



ART IN THE MAKING

News from Nowhere

+ intro by Rowan Bain, Principle Curator at William Morris Gallery

William Morris, artist, writer and socialist, died in 1896. His doctor said that he had died of simply being William Morris; he had done the work of a dozen men. *News from Nowhere* is a film about that work and the life bound up in it.

By the 1880s, Morris had gained fame as a writer, poet, and designer, but his success drew him increasingly towards the ideas of socialism. For Morris the process of industrialisation brought an ugliness that killed the spirit; he dreamed of a classless, craft-based society which valued the dignity of labour and used art to create its millenium. At the same time, his friendship with the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti continued to exert its influence on him.

In the summer of 1880, Morris travelled up the Thames from London to the house in Kelmscott above Oxford which he and his wife shared in an increasingly uneasy *ménage-à-trois* with Rossetti. The film is largely a recreation of that passage upstream, the same journey on which Morris was to base his own *News from Nowhere*. The book was a visionary romance; Morris used it to describe the rural, socialist Utopia that would revitalise his beloved crafts. The film follows Morris and his visionary self along the river, pausing to examine the past and dreaming with him of the future, reflecting on the perplexed sadness which Morris in his lifetime masked beneath his immense creative energy.

Arts Council of Great Britain

The narrative structure of Alister Hallum's highly attractive film about William Morris is provided by the journey up the Thames from London to Kelmscott (north of Oxford) which Morris undertook in the summer of 1880 with his wife Jane, his dog and his friend Richard Grosvenor. (The journey later became the basis for Morris' book *News from Nowhere*, published in 1891.) The fragile Jane eventually leaves to continue the journey by train, but Grosvenor stays on and proves a boon both to Morris and the director, for he seems to know little about Morris' past activities and beliefs, enabling Morris to expound at length, painlessly communicating valuable information.

Hampton Court prompts praise of the Gothic and denunciation of Classicism; a church at Cookham brings out his love of the Middle Ages, when artists were valued for their intrinsic worth rather than their commercial value. A much restored farmhouse triggers off a diatribe against restoration:

'Weathering is natural!' he grumbles, walking around to the astonishment of a resident worker. When Morris' words are directly taken from his lectures and writings, he appears as a lecturer, declaiming against a window. The river journey is also interrupted by flashbacks, detailing in particular the influence of Ruskin in the early days of the Pre-Raphaelites, Morris' relationship with Rossetti (who shares the Kelmscott house and dotes on his wife) and his forays into Iceland, whose myths and landscapes he adored.

With the help of Timothy West's powerful impersonation, the film presents a clear picture of Morris, his convictions and contradictions: a man who channelled his belief in the beauty of work into a multitude of crafts (weaving,

printing, poetry, prose romance, wallpaper, furniture) and dreamed of a fully socialist state while denying his boatman the joy of champagne breakfasts on the banks of the Thames. The décor of the interiors is properly rich in the correct Arts and Crafts, while Jeremy Stavenhagen's sumptuous photography bathes the events in an Arcadian glow which Morris would surely have relished.

Geoff Brown, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1979

NEWS FROM NOWHERE

Director: Alister Hallum
Production Company: Alister Hallum Productions
Sponsor: Arts Council of Great Britain
Producer: Alister Hallum
Production Manager: Iain Watkinson
Production Assistant: Heather Loades
Written by: Philip Henderson, Alister Hallum
Director of Photography: Jeremy Stavenhagen
2nd Unit Photography (Iceland): John Bulmer
Editor: Mick Audsley
Production Designer: Lyall Hallum
Costumes: Shirley Russell
Make-up: Ros McCorkindale
Music: Red Eye Band
Sound Recording: Simon Okin, Albert Bailey

Cast

Timothy West (*William Morris*)
Kika Markham (*Jane Morris*)
John Cater (*Richard Grosvenor*)
Clive Swift (*D.G. Rossetti*)
Theresa Streatfield (*Jenny Morris*)
Suzannah Williams (*May Morris*)
Pat Rossiter (*nurse*)
Dave Hastings (*boatman*)
Ronald Briggs (*printer*)
Elunid Hawkins, Peter Kerr (*dinner guests*)

UK 1978
53 mins

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Art in the Making: News from Nowhere + intro by Rowan Bain, Principle Curator at William Morris Gallery TBC

Thu 5 Jan 18:20

African Odysseys: Hussein Shariffe: A Life Between Exile and Homecoming

Sat 7 Jan 12:00-17:00

Seniors' Free Matinee: UK Theatrical Premiere: Wild and Free, Twice Daily + Q&A

Mon 9 Jan 14:00

Silent Cinema: Metropolis + intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator

Sun 15 Jan 14:40

Projecting the Archive: Thunder in the City + intro by Jo Botting, BFI Curator

Tue 17 Jan 18:20

Experimenta: Nation's Finest, Putting Down Roots and Birthing + Q&A

Wed 25 Jan 18:15

Relaxed Screening: The Hidden Fortress + intro & discussion

Mon 30 Jan 18:00

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