

“I LEARNED NEXT TO NOTHING THERE”:  
WILLIAM MORRIS AT MARLBOROUGH COLLEGE<sup>1</sup>

William Whitla

I went to school at Marlborough College, which was then a new and very rough school. As far as my school instruction went, I think I may fairly say I learned next to nothing there, for indeed next to nothing was taught; but the place is in very beautiful country, thickly scattered over with historical monuments, and I set myself eagerly to studying these and everything else that had any history in it, and so perhaps learned a good deal, especially as there was a good library at the school to which I sometimes had access.

– William Morris, *Letters* 2:227-28

So wrote William Morris, somewhat contradictorily, in his well-known autobiographical account in a letter to his Socialist friend, Andreas Scheu, in 1883, not even mentioning the great rebellion at Marlborough that ended his stay at the school. The manifest opposition between “learned next to nothing” and “learned a good deal” cannot easily be set aside. Morris’s biographers, however, from J.W. Mackail and Morris’s daughter, May Morris, to E.P. Thompson, Philip Henderson, Jack Lindsay, and Fiona MacCarthy, have briefly and unblinkingly agreed with both sides of the paradox. They accept his claim that he learned “next to nothing” at Marlborough, and give little attention to his academic role there – but expand somewhat on his exploration of the Wiltshire countryside. Three writers – E.P. Thompson, Lindsay, and MacCarthy – link aspects of Marlborough to some of Morris’s later writings. To all of them Morris apparently learned little or nothing of the public school’s stock-in-trade, an education in the classics as a preparation for Oxbridge, and at the same time Marlborough afforded Morris the opportunity to begin to amass his deep knowledge of nature, ancient monuments, and historical contexts. But a quite different picture emerges from the school records, and diaries and recollections of Morris’s contemporaries there.

Hence the gap, the contradiction between “learned next to nothing” and “learned a good deal,” between two kinds of learning, academic and experiential or practical, remains a paradox. Morris’s absolute rejection of his “school instruction” is thus in need of serious reconsideration. The second claim about having “learned a good deal” has received far greater attention: the value of