

WILLIAM MORRIS'S "COMMERCIAL WAR":
A CRITICAL EDITION

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William Morris drafted "Commercial War" in 1885 as part of a series of critiques of capitalism written shortly before and after the period of his break with the Social Democratic Federation and co-foundation of the Socialist League.¹ He offered variants of the lecture to the Croydon branch of the Socialist Democratic Federation, the Labour Emancipation League at the Academy Schools in Hoxton, and the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League at Kelmscott House. He did not reprint it in *Signs of Change* (1888), however, and May Morris reproduced only one of its more powerful paragraphs in the second volume of *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936).

The mid-1880s were a period in which mass meetings of angry workers accelerated passage of a Voting Rights Act in 1885; the imperialist campaign in the Sudan reached its height (General Gordon and other British soldiers were killed in the siege of Khartoum on 25 January 1885); and crofters rose up against the Highland Clearances in the north in sporadic armed conflicts such as "The Battle of the Braes" (1882). It was also a period in which, in response to some of these events, Morris composed a long narrative poem, "The Pilgrims of Hope," as well as several "Chants for Socialists"; participated in manifestos and demonstrations which demanded wider voting rights (26 October 1884); condemned the British invasion of the Sudan (Socialist League resolution, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 February 1885); protested unemployment (16 February and 12 April 1885); and commemorated the anniversary of the Paris Commune (22 March 1885).

The striking title of "Commercial War" reflects Morris's view that capitalism is not only a self-justifying form of armed theft, but a mercantile variant of Hobbes's "ceaseless war of man against man" (f.121), and that only a complete change in the social order of this Leviathan will bring lasting respite from its internecine extension of armed conflict by other means.

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