

Art and Society in the Late Prose  
Narratives of William Morris

One result of the current popularity of fantasy literature has been the rediscovery of William Morris's long-neglected prose fiction. During the last ten years of his life, Morris wrote ten book-length narratives. Until recently, only two of these--A Dream of John Ball (1886) and News from Nowhere (1890)--may be said to have escaped obscurity, largely because of their direct concern with socialist thought. Two others, The House of the Wolfings (1888) and The Roots of the Mountains (1889), semi-historical accounts of tribal warfare in second- and in seventh-century central Europe, are now virtually unread. But the remaining narratives have all reappeared, since 1969, in paperbound editions. These last--The Story of the Glittering Plain (1890), The Wood Beyond the World (1894), Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair (1895), The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1895), The Well at the World's End (1896), and The Story of the Sundering Flood (1896) -- are prolific adventure tales whose purely fantastic settings blend Faerie with the world of medieval romance or Icelandic saga. Whereas A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere have long been recognized as literary embodiments of Morris's socialistic and artistic vision, the majority of critics and literary historians have overlooked the many instances of his political, social, and aesthetic philosophy implicit throughout the narratives of the last decade.

The following quotation from Philip Henderson's biography is typical of such an attitude: "It is . . . quite untrue to think that Morris became any less of a socialist in his last years. It is simply that with his declining health he was unable to take such an active part in the movement as heretofore and that socialism can scarcely be detected in such works as The Water of the Wondrous Isles and The Well at the World's End."<sup>1</sup> But J.W. Mackail may be closer to the facts when he refers to the narratives as "not consciously socialistic."<sup>2</sup> Morris admittedly did not intend them to be so: when a reviewer in The Spectator attempted to read a socialist allegory into The Wood Beyond the World, Morris felt obligated to respond denying it. Indeed, none of the late narratives, with the exception of A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere, is either consciously or directly concerned with conveying a message.