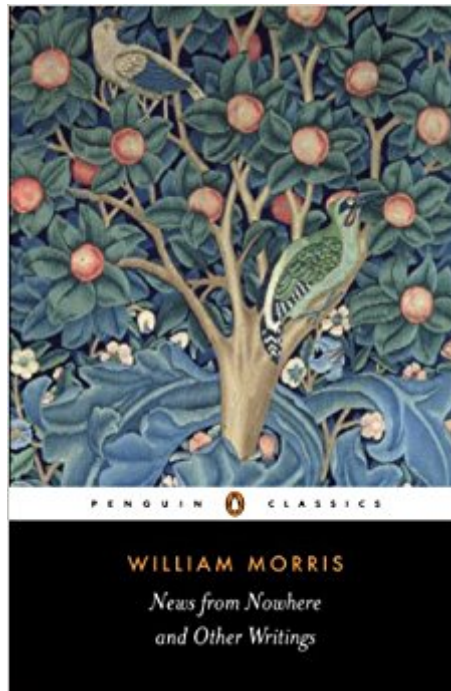




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News From Nowhere And Other Writings (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Poet, pattern-designer, environmentalist and maker of fine books, William Morris (1834-96) was also a committed socialist and visionary writer, obsessively concerned with the struggle to achieve a perfect society on earth. *News From Nowhere*, one of the most significant English works on the theme of utopia, is the tale of William Guest, a Victorian who wakes one morning to find himself in the year 2102 and discovers a society that has changed beyond recognition into a pastoral paradise, in which all people live in blissful equality and contentment. A socialist masterpiece, *News From Nowhere* is a vision of a future free from capitalism, isolation and industrialisation. This volume also contains a wide selection of Morris's writings, lectures, journalism and letters, which expand upon the key themes of *News From Nowhere*.

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Customer Reviews

If you've made your way here, it's pretty safe to say this is exactly what you're looking for. Nice collection. Morris' political essays stand with Orwell's and Bertrand Russell's in both clarity,

personality, and, if I may, loveliness. There's much more than wallpaper here.

Morris published this book in 1890, at the age of 56, six years before his death, just as the Socialist League which he had founded had disintegrated and effectively put an end to his involvement in politics. It is of course a Utopia, taking the form of a dream he had of a better world. In it we find an expression of his philosophy, which is both backward and forward looking: backward in his idealization of a pre-industrial age when men took pride in craftsmanship, and forward in progressive views on education and the place of women in society. I have always thought of Morris as a lovable idealist, but one who was totally impractical. Socialists were inspired by him, but as the labour movement advanced, for better and for worse it compromised with capitalism and a badly defective parliamentary system. Morris had wryly realized that the labour movement has passed him by - but at least he could still dream; and his dream was in places so wildly unrealistic that one must assume that at least some aspects of this Utopia were written with tongue in cheek. He dreamt of an England nearly two centuries after his time (the exact date is never specified). London has been considerably de-urbanized - the ugly and squalid buildings against which he had campaigned had mostly gone, to be replaced by open spaces, woods and gardens; the Thames in London is clean again and is swarming with salmon. Village life and the life of small towns had revived; the industrial towns in the North and in the Midlands had gone - there was next to no factory production, and the people were happily multi-skilled in manual craftsmanship. Idleness was unknown; so was money - everybody worked unpaid. Children did not have to go to school, happily learnt from doing, learnt to read without being taught, and many were able to speak more than one language. Women were fully emancipated and honoured - for their traditional roles as housewives and mothers. Couples remained together as long as they liked each other sufficiently, and if they parted, there was no disgrace and no economic considerations which made that process so confrontational. Because everybody was happy, they all looked much younger than they were and very handsome; and their clothes were as bright as those of the 19th century had been dull. There were no civil or criminal laws, no courts, no police, no prisons they were not needed when there were no disputes about property and few crimes of passion, which were treated as diseases rather than as crimes. There is no central government - all decisions are made at the communal level, and after discussions, the minority readily goes along with the decisions of the majority. They had tried State Socialism, but that had enslaved the people almost as much as capitalism had. There is a long historical section in which Morris imagined the process by which 19th century society had replaced the old system with the new - General strikes, and a civil war. Morris rides some other of his hobby-horses: the people in

his dreams are more interested in myths and legends of old than they are in depictions of contemporary life. All this is conveyed in a rather didactic style (which I found both unimaginative and tediously repetitive, and with many romantic clichés) in the first half of the book. In the second half, it seems to me, what interest there was in the first had quite disappeared, as we get an account of him going by boat, with friends he has made, up the Thames from Hammersmith to beyond Oxford, noting that the "cokneyfied" houses that had spoilt its banks had all gone and that the ugly iron bridges spanning the river had been replaced by more handsome wooden ones. He falls in love (rather soporily, I think) with one of the young women in the party - and then he wakes up. I have always been fond of Morris; but, as a literary production, I found this tract very disappointing.

Yes, I mean that with a capital S. The title story, "News from Nowhere", is a Socialist Utopia like Bellamy's "Looking Backward." In fact, Morris wrote an intro to Bellamy's brief book, and criticized it (gently) for not going far enough. Morris' view of that happy future occupies about half of this thick compilation. It is an incredible Eden, where hale, hearty, and lovely people swing into everything with the greatest gusto. Morris' character, the Guest, arrives just when everyone is falling over themselves to row upstream for the privilege of baling hay. Through some Socialist magic, everyone has become beautiful, intelligent, and youthful. In fact Ellen, who takes a shine to the Guest, has such "beauty and cleverness and brightness" (her own words, p.223) that she lives out of town to avoid causing a ruckus among the young bucks there. Outside of everyone's passion for good, hard labor (with the fear of some future shortage of sweaty work to go around), 'Nowhere' is most notable for the changes it has wrought on the English countryside. Since government no longer serves a Socialist need, the old trappings of power have been torn down. The one exception is the old Parliament building, which now serves as the transfer station between the producers of manure and its consumers - with a clear implication that little has changed. Exchange of manure is about the most sophisticated social interaction, since Morris declares that "this is not an age of inventions. The last epoch did all that for us," (p.192) and they let more of the old knowledge slip away every year. Instead, his healthy and pastoral people work for love of work, and infuse some vague sense of art into whatever it was they were going on about. Issues of medical care are waved away under their general shiny health, despite the fact that pastoral, non-technological people filled their graveyards with women dying in childbirth. The other half of this book is divided between a number of essays and lectures, most of which extol the Socialist ethos. About 120 pages of "Lectures" discuss design, and some few - with gritted teeth - acknowledge that science may deserve to exist. Yes, he tolerates those people in whom the desire to know burns most brightly.

Mostly, however, "science" is something good for cleaning flue gas so the rural colors may shine more brightly. Morris was a visionary. He was also a brilliant and driven man, a skilled artisan, and eloquent writer. Unfortunately, he was born into a good-sized estate, so never had to pay all that much attention to the fussy bits of how people put the bread on their tables. The disconnect between his plenty and the majority's need is painfully apparent, but not to himself. The best-reasoned essay of the lot was the last, on the founding philosophy of his Kelmscott Press. He explained, in concrete terms, how he decided on the principles of artisanship of printing, and goes into some detail about how well-made text should appear. Much of what he said made sense, and much of the rest could be confirmed or denied by printing up a few pages and seeing what worked - the essence of his reviled "science." Morris had a fine and wide-ranging mind. This book shows many of its aspects, but also shows many of its failings. I was happier thinking of him only as the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. //wiredweird

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