

A CONVERSATION WITH NORTHROP FRYE
ABOUT WILLIAM MORRIS

Christopher Lowry

This previously unpublished interview with Northrop Frye took place in January 1988. It was originally intended for publication in the *Journal of Wild Culture*, a magazine that ceased to exist ten years ago. As a co-founder of the Society for the Preservation of Wild Culture and senior editor of the magazine, I had the idea that I would like to interview Northrop Frye about William Morris. The vision that inspired Wild Culture--a marriage of ecology and imagination pitched in an amusing and harmonious key, with a vernacular and dilettante edge--seemed to owe an unacknowledged debt to Morris. I thought perhaps that I could link the principles behind the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Morris's radical vision of social and ecological justice, with the mission of Wild Culture. I was fascinated by the way Morris walked his talk, living his ideals. If a conversation with Professor Frye could elucidate Morris's social attitude, I imagined, then the parallel path ahead might be illuminated for our circle of cultural workers and green city activists in the Society for the Preservation of Wild Culture. In any case, it would be interesting to try.

On learning of my interest in Morris, and after examining a few issues of *Wild Culture*, Professor Frye graciously agreed to talk to me. He consented to a thirty-minute interview at his first-floor office in Massey College at the University of Toronto. The result is a series of questions and answers on several aspects of Morris's thought.

Christopher Lowry: Can you recall your first introduction to Morris? Was it as a literary figure or a political figure?

Northrop Frye: Well, it was more a literary figure. I was interested in Blake because it was the subject of my first book and, of course, one of Blake's main interests was the democratizing of art, of making it a general possession. Morris carried that a good deal further from the study of Carlyle and Ruskin, and he felt that the difference between the major and the minor arts – painting, music, literature on the one hand, and pottery, ceramics, and textiles on the other – was a class distinction of the kind to get rid of. He concentrated on what were then called the minor arts as a kind of index of social stability, and that led him to the