NEWS FROM NOWHERE

Jason D. Martinek, Ph.D.
William Morris (1834-1896)

- Converted to Socialism late in life (early 1880s).
- Created the Socialist League in 1884.
- Edited the League’s newspaper, Commonweal, from where News From Nowhere originally appeared (1890).

Portrait by Cosmo Rowe (1895)
Like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851), Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1905), *News From Nowhere* first appeared as a serial, that is as a regular installment in a magazine or newspaper, and then was published as a book.
News From Nowhere

- In the literary tradition of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516).
- Dream narrative drawn, in part, from medieval and romantic literary conventions (e.g. *Piers Plowman*).
- Direct response to the socialist vision of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888).

Page 99 from the Kelmscott Press edition of *Utopia* (1893)
Bellamy’s Socialism

- Industry became more and more consolidated into big corporations, and eventually nationalized in the form of the Great Trust (Chapter V).

- The transformation occurred through a peaceful, evolutionary process (Chapter V).

- Politics and political parties were abandoned (Chapter VI).
Bellamy's Socialism

- Labor was organized through the mechanism of an “Industrial Army” (Chapter VI).
- Industrial service was mandatory between the ages of 21 and 45 (Chapter VI).
- One’s occupation in the “Industrial Army” was determined by his or her “natural aptitude” (Chapter VII).
- Business administrators incentivized unpopular jobs to make sure that all occupational needs were met (Chapter VII).

Edward Bellamy (1850-1898)
Bellamy’s Socialism

- The Industrial Army emphasized “obedience, subordination, and devotion to duty” (Chapter XII).

- Money abolished; credit cards issued by the nation at the beginning of each year. (Chapter IX).

- All goods were distributed by the nation (Chapter IX).

- Technology a great time-saver and benefit to humanity (Chapter IX, XI).
Morris’s Socialism

Walter Crane, 1889
Morris’s Socialism

Key Aspects

1. Socialism is steeped in pre-industrial craft ideals.
2. The factory and factory system are anathema to progress.
3. Money no longer determines an individual’s social value and worth.
4. Workers are artists-craftsmen with the free time to pursue their artistic and intellectual interests (e.g. metalworking, printing, writing).
5. There is greater equality between the sexes (total equality debatable).
6. Representative government is abolished and replaced by a participatory democracy exercised at the local level.
Evidence of ...

1. Socialism was steeped in pre-industrial craft ideals.
   Key Examples:

Chapter XV: “[T]he reward of labor is life,” “the reward of creation.”
Chapter XV: Happiness is attained “by the absence of artificial coercion, and the freedom for every man to do what he can do best, joined to the knowledge of what productions of labor we really wanted.”
Chapter XV: “[T]he happiness of the workman at his work, nay, his most elementary comfort and bare health, his food, his clothes, his dwelling, in short - did not weigh a grain of sand in the balance against this dire necessity of ‘cheap production’ of things, a great part of which were not worth producing at all.”
Chapter XXV: “[T]his is not an age of inventions. The last epoch did all that for us, and we are now content to use such of its inventions as we find handy, and leaving those alone which we don’t want.”

If I could but see a day of it.
Evidence of ...  

2. The factory and factory system were anathema to progress. 

Key Examples:

Chapter II: “The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone.”
Chapter III: Everyone in the new society looks younger and more vital.
Chapter IV: “I haven’t seen any poor people about - not one.”
Chapter VII: What factories that remained are “[b]anded workshops: that is, places where people collect who want to work together.”
Chapter X: Nineteenth century society is described as organized around “systematized robbery.”
Chapter XV: [I]t is each man’s business to make his own work pleasanter and pleasanter, which of course tends towards raising the standard of excellence.”
Chapter XXVII: “[O]nly slaves and slaveholders could live solely by setting machines going.”
Chapter XXVII: “[M]achine after machine was quietly dropped under the excuse that the machines could not produce works of art, and work of art were more and more called for.”

If I could but see a day of it.
Evidence of ...

3. Money no longer determined an individual’s social value and worth.

Key Examples:

Chapter VI: At the local market no money is exchanged for goods.
Chapter X: There are no more slums, the eradication of which is celebrated in the annual event “the clearing of the misery.”
Chapter X: London’s former business district is now known as “Swindling Kens.”.
Chapter X: Learning in pursuit of commercial advantage is replaced with learning for love.
Chapter XII: With “private property being abolished, all the laws and all the legal ‘crimes’ which it had manufactured of course came to an end.”
Chapter XV: “What is the object of the Revolution? Surely to make people happy. ... [H]appiness without happy daily work is impossible.”

If I could but see a day of it.
Evidence of ...

4. Workers were artists-craftsmen with the free time to pursue their artistic and intellectual interests.

Key Examples:

Chapter III: The weaver is also a printer.
Chapter X: “[W]e live amidst beauty without any fear of becoming effeminate.”
Chapter XV: “[A]ll work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honor of wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable habit, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists.”
Chapter XVIII: “The art or work-pleasure, as one ought to call it, ... sprung up almost spontaneously ... from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible over-work, to do the best they could with the work in hand - to make it excellence of its kind; and when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men’s minds, and they began rudely and awkwardly to ornament the wares which they made; and when they had once set to work at that, it soon began to grow.”
Chapter XVIII: “[A]t last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we had our fill of it; and then all was gained, and we were happy.”
Evidence of ...

5. There was greater equality between the sexes.

Key Examples:

Chapter III: Women “not upholstered like armchairs.”
Chapter IX: Companionate marriages replace marriages as financial arrangements.
Chapter IX: There is no more divorce court.
Chapter IX: “[W]e have ceased to be commercial in our love-matters, so also we have ceased to be artificially foolish.”
Chapter XII: “[F]amilies are held together by no bond of coercion, legal or social, but by mutual liking and affection.”

Follow-up Questions: Are women still expected to do the housework? To take care of the kids?

If I could but see a day of it.
Evidence of ... 

6. Representative government was abolished and replaced by a participatory democracy exercised at the local level.

Key Examples:

Chapter V: The Parliament is now used to store manure.
Chapter XI: “[M]an no more needs an elaborate system of government, with its army, navy, and police, to force him to give way to the will of the majority of his equals, than he wants a similar machinery to make him understand that his head and a stone wall cannot occupy the same space at the same moment.”
Chapter XI: The rights of property were abolished because these rights represented only “the protection of the rich from the poor.”
Chapter XI: Government in the nineteenth century was a “machinery of tyranny.”
Chapter XII: The premise in the new society is “acting on the whole for the best.”

If I could but see a day of it.
Over-Romanticization of Medieval Life?

Chapter VIII: “[T]he Mediaeval folk acted after their conscience ... and they were ready to bear what they inflicted on others; whereas the nineteenth century ones were hypocrites, and pretended to be humane and yet went on tormenting those who they dared to treat so by shutting them up in prison, for no reason at all, except that they were what they themselves, the prison-masters, had forced them to be.”

Chapter X: “Like the Mediaevals, we like everything trim and clean, and orderly and bright; as people always do when they have a sense of architectural power; because then they know that they can have what they want, and they won’t stand any nonsense from Nature in their dealings with her.”
“[B]y so laying out a Garden City that, as it grows, the free gifts of Nature - fresh air, sunlight, breathing room and playing room - shall be still retained in all needed abundance, and by so employing the resources of modern science that Art may supplement Nature, and life may become an abiding joy and delight” (Chapter X).

Ebenezer Howard, 1898
“[T]horough sanitary and remedial action in the houses that we have; and then the building of more, strongly, beautifully, and in groups of limited extent, kept in proportion to their streams and walled round, so that there may be no festering and wretched suburb anywhere, but clean and busy street within and the open country without, with a belt of beautiful garden and orchard round the walls, so that from any part of the city perfectly fresh air and grass and sight of far horizon might me reachable in a few minutes’ walk. This the final aim ...” - *Sesame and Lilies* (1865)
The landscape is marked by “quaint and fanciful little buildings” (Chapter II).

Houses are surrounded by a “teeming garden” (Chapter IV).

The architecture is “exquisitely beautiful” (Chapter IV).
“This is how we stand. England was once a country of clearings amongst the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed, which were fortresses for the feudal army, markets for the folk, gathering places for craftsmen. It then became a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty. for, indeed, we should be too much ashamed of ourselves if we allowed the making of goods, even on a large scale, to carry with it the appearance, even, of desolation and misery” (Chapter X).
The Guest House

How Did The Change Occur?

- The Great Crash.
- The Battle of Trafalgar Square, 1952.
- General Strike.
- Two Year War.
- Revolution, not Evolution.

Trafalgar Square
Discussion Questions

1) What is the thematic significance of the dream motif? What purpose is served by constructing a literary utopia? Is utopia a place? A state of mind? A process?
2) What allusions are contained in the narrator’s name of “William Guest”?
3) What critique does the narrator make of Victorian education? Why has formal schooling been abolished?
4) What is the view of history by members of the new society? According to Guest, in what periods of society do people concern themselves with history? Do you think this may be an accurate observation?
5) What is the new society’s attitude towards prison? How is this a change from Morris’s time?
6) What is the purpose of preserving buildings no longer considered handsome? What is considered handsome architecture?
7) How has London changed in the new society?
8) What changes have occurred in matters of passion and violence? In your view, is there evidence that an unpossessive society would be less violent?
9) What does Hammond think was wrong with the idea of nationalism? What does he see as inherently false about demanding allegiance to a centralized nation?
10) How does majority rule work?
11) What has happened to war?
12) Which of Morris’s predictions seem to have come true?
Resources


