

i Once Upon a Time

*Folk say, a wizard to a northern king
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the spring,
And through another saw the summer glow,
And through a third the fruited vines a-row,
While still, unheard, but in its wonted way
Piped the drear wind of that December day.*

On a fine summer's morning in Hammersmith, a man awoke to find himself in the middle of a miracle. He had gone to bed on a winter night in 1890, but as he gathered his senses in the hot early sunshine, he gradually realized that not only had the season changed but the whole of society and its buildings had been wonderfully altered.

The hero of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* had, by a trick of time, entered the post-Revolutionary world. It was a world in which money did not exist, in which everyone freely laboured at the dreary tasks, allowing all to devote time to creating beautiful and useful artefacts which they gave to each other whenever they were asked.

A pellucid Thames flowed softly through a London freed of smoke and congestion, where gardens and orchards ran down to the river banks half hiding "very pretty houses, low and not large, standing back a little way from the river; they were mostly built of red brick and roofed with tiles, and looked, above all, comfortable, and as if they were, so to say, alive and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them."¹

Rising above these little houses were the public buildings, and Morris's hero finds himself lodging in one—the Guest House of Hammersmith. "It was a longish building with its gable ends turned away from the road, and long traceried windows coming rather low down set in the wall that faced us. It was very handsomely built of red brick with a lead roof; and

*So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the beating of the steely sea.*

From *The Earthly Paradise*, William Morris 1868–70

high up about the windows there ran a frieze of figure subjects in baked clay, very well executed, and designed with a force and directness which I had never noticed in modern work before."²

Morris set his story more than a hundred years ahead of 1890, when it was first published in the *Commonweal*, the journal of the Socialist League. But, though the English Revolution has even now not occurred, when *News* was published, English architects and craftsmen were building a world that much resembled that seen by Morris's time traveller. These people centred around the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, founded in 1888 with the aim of initiating a new, original and vigorous approach to design. The approach was strongly rooted in the ideals of Morris as shown in the work of his firm and in his writings.

Arts and Craftsfolk were a highly individualistic lot but all shared Morris's affection for simplicity, truth-to-materials and the unity of handicraft and design. And they shared his affection for the Gothic—not the scholastic and religious Gothic of the High Victorians but for a Gothic spirit. It was a Gothic free of Rule, derived more from the unconscious cottages, almshouses and barns of ordinary medieval people than from palaces, town halls and churches. In an 1889 lecture on Gothic architecture Morris spelt out the Arts and Crafts ideal: "Now a Gothic building has walls that it is not ashamed of;

and in those walls you may cut windows wherever you please; and, if you please may decorate them to show that you are not ashamed of them; your windows, which you must have, become one of the great beauties of your house and you have no longer to make a lesson in logic in order not to sit in pitchy darkness in your own house, as in the sham-Roman style; your window, I say, is no longer a concession to human weakness, an ugly necessity (generally ugly enough in all conscience) but a glory of the art of Building. As for the roof in the sham style: unless the building is infected with Gothic common sense, you must pretend that you are living in a hot country which needs nothing but an awning, and that it never rains or snows in these islands.¹³

Hand in hand with these rather austere principles, a thoroughly Victorian affection for comfort and gentle ease ran throughout the Arts and Crafts movement. And there was a strong feeling for nationality—English and sometimes Scottish—as befitted a nation which had ruled the waves unhindered for the most part of a century.

The Arts and Crafts movement was of and for the Victorian upper middle class. The inhabitants of William Morris's visionary world have all the nice characteristics of Victorian gentleness, they are hobbits without furry feet: kind, generous, polite, energetic, moral, nationalistic (in the best sense), intellectual, practical, comfort loving and fond of "beauty". They are purged of the reverse of the Victorian coin: hypocrisy, philistinism, selfishness, puritanism, arrogant chauvinism, indifference to others and terrible class consciousness.

The upper middle classes were the only people who could enjoy individual freedom in Victorian England; they were free of the grinding poverty of the lower orders, the inverted snobbery of the lower middle

classes and the increasingly rigid formality of the aristocracy. Because Britain was the richest and most powerful nation, they were probably the most free people in the world. It was for them that Arts and Crafts architects worked, evolving a new easy style which was most often seen in the small country houses of a free, proud, individualistic breed who, in three decades from 1880 to 1910, were the patrons of some of the finest and most original architecture and artefacts ever produced in Britain.

The achievements of Arts and Crafts architecture were widely recognized by continental contemporaries and by no-one more clearly than Hermann Muthesius, an architect attached to the German embassy in London between 1896 and 1903, who produced his monumental *Das englische Haus*, the definitive analysis of the domestic scene at the turn of the century, in 1904 and 1905.

Muthesius was clear that the mainspring of the British success was modest individuality. "The Englishman builds his house for himself alone. He feels no urge to impress, has no thought of festive occasions or banquets and the idea of shining in the eyes of the world through lavishness in and of his house simply does not occur to him. Indeed, he even avoids attracting attention to his house by means of striking design or architectonic extravagance, just as he would be loth to appear personally eccentric by wearing a fantastic suit. In particular, the architectonic ostentation, the creation of 'architecture' and 'style' to which we in Germany are still so prone, is no longer to be found in England. It is most instructive to note . . . that a movement opposing the imitation of styles and seeking closer ties with simple rural buildings, which began over forty years ago, has had the most gratifying results."¹⁴

1 Morris, *William Morris from Nonesuch*, reprinted in *William Morris*, Nonesuch Press 1974, p. 9

2 *Ibid.*, p. 13

3 Morris, *William Gothic Architecture*, reprinted in *William*

Morris, Nonesuch Press 1974, p. 491

4 Muthesius, Hermann *The English House*, Crosby Lockwood Staples, London 1979, p. 10. This is the first English translation (by Janet Seligman).