

## WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE POETS OF THE CONFEDERATION

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*For Lionel Adey*

In the days when a great many teachers of English in Canadian universities were from England, I was invited into the pleasures of Victorian poetry by a kind and learned Englishman who knew why Canadian cities were so ugly. "Canada," Lionel Adey proclaimed, "had no Pre-Raphaelite Movement." If cities such as Halifax, Toronto, and Victoria contained more neon signs than stained glass, it was because Rossetti, Millais, Hunt, Morris, Burne-Jones, and their associates and disciples had done their work and left their mark elsewhere. I am not sure that it was Professor Adey's remark that started me on the road towards two graduate theses on the Pre-Raphaelites, but this seems quite possible: like many an undergraduate at the University of Victoria in 1960s, my Penelopes were the High American Modernists and my Ithaca was the island which, few doubted, had nurtured most of the best that had been thought and said. Not until returning from England in 1974 was I equipt to recognize that my provocative teacher had perhaps been *a little* harsh on Canadian cities and *slightly* parsimonious in his assessment of the presence of the Pre-Raphaelites in Canada. True, the strips of motels and gas stations that surround cities from coast to coast are ugly, but there is a considerable Pre-Raphaelite presence in Canadian architecture, Canadian painting, and – the subject of this small gesture of thanks to Lionel Adey – Canadian poetry. Canada had no Pre-Raphaelite Movement, but one source of beauty in the work of the Confederation poets is the influence of Dante and Christina Rossetti, Swinburne, William Sharp, Richard Le Gallienne, and, by no means least, William Morris.

In a sense, two Morris'es arrived in Canada in the decades following Confederation: the medieval William Morris of *The Defence of Guenevere* poems of 1858 and the utopian William Morris of the *News from Nowhere* romance of 1890 (the pirated American edition) and 1891. As the chronology of Morris's own metamorphosis from the colourful Arthurianism of the Oxford days to the outspoken socialism of the London years might lead one to predict, it was the young