

William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

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I

There are two main ways of conserving historic buildings: (1) to preserve the original style and structure by exchanging old materials for new ones; and (2) to preserve old materials by repairing damaged parts. In nineteenth-century England, the debate over these two methods was intense. The Gothic Revivalists used the former method, restoring medieval architecture in the original Gothic style. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) tried to protect them from restoration, adopting the latter method.

The SPAB was formed by William Morris in 1877. By the time of its formation, Morris was already known as a designer of interior decorations, a businessman, and a poet. He was also interested in architecture as art from John Ruskin's writings. The formation of the SPAB was a turning point for Morris in the sense that it united his interest in art with his public life. As a member of the SPAB, he delivered lectures and wrote letters in order to protect historic buildings. These lectures and letters show that Morris viewed art as closely connected with social conditions. His insights into art and society led to his later involvement with the socialist movement. The SPAB functioned not only as an architectural group but also as a philosophical centre which was to determine Morris' later activities.

The relationship between the SPAB and Morris, however, has received limited attention. The reason for this lacuna may be that it was Morris' creative activities as a poet and an artist rather than the noncreative work of the SPAB that made a great impact on society. Yet, this noncreative aspect can be shown to have made a profound contribution to the development of his thought. This essay will reexamine the philosophy and prac-

tice of the SPAB, and consider the connections between the SPAB and Morris' artistic and political ideas. It will seek to clarify Morris' social agenda not from within the framework of particular problems but rather synthetically within the context of the SPAB.

II

The foundation of the SPAB started with Morris' movement against the restoration of Tewkesbury Abbey. On 5 March, 1877, he penned the following protest against the proposed restoration of the Abbey to the editor of *The Athenaeum*.

My eye just now caught the word "restoration" in the morning paper, and, on looking closer, I saw that this time it is nothing less than the Minister of Tewkesbury that is to be destroyed by Sir Gilbert Scott
(*Letters* I: 351)

George Gilbert Scott, one of the famous Gothic Revivalists, removed a later-added organ which masked the spectacle of stained glass windows of the sanctuary, and recreated the screen in the Gothic style. Morris denounced such restoration as destruction because it meant the damage of "living history" (*Letters* I: 351).

Restoration derived from the Gothic Revival. The revival of the Gothic style was related to Romanticism and Medievalism, which stemmed from opposition to the industrialised society that grew up in the late eighteenth century. The Revivalists' principle of restoration was to reconstruct ancient buildings in their original style. In 1842, the Cambridge Camden Society published its tract *The Ecclesiologists* which states that, "To restore is to revive the original appearance lost by decay, accident or ill-judged alteration" (qtd. in Stamp 90). Scott joined the Society in this year, and practiced its ideas in his restorations.

The Revivalists' restoration to the original state, however, led to over-restoration. Although Scott and the Camden Society claimed their aim of restoration was "to revive the original appearance," they regarded the Decorated English style¹ of the fourteenth century as the best. For example, Scott restored the west windows of Litchfield Cathedral, the screen of

Salisbury Cathedral, and the east windows of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, from the Perpendicular to the Decorated.

Morris reveals a contrasting attitude to the Revivalists. On the Society's foundation, Morris drafted the Manifesto which stated the Society's aim with his friends George Wardle and Philip Webb. In the Manifesto, Morris justifies the restorations in early times as follows:

A church of the eleventh century might be added to or altered in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, or even seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, but every change, whatever history it destroyed, left history in the gap, and was alive with the spirit of the deeds done midst its fashioning. The result of all this was often a building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were, by their very contrast, interesting and instructive. . . . (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* I: 110)

Morris accepted the incongruity of each change as proof of the processes of time. Moreover, he praised the changes as spiritually vivifying and instructive.

Morris' praise of change in ancient buildings derived from his respect for the lives and spirits of past men. He later defined works of architecture as "man's expression of the value of life" (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* II: 266–7). Humans cannot exchange their lives and spirits for other ones, so old architecture should not be changed by the workmen of new generations.

III

The Society's respect for past men's lives and spirits was influenced by John Ruskin's idea. In the "Lamp of Memory" of the *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin wrote as follows:

The greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity. (*Works* VIII: 233–4)

Ruskin strongly felt that the walls of ancient buildings bore the marks of history in a way that continued to influence the spirit of his own times.

Ruskin's respect for past lives and the spirit of ancient buildings formed the basis of the idea of the SPAB: (1) to accept the incongruity of historical styles accumulated in buildings and to avoid particular styles of repair; and (2) to preserve the surfaces and materials of old buildings.

Morris developed his view of ancient buildings in his own writings. In "The Decorative Arts," he stresses that "by means of which [art] men have all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life" (*Collected Works* XXII: 4). He had the unique view that art was not a matter of aesthetics but that of daily lives. In "Gothic Architecture" (1893), Morris also remarks as follows:

. . . their continuous production, or the existence of the true Art of Architecture, betokens a society which, whatever elements it change it may bear within it, may be called stable, since it is founded on the happy exercise of the energies of the most useful part of its population. (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* II: 267)

Morris thought that architecture reflected social conditions in the sense that it involved a great number of workmen. This statement also shows that he desired the society in which people worked with pleasure.

The reason why Ruskin and Morris praised the celebratory works of the past was that they felt Victorian society could not emulate them. They criticised competitive commercialism of their time. In "The Nature of Gothic," Ruskin argues that it was commercialism which had brought about the division of labour (*Works* X: 196). He continues, "It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: — Divided into mere segments of men — broken into small fragments and crumbs of life" (*Works* X: 196). He warns that the division of labour leads to the dehumanisation of workers. Morris also disagreed with commercialism and the division of labour because it prevents the "invention and ingenuity of man" and "sympathy between the designer and the man who carries out the design" (*Collected Works* XXII: 10; 164). Both Ruskin and Morris feared that Victorian commercialism encouraged mechanisation, which deprived workers of the pleasure and freedom to think and feel.

For Ruskin and Morris, the ideal past was the Middle Age. In "The Nature of Gothic," Ruskin regards the medieval ornament as the best

because it recognises “the individual value of every soul” (*Works* X: 190). Morris followed Ruskin’s view of art and work. Morris’s idealisation of the medieval society led him to reevaluate Gothic architecture: “Today there is only one style of architecture on which it is possible to found a true living art . . . and that style is Gothic architecture” (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* II: 283).

Morris, however, never tried to restore architecture to the Gothic. First, he respected the continuity of past men’s lives and spirits. Second, Morris noticed that restoration itself never subscribed to an ideology of commercialism. Dellheim regards profit as the main reason why architects wanted to restore old buildings (83), while, Peter Ferriday estimates that Victorian society spent fifteen million pounds on restoration (qtd. in Dellheim 83). The more buildings architects restored, the more financial rewards they could gain. It was often more profitable for architects to make radical alterations rather than simple repairs. Morris, in the latter half of the protest letter about Tewkesbury Abbey, expresses his disappointment with architects who regarded profit as the motivation for work (*Letters* I: 351). Moreover, in “The Decorative Arts,” he raises the question, “Is money to be gathered? . . . [Should we] pull down ancient and venerable building for the money [?]” (*Collected Works* XXII: 24). Morris had misgivings about a situation in which people were at the mercy of the profit motive. Morris’ formation of an anti-restoration society represented one shot fired in a very Victorian battle against Mammon.

IV

The SPAB was launched on 2 March, 1877. Ten members including Morris attended the preparatory meeting. During 1877, membership increased to 294 (*First Report* 45–54). The SPAB was composed of members from various fields. Architects such as Webb, John Stevenson, William Lethaby, and Thackeray Turner were concerned with giving their advice on the technical side. Men of influence, such as John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, William Hunt, and Thomas Hardy, also joined the SPAB. James Bryce, the Liberal MP, became a member of the SPAB on Morris’ request (*Letters* I: 357). Morris and Bryce had become acquainted with each other through their involvement with the Eastern Question Association (EQA)², formed

in 1876. Other liberals such as John Lubbock, A. J. Mundella, Charles Dilke, and Leonard Courthey, and Hon. Percy Wyndham, the Conservative MP, were enlisted by the Society. Lubbock especially contributed greatly to the passage of the Act for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments between 1873 and 1882. Morris depended not only on the members of London-based upper and middle classes but also “local correspondents” (*Essays* 69). As Dellheim states, “The diverse composition of the society reveals that the taste for historic preservation was not confined to the partisans of any one class, ideology, or faith” (86). The SPAB attracted publicity among every region and sector of society.

The SPAB’s practice was carried out in the indirect and educational approach. The Society mainly did three kinds of work. First, it sent protests against restoration to authorities. The Society received a number of letters and reports from their local correspondents and the general public. Among them, the Society chose those cases which most deserved its careful attention and influence. It would then write to the authorities to stop or alter their restoration plans.

Secondly, SPAB members tried to spread their views through lectures and the press. Morris referred to architectural preservation or the SPAB in a number of his lectures: “The Decorative Arts” in 1877, “The Beauty of Life” in 1880, “The History of Pattern-Designing” in 1882, “Art, Wealth, and Riches” in 1883. On May 22, 1877, Stevenson delivered the lecture “Architectural Restoration: Its Principles and Practice” at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). In his lecture, Stevenson created a sensation by hotly criticising Scott’s restorations. Between 1877 and 1895, Morris penned a series of protests against restoration to the editors of *The Times*, *Daily News*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *Daily Chronicle*. Other members such as William Loftie and Sidney Colvin contributed articles to *MacMillan’s Magazine* in June 1877 and *Nineteenth Century* in October 1877 (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* I: 116). Other newspapers and magazines that cooperated with the Society include *The Athenaeum*, *Punch*, *Fun*, *Globe*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Architect*, *Whitehall Review*, *Graphic*, *Truth*, *Standard*, and *Echo* (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* I: 116; *Essays* 44). Through their letters, lectures, and the press, the SPAB educated the public to change the whole point of view from which

it judged restoration.

Thirdly, the SPAB compiled information about unrestored buildings. At its first annual meeting, Morris reported that the Society had collected information about 749 ancient and unrestored churches in Buckinghamshire, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire, and Wales (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* I: 115). He stated that the SPAB would obtain information concerning Scotland and Ireland the following year (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* I: 115).

The activities of the SPAB sometimes adopted a direct approach. The Society despatched members to investigate and report on the fabric of buildings. It sent down a member to view Studland Church in Dorset and two more to examine Deopham Church in Norfolk (*Essays* 64; 80). Furthermore, architects of the SPAB were directly involved with the modification of restoration plans. One source states as follows:

Mr. Thackeray Turner acquired the specification of an architect who proposed to restore an ancient building, and pointing out where it was wrong, he altered it so that it was more in agreement with Anti-Scrape. The altered specification came from that time on to be used by other architects, to the great improvement of their work. ("Morris and Anti-Scrape" 150)

The SPAB tried not only to change the view of the public but also to illustrate concrete methods of restoration on the basis of their architectural investigations.

Morris worked hard for the SPAB in its first five years. Most significantly, he controlled the Society as honorary secretary in its first two years. He personally wrote protest letters to restoration committees and newspapers with regard to Canterbury Cathedral, Southwell Minster in Nottingham, St. Alban's Cathedral in Hertfordshire, the Water Gate of York in London, St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, Magdalen Bridge in Oxford, and Blundell's School in Tiverton, and reported at every annual meeting the cases with which the Society had dealt. MacCarthy illustrates Morris' eagerness for the work of the SPAB by reporting his regular attendance at weekly meetings: in eight months between April and November 1878, he was at twenty-eight meetings, missing only nine; and in 1879, he was at twelve out of the total

nineteen meetings (416). Morris worked hard because he thought “our ancient monuments are national property” (*Letters* I: 375). The activity of the SPAB was the centre of Morris’ work in the late 1870s.

V

The campaigns of the SPAB, however, were not always successful. Morris reported only two successful cases out of six at a meeting in 1879, three out of ten in 1880, and five out of fifteen in 1882 (*Essays* 43–51; 62–9; 77–88). There were two main reasons for this unsatisfactory result. First, architects were generally reluctant to take advice on the fabrics used in restoration. Concerning Deopham Church, Norfolk, the SPAB wrote several times to the architect Ewan Christian to halt the proposed scheme. Christian was angered with the letters as an insult to his professional integrity, and so he ignored them.

The second reason for failure was the intervention of the owners of ancient buildings. For example, Morris came into conflict with the Dean of Canterbury about the restoration of the choir. On June 4, 1877, *The Times* published Morris’ protest against the restoration. Three days later, Dean Smith argued against his letter saying that “Mr. Morris’s Society probably looks on our Cathedral as a place for antiquarian research or for budding architects to learn their arts in. We need it for the daily worship of God” (qtd. in *Letters* I: 376). As a result of the conflict, the Dean got his way. In 1878, Rev. W. H. Marvin of St. Margaret’s Church in Luton, Bedfordshire, started repairs on his church according to the SPAB’s advice. Halfway through the work, however, he realised that the repairs were going to take more time and labour than a straightforward restoration would have done. Finally, Marvin rebuilt the exterior (Miele 82). The Society’s influence depended, therefore, on owners’ attitudes. Morris, who regarded ancient buildings as national property, could not accept owners’ behaviour toward them as if they were the owners’ property. He was especially dissatisfied with the materialistic behaviour shown in the case of St. Margaret’s Church in Luton.

Such conflicts between the Society and owners made Morris pessimistic about the system of private property under capitalism. His pessimism is illustrated in the case of Blundell’s School, Tiverton. The Society’s cam-

paign began in 1878. Blundell's was planning to demolish its original buildings of 1604 and move to another area of the town. Morris was opposed to their demolition as they were considered one of the finest examples of school architecture dating back to the school's foundation in 1599 (*Essays* 47). In 1882, however, the school buildings were sold to a private individual. According to a letter to the *Daily News*, Morris regarded the sale to the new owner as the "loss" of the buildings (*Letters* II: 159). The letter shows that Morris did not see any hope in the systems of private property and commercialistic capitalism which promoted buying and selling.

Morris' sense of dissatisfaction deriving from the work of the SPAB had a great influence on the socialist view which he started to espouse around 1883. In 1883, Morris lectured as follows:

I could give you a long and dismal list of buildings which England, with all her riches, has not been able to save from commercial greed in some form or another. "It's a matter of money" is supposed to be an unanswerable argument in these cases, and indeed we generally find that if we answer it our answer is cast on the winds. . . . there is no law to prevent a madman or an ignoramus from pulling down a house which he chooses to call his private property, though it may be one of the treasures of the land for art and history. (*Collected Works* XXIII: 158)

Morris realised the priority of socialism over the SPAB campaigns in the situation where ancient buildings as the texts to re-examine the problems of capitalistic society were rewritten by capitalism itself. As his socialist movement became active, his official work as an SPAB member decreased. Morris left most of the campaigns to other SPAB members, and from that time rarely wrote to newspapers about anti-restoration. MacCarthy reports that Morris attended only nine weekly meetings in 1886 (595).

Morris' socialism started with his joining the Democratic Federation, which became the Social Democratic Federation, on January 13, 1883. In the same year, Morris read Marx's *Capital*. In 1885, he organised the Socialist League, and started the paper *Commonweal*. In 1890, Morris and the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League withdrew from the League and formed the Hammersmith Socialist Society. With the Fabian Society,

these societies engineered the second wave of socialism following the 1820s utopian socialist movement of Robert Owen. Morris tried to draw public attention about their social problems.

The socialist society which Morris hoped for was one he had learnt from ancient buildings. Morris' restless change of socialist groups indicates his delicate position with regard to socialism. He did not hold out any hope for party government nor anarchism. Nako calls Morris' socialism "artistic socialism" or "a kind of aesthetics" (129). It was not concerned with popularising a specific system of policy but appealed rather to men's souls by imagining a beautiful society where the pleasures of work and everyday life co-existed (Nako 129). Morris idealised a community in which all people worked in cooperation, found pleasure in their labour, and organised themselves democratically, that is to say a society which showed the facade of ancient buildings. Morris realised that the work of the SPAB itself could function as socialist propaganda and education of the public for the revolution.

Morris' realisation of the importance of the SPAB led him to restart the official work of the Society. In 1889, he visited the churches of Kelmscott, Edington, and Inglesham, and reported on their conditions to the Society. He initiated anti-restoration campaigns at Westminster Abbey and Peterborough Cathedral in 1889, Holy Trinity, Stratford-on-Avon in 1890, and Chichester Cathedral in 1895.

The campaign against the restoration of Westminster Abbey between 1889 and 1895 revealed the impact of Morris' experience of the socialist movement. In 1889, alterations were proposed to move the increasing number of monuments to distinguished men into the cloisters (*Twelfth Report* 48–9). Morris took objection to this scheme. He lamented the "strange notion" that national property should be used as "a kind of registration office for the names of men whom the present generation considers eminent in various capacities" (*Collected Works* XXII: 410). What was different from his early days was his suggestion for the intervention of the public in the evaluation of schemes. On 22 October, 1891, Morris wrote to *The Pall Mall Gazette* as follows:

. . . information has been wholly refused, and the public are still in the dark as to what is going to be done in this most important matter. The Society feels compelled to ask . . . is the public to have no opportunity of forming a judgement on the proposals of the Dean and Chapter before the work is actually done? (*Letters* III: 363)

This demand derives from Morris' socialistic distrust of private ownership and belief in the power of popular opinion.

The case of Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds shows the rise of local opinion in favour of preservation. The twelfth-century Cistercian architecture was owned by Lord Cardigan and managed by his agent B.E. Bennett. On 8 September, 1882, a local man called Edmund Berchall wrote to the SPAB to ask for its help in protecting the Abbey from further dilapidation (Letter to the SPAB). However, the Society reported that "the difficulty of dealing with private property . . . has been the final block to every attempt" (*Seventh Report* 19). In 1888, the campaign resumed when the Abbey was offered for sale by public auction. Local people proposed various ways to protect the Abbey. For example, Patty Honeywood appealed for the purchase of the Abbey by Leeds Corporation in *The Yorkshire Post* on 25 August, 1888 ("The Sale of Kirkstall Abbey"). *The Leeds Mercury* on 4 September, 1888 carried a suggestion of one R. Tabbern that the Abbey should be purchased for the free use of its inhabitants by wealthy, public-spirited men ("Kirkstall Abbey"). On their suggestions, Edmund Wilson, a local Liberal councillor and SPAB ally, purchased the Abbey, and Colonel North, a local magnate, purchased it from Wilson. The Abbey was presented to the town of Leeds by North. In the summer of 1895, the Abbey was reopened to the public. This case shows how the voices of local people influenced architectural preservation. Morris' aim to strengthen the influence of public opinion was accomplished through the cooperation of the SPAB's campaigns and socialist movement.

VI

Conservation theory seemed to have nothing to do with social reform, but Morris' work at the SPAB was able to synthesise the two. For Morris, the art of architecture is the embodiment of the spirit of each age. His

insistence on the humanity of every individual is at the root of his thought. Morris' activities at the SPAB functioned as a visual movement to praise the achievement of past generations. His socialist activity worked as a philosophical movement to appeal to the innate human feelings of every human generation. The two activities are closely related to each other.

Morris' architectural conservation led him to consider not only relationships among men but also between men and nature, in other words his ecology. It deepened his ecological idea. Morris regarded architecture as a symbol of men's action in nature. In "The Lesser Arts," he states that "we may still see the works of our fathers yet alive amidst the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part (*Collected Works* XXII: 17). He criticises the restoration of St. Mark's, Venice, because "it has now become a work of art, a monument of history, and a piece of nature" (*Letters* I: 529). He thought that ancient buildings became integrated into nature with the process of time. Thus it was natural that the SPAB's architectural conservatism developed alongside its environmental movement.

Morris and some SPAB members tried to promote natural beauty and eliminate pollutants through environmental societies: the Selborne Society, the Kyrle Society, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA), the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising (SCAPA), the Coal Smoke Abatement Society (CSAS), the Common Preservation Society (CPS). Morris also spread the work of the SPAB to a local campaign to resist the felling of hornbeams in Epping Forest. He, with the SPAB's members, attacked the London authorities who wanted to turn the Forest into landscape gardens or a golf course (*Letters* IV: 269). The SPAB's view of conservation influenced the foundation of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty which to this day acts to preserve nature and historic buildings for the nation.

The movement of the SPAB had a great influence on not only Morris himself but also our society. Morris' ecological ideas can be seen in the green movement of today, the reinterpretation of Marxism, and social ecology of the late twentieth century. They all extend to the debate on social reform. Morris' unique ideas synthesising art, socialism and ecology

through the SPAB are still relevant. They teach us in our diversified society to look at life from a broad perspective.

Notes

1 According to Thomas Rickman, the history of architecture may be classified into four parts: the Norman style from 1066 to ca.1190, Early English Style from ca.1190 to ca.1300, Decorated English from ca.1300 to ca.1390, and Perpendicular English ca.1390 to 1540 (43–44).

2 The EQA was formed in 1876 to promote resistance to Disraeli's alliance with the Turks, following revelations of atrocities committed by Turkish mercenaries upon the Christian population of Bulgaria. Morris joined the Society as treasurer. See E. P. Thompson (202–25).

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