

APPLICATION FOR SABBATICAL LEAVE, 2018-19

MICHAEL ROBERTSON
Department of English
mroberts@tcnj.edu

WILLIAM MORRIS: THE JOURNEY TOWARD UTOPIA. A BIOGRAPHY
September 8, 2017

First appointment at The College of New Jersey: September 1993

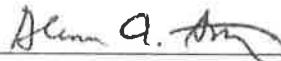
Previous sabbatical leaves: Fall 2002-Spring 2003 and Fall 2011-Spring 2012

Current application is for full academic year

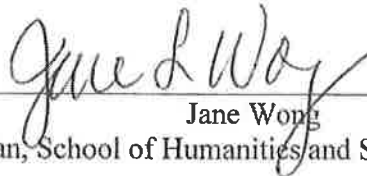
I have notified my dean and department chair of my intention to apply for a sabbatical leave.



Michael Robertson



Glenn Steinberg
Chair, Department of English



Jane Wong
Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences

William Morris: The Journey Toward Utopia. A Biography

Project Description

William Morris (1834-1896) stands—along with Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Alfred Tennyson—as one of the most important artistic figures of the Victorian era. He is certainly the most multi-talented. Today Morris is best known in the U.S. for his work as a designer. As founder of Morris & Co., the most influential design firm of the nineteenth century, Morris was celebrated for his wallpapers, fabrics, tapestries, carpets, and stained glass, and he inspired the international Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During his lifetime, however, Morris was known principally as a poet, the author of many volumes of popular narrative verse. In addition, Morris became, in his maturity, England's most prominent socialist, a tireless advocate for a unique socialist vision that promised nothing less than the transformation of everyday life. His political activism led directly to his most famous literary work, the utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1891), which stands alongside Thomas More's foundational *Utopia* (1516) as one of the greatest works of utopian fiction in world literature.

I will use my 2018-19 sabbatical to conduct research in England and northern Europe for a new book-length biography, *William Morris: The Journey Toward Utopia*. Morris has been the subject of numerous biographies, but the most recent, Fiona MacCarthy's *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, was published over twenty years ago. MacCarthy's biography is excellent: detailed, comprehensive, and artful. However, MacCarthy's "definitive" biography exhaustively documents Morris's life and career, and the volume takes up nearly 700 closely printed pages. Her achievement provides an opening for a much briefer biography—I anticipate a work of about 350 printed pages, half the length of MacCarthy's—that will appeal to readers beyond the circle of Victorian Studies specialists. It is time for a new biography of Morris that can bring this vitally important artist, writer, and political thinker to twenty-first-century readers.

My biography will make a number of distinctive contributions to scholarship not only on William Morris but on Victorian England:

- As my subtitle indicates, I argue that Morris's entire career can be seen as a journey toward utopia. Morris was one of Victorian England's greatest dissenters, a conscientious objector to industrial capitalist civilization. His art, his writing, and his political activism contributed to the visionary utopianism of *News from Nowhere*.
- My biography will be the first to make use of Wendy Parkins' *Jane Morris: The Burden of History*, a powerful feminist study of Morris's marriage that exposes the myths surrounding his wife Jane Burden, a famous Pre-Raphaelite artist's model—myths that all previous biographers, including MacCarthy, have perpetuated.
- My background as a teacher of gender studies courses ("Men and Masculinities" and "American Masculinities") and scholar of the history of sexuality (book chapters on Walt Whitman's British homosexual disciples and on sexual theorist Edward Carpenter) has prepared me to explore the homoerotic subtexts of Morris's intense male friendships. I will build on the foundational work of James Eli Adams, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Herbert L. Sussman, as well as more recent scholarship.

- No scholar has yet given attention to the ways in which Morris's intense interest in the medieval Norse sagas and the heroism of the Nordic "race" is connected with the racist discourse of British imperialism. I will build on recent work by Saree Makdisi and John C. Mitcham.
- In my forthcoming book *The Last Utopians* I make use of the concept of "reflective nostalgia" advanced by cultural theorist Svetlana Boym. I plan to use Boym's work in the biography to advance understanding of the political utility of Morris's medievalism.
- As an American, I bring an "outsider" perspective to the history of Victorian England. Previous Morris biographers have been British, and they assume readers' familiarity with cultural forces such as the Oxford Movement and figures ranging from Prime Minister William Gladstone to architect Nicholas Pugin. My biography will place Morris within a rich social history of Victorian England.
- I will be the first biographer to make use of the nearly three hundred previously unpublished letters by Morris collected by independent scholar Frank Sharp. I have already talked with Sharp about these letters, which reveal the full extent of Morris's involvement in architectural preservation and emphasize the international dimension of his socialist activities.

Work Plan

Appendix A lists the archives I intend to consult during my sabbatical. The most important archives are those in the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the William Morris Gallery, all of which are located in London. I intend to rent a flat in London from August 2018 through July 2019, though I will often be away from the city, visiting archives in Oxford, Cambridge, Cheltenham, and Yorkshire. I will also consult the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, which holds the papers of Morris's close political associate Andreas Scheu.

If Morris were merely a writer, research in the archives might be enough. Morris, however, trained as an architect and worked as a designer of churches and dwellings. The houses he lived in, the Gothic cathedrals that profoundly influenced him, and the buildings he decorated are all crucial for understanding his achievement. Appendix B lists houses and churches throughout England that Morris & Co. decorated. It also includes the two most significant houses in which Morris lived as an adult: Red House, near London, which he designed with his friend Philip Webb and which is widely considered the most influential English domestic building of the late nineteenth century; and Kelmscott Manor, in Oxfordshire, a seventeenth-century house that fired Morris's utopian imagination—so much so that Kelmscott Manor is the setting for the climactic final scene of his utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, and an engraving of the house serves as frontispiece of Morris's 1892 edition of the book.

Appendix B also includes a number of cathedrals in Northern France that Morris visited as a young man—a journey that constituted the most important aesthetic/intellectual experience of his life. The French cathedrals spurred Morris's vision of a utopian socialist future in which workingmen and women, liberated from industrial capitalism, would once again produce buildings and objects of surpassing beauty. In order to understand fully Morris's forward-looking medievalism, I need to retrace his youthful journey through France.

Schedule

Fall 2018: I will begin research in the principal London archives: the British Library, the National Art Library, and the William Morris Gallery. I will travel to Castle Howard Archive, Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, and the International Institute of Social History. I will also visit sites associated with Morris in Ely, Leek, Marlborough, Northern France, Oxfordshire, Sussex, and Wolverhampton.

Spring 2019: I will continue research in the British Library, National Art Library, and William Morris Gallery. In London, I will also consult the archives of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the William Morris Society. I will travel to consult archives in the Bodleian Library, Oxford and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. I will complete my visits to London sites: the Emery Walker House, Linley Sambourne House, Merton Abbey, Red House, and Whitelands College Chapel.

Outcomes and Value

Professional Development: My entire career since 2000 has served as preparation for this project. In that year I began research for my prize-winning group biography *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton UP, 2008), which includes three chapters on Whitman's nineteenth-century British disciples, all of whom traveled in the same artistic and political circles as Morris. In particular, my work on *Worshipping Walt* immersed me in the complex history of British socialism, in which Morris played a central role.

With my next book, *The Last Utopians* (Princeton UP, 2018), also a group biography, I deepened my study of British socialism and wrote for the first time about Morris, who is one of four subjects of the book. In the course of writing the book, I attended the 2015 symposium "William Morris in the 21st Century" in Birmingham, England, where I met leading Morris scholars and was invited to address the symposium about my planned biography. In 2016 I joined the Governing Board of the William Morris Society of the U.S. As a board member, I serve as editor of the Morris Society blog, *News from Anywhere* (morrissociety.blogspot.com) and have contributed articles to the Society's publication, *Useful and Beautiful*. I was invited to contribute to the forthcoming collection *Teaching William Morris* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP) and, most significantly, have written the entry on "Biographies" for the forthcoming *Companion to William Morris* (Routledge). In writing this lengthy essay, I read or re-read dozens of biographies, memoirs, and collections of letters, which served as an ideal preparation for my sabbatical research.

Value to the Scholarly Community: My first book, *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature* (Columbia UP, 1997) was well reviewed and won a national award, but it was directed to a relatively small scholarly audience. Both of my next two books were addressed to a broad audience both in and outside the academy. My success is reflected by sales of *Worshipping Walt* and by positive reviews in such general-interest American and British journals as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Financial Times*.

In the Project Description above, I outline this project's contribution to scholarship on William Morris and Victorian England. However, I believe that a well-written biography of

Morris that emphasizes his current relevance—to discussions not only of art and design but also of work, gender, politics, and the environment—can appeal to both scholarly and general audiences. I intend to place the book with a trade press in order to reach a wide readership of those interested in art, literature, politics, and Victorian history.

Value to the College Community: My research on Morris has already led to my teaching of three new courses: an FSP seminar on “The Simple Life,” an Honors course on “Utopia,” and a course on “The Utopian Tradition in Western Literature” at Northern State Prison, taught to a combined group of prisoners and TCNJ students. I also taught for the first time last spring LIT 252, a survey of British Literature from 1700 to the present. As I move from my earlier study and teaching of American literature to a focus on Victorian culture and history, I expect to teach LIT 362, “Victorian Literature.”

I have given multiple talks to various groups on campus sharing my work on Walt Whitman and utopian literature; I look forward to sharing my work on Morris with students and colleagues.

In conclusion: Each of my two previous sabbaticals led directly to a book publication: my 2002-03 sabbatical to *Worshipping Walt* and my 2011-12 sabbatical to *The Last Utopians*. I expect this sabbatical to be similarly productive.

Works Cited

- Adams, James Eli. *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.
- Makdisi, Saree. *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race and Imperial Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2014.
- MacCarthy, Fiona. *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Mitcham, John C. *Race and Imperial Defence in the British World, 1870-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016.
- Parkins, Wendy. *Jane Morris: The Burden of History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Sussman, Herbert L. *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.