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An Interview with William Morris, September, 1885: His Arrest and Freedom of Speech

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TEXTS

TERRY L. MEYERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
WILLIAM MORRIS,
SEPTEMBER, 1885:
HIS ARREST AND
FREEDOM OF SPEECH

UNTIL RECENTLY, IT HAD BEEN PRESUMED THAT AFTER William Morris was arrested on September 21, 1885, in a melée at the Thames Police Court, he made no public comment on the incident (Thompson 398). Norman Kelvin's edition of Morris's letters, however, includes a letter about the incident to the *Daily News* published on September 23, 1885 (Morris 456–57). To this letter may now be added the following interview with Morris printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, also on September 23, 1885, p. 4.

The interview was granted within a day of when Morris found himself arrested for disorderly conduct at the trial of Lewis Lyons, a tailor, and others who had been charged with resisting arrest at a mass meeting of Socialists on Sunday,

September 20, 1885. That meeting was one of a series that had attracted the attention of the government—in the form of police prosecution on the grounds of “obstruction”—and that raised important questions concerning freedom of speech in England. E. P. Thompson makes the point that the meetings which were held at Dod Street in Limehouse took place on “a long-established open-air site of Radical and religious bodies” (Thompson 394–95).

A summary of the trial of Lewis Lyons and those charged along with him appears in *The Times*, September 22, 1885, p. 4f. Lyons was sentenced by the magistrate, Thomas Williams Saunders, to two months hard labor. Among the crowd that protested the harshness of his sentence were Eleanor Aveling, the daughter of Karl Marx, and her husband, Edward.

In the end, after identifying himself (“I am an artist, and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe” [Thompson 397]), Morris was discharged without penalty.

THE POET AND THE POLICE.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. WILLIAM MORRIS.

A representative of the *Pall Mall Gazette* called yesterday afternoon upon Mr. William Morris at his fine-arts works at Merton Abbey, and at his invitation Mr. Morris willingly “thought aloud,” at greater length than the officers of Mr. Saunders’s court would permit, upon the subject of the police and their prosecutions.

“The *Standard*, I see,” he observed, “speaks of the magistrate’s decision being ‘in accordance with justice and common sense’; but I will be bound that if the writer had been present in court yesterday he would not have thought so. The fact is, the worthy magistrate picked out for discharge the man who did the most, while he sent to prison for two months the man who was least responsible. We are really concerned for Lyons, who is not the sort of fellow to have done the thing charged against him. The constable charged Lyons with having kicked him, but how could the

policeman tell absolutely who kicked him in a crowd like that? The evidence given in support of the attempt to connect the banner-bearers with a previous resistance to the police was most trumpery, and if I had been a jury-man I should not have convicted upon it, even supposing that the police were in a position to identify those men in the midst of a great crowd when they were almost the breadth of a street away. From what I know of the people taken, I feel certain that they had not been active in the matter. We are bound, I think, to take what action may be possible to secure the release of Lyons.

"When I found myself in the dock, upon my word it was so absurd a charge I really did not know what to say—I could not treat it seriously. When the sentence was passed upon the men charged with resisting the police we had all cried out 'Shame!' and then came the order, 'Clear the court!' Two or three policemen rushed at us, especially the policeman who had given evidence against Lyons. He caught hold of me and shoved me, and also seized Mrs. Aveling by the shoulder, and hustled us about. I had previously said 'All right, I am going,' and all that I did when hustled was what a man always does when shoved—he stiffens himself up, else he would fall down. Turning round, I remonstrated with the constable upon his conduct, when he exclaimed, 'I will run you in,' and then, as if a brilliant idea had suddenly struck him, he added, 'You have broken my helmet chin-strap.' Thereupon, another bobby having taken hold of me, they ran me into the road, where the people cheered me vigorously. I was walked into the police-station, where there was some ridiculous discussion as to the damage to the helmet; and afterwards I was kept for two hours in the lobby before I was placed in the dock. I am sorry for more reasons than one that I answered the magistrate's inquiry—'What are you?'—in the language I did. As sure as a gun, if I had passed as an ordinary workman, I would have been sent to prison. Yes; your contemporary's 'empty-headed artists and literary men' is one for me; but I am tolerably thick-skinned. By the way, I was congratulated at our meeting last night on having written a new poem."¹

"I shall probably get to prison yet," continued Mr. Morris, "if the authorities maintain their present attitude. I have to go to Manchester next Sunday, but the Sunday after, if the game is kept up, I am bound to be on the ground. But I honestly confess I do not take kindly to the idea of going to gaol. For I do not like to have a door locked upon me, nor do I like to be stopped from going where I want to go. Besides, I have read the article in the Pall Mall Gazette by a writer who had spent some days in the Holloway Gaol ["Forty" 1-2]. The fines of all the men who were fined were paid the same evening, but not so quickly as to prevent one of them from having his hair cropped; and after they had been committed, they were insulted most grossly by the police. Going to gaol, even for a week, is no joke for these working men, as we must all admit if we give the matter a thought; but they are very eager in this business, I assure you. The existence of this spirit of self-sacrifice on the part of the working men makes the position one of some difficulty for persons with means. I have not yet made up my mind what course I should take if I were simply fined. My view is that everybody ought to do in this matter as his conscience bids him. We are certainly determined to support our friends. It grieves me to see so many outsiders taken, for all the speakers were not taken. We ought all to be taken."

Invited to express his views upon the conflict in its graver aspects, Mr. Morris said, "We are regarding it simply from the public-meeting point of view. The movement at present represented in Burdett-road is not necessarily a Socialist movement; it is a movement in defense of the right to free speech. As I have heard the law expounded, those who call a meeting on a public road hold it on peril of being charged with creating an obstruction—with preventing a person going anywhere he pleases on the road; but before a conviction is entered, there certainly ought to be good proof of actual obstruction—the obstruction ought not to be a merely technical obstruction, but a real obstruction. Whether meetings held in the streets shall be interfered with or not undoubtedly lies largely in the discretion of the authorities for each

district. But it is not the custom to strain the laws against the promoters of these meetings unless the necessities of the public convenience imperatively call for interference. At Hammersmith, where we have held meetings on a piece of waste ground beside the road, the police were even good enough to say, at a time when we were troubled with ill-mannered opposition, that if we sent them word they would send down constables to maintain order for us. The police at the East-end, however, appear to be downright ill-tempered. I suppose the police grow worse when they have continually to deal with poor people, for down there they seem to treat the people like dogs. The Socialist League has been 'warned' in Soho and Hoxton, and interfered with at Stratford, and, in this present case, at Limehouse. But when we were interfered with at Stratford, Mr. Phillips decided that there had been no obstruction proved, and discharged the prisoner. As everybody knows, meetings of other kinds have been held in numberless places without interference for years and years. We contend that the persistent interference with the Socialist meetings held in Dod-street proves an animus of some sort, wherever it comes from—which we don't profess to know. A police-officer with whom I talked on the subject at the police-court raised what might be regarded as a reasonable objection—that meetings in the street interfered with the rest of working people who had to sleep during the day; but when I asked him, "Then why have you not shut up the 'Salvationists'?" he immediately shifted his ground, saying, "You must admit that the people of this country as a body are religious." That observation, as I remarked to the officer, just proves our case. We are interfered with because we preach disagreeable doctrines.

"The good magistrate asks, 'If you want to preach your doctrines, why don't you hire halls or go to the parks?' Well, the working people who form the Socialist bodies do not hire halls because they cannot afford to do so, and they do not confine themselves to the parks because they cannot there reach all the classes of people whom they wish to reach. The people who most need to be stirred to a comprehension of their own condition are the very people who do

not and will not attend ordinary meetings, whether in hall or park. We must get at these people at their own doors, and these are the people we do get at by our street meetings. They are so down-drawn with poverty they scarcely know what to think at first, but they always listen patiently and quietly. When there are disturbances they are caused by men in better positions. If we do not get hold of these poor people, what can we do? They are the people who have the best reason to be discontented—they are the people who must move. Other missionary organizations will appreciate this as readily as the Socialists. Apart altogether from the objects of the promoters, I believe that the stoppage of these meetings would entail upon the people a distinct loss. I think in respect to these meetings in the same way as I think in regard to the complaints against the street musicians—how wearisome and dull the streets would be if they were as respectable people would have them! For myself, I would rather experience some noise and suffering rather than that the streets should be dull. We must remember that the people in the poorer districts have not the same recreations and amusements that we possess.[”]

“The movement as a movement for the defence of free speech is now in the hands of a vigilance committee, formed of delegates from political clubs and leagues; and I should think the suggestion made by the Pall Mall Gazette—for the summoning of a conference of all persons interested in the maintenance of the right to hold public meetings in the streets [“Right” 1]—will commend itself to the committee. I decidedly think the attempt to hold these meetings should be maintained at any cost; and it is the direct and urgent interest of everybody that has anything to gain by street preaching to join those already associated together in protection of the right to free speech. Unless the Home Secretary intervenes, I have no doubt that we shall be interfered with next Sunday.² But that kind of interference is a dangerous business. The men who attend these meetings may be as peaceably disposed as you please, but when a man is knocked down, who can answer for him? However, if the peace is broken, the burden will lie solely upon the police.

It may be that the Government, having been rather loose in one direction—Ireland—are pulling the reins a little tighter in another direction, in order to regain their character for firmness. Still, it cannot be in the interests of the Government to allow this business to continue. As one of my workmen remarked to me this morning, every Conservative candidate at the East End will rapidly lose any chance of election they may have had." "As I have said," concluded Mr. Morris, "I am not predisposed to enjoy the luxury of martyrdom in a small way, but I am quite clear that the question must be fought out, whatever may be the cost." "Have you any important literary work in hand at present, Mr. Morris?" "I cannot say that I have—I cannot find time." "Then it may be a public gain if you are cast into prison?" "Ah! But there is the oakum to pick."

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

NOTES

¹According to Edward Aveling, one of the newspapers identified Morris as the author of the "Paradise League" (qtd. in Thompson 396).

²On the next Sunday, between 30,000 and 50,000 people turned out at Dod Street. Thompson notes that "the police, for fear of alienating the whole radical movement, kept at a discreet distance" (398).

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