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'A Dream of John Ball' by William Morris

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Introduction

Written by writer, translator, artist, designer, and translator William Morris (1834–1896), *A Dream of John Ball* is a fictionalised account of events surrounding the failed English uprising of 1381 and its most famous priestly leader, John Ball. The story was first serialised in 1886–1887 and soon published in book form (e.g., Morris 1888; 1892). *A Dream of John Ball* is set shortly before Ball's capture and execution in July 1381. It tells the story of a character called the 'Man from Essex' (likely a reference to Morris himself) who has a vivid dream in which he interacts with Kentish rebels from 1381, including an extended discussion with Ball about the future of exploitation and the possibility of a better world for the exploited. Through prophetic, apocalyptic, and eschatological language, the story effectively functions as a Marxist account of the development and transformation of human societies, particularly from feudalism to capitalism and then from capitalism to socialism and communism. This vision of the development of human society pointed to an expected harmonious future when all things would be shared in common, and people would contribute according to their abilities. The example of Ball and the rebels provided Morris with a model community ahead of its time whose ideas of fellowship were unable to be fulfilled until history had passed through its capitalist phase. Nevertheless, Ball and the medieval community of rebels were still seen as providing a foreshadowing of, and an inspiration for, a better world beyond capitalism. In this respect, *A Dream of John Ball* was part of an 'oppositional' understanding of English history and identity—that is, an anti-capitalist and socialist alternative to dominant Victorian notions and anxieties about Britain's imperial and industrial strength (Ward 1998; Yeo 2014; Courtney 2015, 10).

Background

While Morris had long ceased to be a believing Christian by the time of writing *A Dream of John Ball*, the use of Christianised apocalyptic language was part of his upbringing, background, and thinking, and connected to his interest in Catholic, medieval, and Romantic aesthetics. Morris was raised a strict Anglican and appreciated the antiquated architecture of cathedrals and old churches. In 1848, Morris went to Marlborough College, Wiltshire, where he came into sustained contact with Anglo-Catholicism which influenced him throughout his life. Morris was further exposed to the High Church influences in his private tuition from Rev. Frederick B. Guy. In 1852, Morris went to Exeter College, Oxford University, to read the classics and there he met his lifelong friend Edward Burne-Jones. At Oxford, Morris further developed medieval, Arthurian, Romantic, and Anglo-Catholic interests with an accompanying critique of industrialisation and afterwards Morris and Burne-Jones continued to develop interests in Christian Socialism and critiques of capitalism, class, and poverty. Morris's lifelong admiration for John Ruskin reveals a similar set of influences about societal decay, beauty, nature, and the contrast between the alienation of the Victorian worker and the freedom of individual expression for medieval workers (for detail on Morris's life, see, e.g., Thompson 1977; MacCarthy 2010).

Morris lost his religion but these interests in Anglo-Catholicism, Christian Socialism, and Ruskin were part of the reason why he retained this specific type of Christian language. As we will see below, he was also especially critical of a different sort of Christianity, namely, establishment Puritanism and Protestantism and what he saw as its moral and economic hypocrisy, the misery it enabled, and its historical association with capitalism.

Politically, the adult Morris had been associated with the left wing of liberalism but became disillusioned because he believed liberalism was too closely aligned with the interests of capitalists and capitalism. By the 1880s, Morris's politics were aligned with ideas of revolution, anti-imperialism, working-class agitation, and socialism (on the issues surrounding Morris's shift to socialism, see Thompson 1977, 243–74, 763–816; Kinna 2000, 1–31, 107–21, 157–212; Katz 2005, 112–13, 215–66; Mahamdallie 2008; MacCarthy 2010, loc 8737–9128, 9157–9523; Bevir 2011, 85–105). He described socialism as advocating:

> *a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers, nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all—the realization at last of the meaning of the word COMMONWEALTH. (Morris 1894)*

Morris attempted to help bring about a new world through involvement in political groups. In 1883, he joined the newly formed socialist group, the Democratic Federation, for which he was a regular speaker, propagandist, publisher, and designer. In 1884, the Democratic Federation became the Social Democratic Federation and split over the role of parliamentary socialism and British imperialism. Morris was hostile to both, which led to his departure, and later in the same year established the Socialist League. While trying to navigate the different internal factions, Morris advocated a non-parliamentary, internationalist, and revolutionary road to socialism. Whatever doubts he may have had about socialist transformation, in a letter to John Burns (27 October 1885) he claimed that he was "beginning to hope that I may live to see the great change" (Kelvin 1987, 475).

In 1885, Morris, along with the prominent English socialist Ernest Belfort Bax, revised the *Manifesto of the Socialist League*. The *Manifesto* explained concepts of exploitation and class conflict and gave examples such as strikes, rebellion, and lawbreaking. Socialism, rather than administrative tweaking, was said to be the only remedy to the enslavement of the working class and the only way to produce a society where everyone "will have abundant leisure for following intellectual or other pursuits congenial to his nature" (Socialist League 1885; Morris and Bax 1885). The Socialist League hoped to educate people in the "principles of this great cause" and so "when the crisis comes," there would be a body of people "ready to step into their due places and deal with and direct the irresistible movement.” This meant the need for solidarity or “close fellowship” and a “steady purpose for the advancement of the Cause,” including “equality and brotherhood for all the world” to bring about the necessary organisation and discipline (Socialist League 1885).

Lecturing in 1893, Morris clarified further the necessarily vague conceptualisation of the future in using the language of ‘communism,’ a system which would be the successor to, or the completion of, socialism. Communism would exist when socialism “ceases to be militant and becomes triumphant.” With communism, the resources of nature (e.g., land) will be foregrounded and owned by ‘the whole community for the benefit of the whole’ so that needs and comforts of all the people in this classless society will be met. Work will be carried out by people suited for the job and “for the benefit of each and all” (Morris 1903; cf. Morris 1890; Kinna 2000, 118–19; Levitas 2016, 8–12).

This propagandising was part of what has been called the “eschatology of socialism” of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Crossley 2022, 291–95, 311–16). This was a concept implicit in the explicit rhetoric of the time about the ‘religion of socialism’ (and present in the *Manifesto*, and elsewhere in the works of Morris and Bax; cf. Bax 1890; Yeo 1977). In this thinking, socialism would absorb and transform that which was deemed useful and effective in existing religion, including a sense of responsibility to one another, morality, evangelising, consciousness-raising, propaganda, popular education, and even utopianism. The religion of socialism would help realise “the change towards social order” and make known the importance of “sacrifices” to “the Cause” (Socialist League 1885). The ‘eschatology of socialism’ is a heuristic concept which covers common themes at the time connected to Marx and Engels’s reading of history, on which Morris and Bax themselves had published (Morris and Bax 1893; 1994). This involved ideas about the transformation of human history from the beginning of social organisation through ancient societies to feudalism to capitalism, with the expectation of socialism and communism to come and consciously cast in a secularised version of Jewish and Christian prophetic, apocalyptic, and eschatological language.

As Morris put it concerning England’s future in his poem, ‘The Day is Coming’ (1884): “There more than one in a thousand in the days that are yet to come / Shall have some hope of the morrow, some joy of the ancient home…That the Dawn and the Day is coming” (Morris 1885, 3–5). We can extend this notion of an ‘eschatology of socialism’ to Morris’s disillusionment towards the end of the 1880s about imminent future change and his ideas about a more patient approach to growing working-class consciousness. Lecturing in 1893, he noted that “hope of the newbirth” was growing, that some believed that a sudden change was “close at hand,” and that his younger self believed in the “inevitableness of a sudden and speedy change.” However, like plenty of preachers of imminent transformation before and after him, Morris had to face the realisation that this change was unlikely to come about in his lifetime. From 1887 onward, Morris was sceptical about the imminence of the transformation, noting how hard it was for tyrannies to die. Democratic changes only seemed to alleviate temporarily the struggles of the “present days of oppression.” The slower movement towards transformation would mean a “period of great suffering and misery” and so Morris still hoped the transformation would be speedy. Nevertheless, hope was important because it encouraged the necessity of educating the workers and, in line with the aims of socialism, part of “a longing to bring about the complete change which will supplant civilization by communism” (Morris 1903; Kinna 2000, 157–59).

Ball and the 1381 uprising, then, had a readymade historical schema into which they could be placed. The historical schema could help explain the uprising itself while the uprising could contribute to Marxist understanding of human societies. We have some indication of why Morris chose Ball, beyond being the most well-known ideologue associated with the most prominent revolt in English medieval history. In 1884, Morris complained about the Lord Mayor's show and its presentation of the uprising. The leader of the revolt, Wat Tyler, was, Morris lamented, regrettably cast as "the ruffianly agitator" whose death was celebrated against a "dark background of foolish and ignorant armed peasants." Against this reading, Morris explained that the rebels were objecting to serfdom and exploitation and he provided a more positive account, including of Tyler's "worthier associate" Ball. Morris suggested that neither Tyler nor Ball "died for nothing," though at this point gave little detail about what they died for (Morris 1884). Elsewhere, Morris connected Ball with ideas of wider historical developments and contemporary socialism. In the same year, Morris wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* (7 October 1884) and mentioned he had talked to audiences in Ancoats about Ball, noting that,

> *[Ball] preached the enfranchisement of labour as he understood it, and that to him it meant the abolition of serfdom first, and good life to the labourer next…John Ball was murdered by the fleecers of the people many hundred years ago, but indeed in a sense he lives still, though I am but a part, and not the whole of him…Nor will he quite die as long as he has work to do; and I am not yet convinced that even in Manchester he has no work to do…your correspondents' letters…seem to take for granted that my opinions are eccentric and solitary—died with John Ball in fact; but I can hardly believe them to be so ignorant of current events as not to know that all over Europe Socialism is alive and growing.*

A Dream of John Ball expanded on these ideas and in doing so presented a version of a Marxist understanding of historical development and transformation in story form (Salmon 2001; Crossley 2022, 270–97).

A Dream of John Ball: An Overview

A Dream of John Ball starts with the Man from Essex lucidly dreaming about being in Kent during the 1381 uprising. He meets rebels, including Will Green who is among the wealthier of the yeomen (Ch. VIII). Upon hearing the idea that a person has no master, Green jokes that the Man from Essex must have descended from heaven. However, Green also whispers a coded message from letters associated with Ball: "John the Miller, that ground small, small, small." The Man from Essex mentions another of Ball's coded messages: "The king's son of heaven shall pay for all" (Ch. I). They move on to a church where the crowds congregate and are accompanied by a banner evoking the labours of Adam and Eve, bearing the words most famously associated with Ball: "When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?" (Ch. III). So central was this saying that Adam digging and Eve spinning would later feature on the famous Edward Burne-Jones's frontispiece for the Longman's editions of *A Dream of John Ball*.

Ball-the-priest addresses the crowd. He is described in various ways, including one description which pre-empts his later role as a 'seer,' the type of person who would look at something in the distance "which is the wont of the eyes of the poet or enthusiast" (Ch. III). Rebels emotionally appreciate Ball's preaching from the cross at the church while Ball recounts being rescued from prison and explains the importance of fellowship and solidarity, the struggles of a revolutionary life, the fate awaiting the rich lords and oppressors, and the better life awaiting peasants. Anticipating the finale to *A Dream of John Ball*, the Man from Essex notes the longer-term implications of the revolt in the context of the history of defeat and new struggles:

> *But while I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name—while I pondered all this, John Ball began to speak again in the same soft and dear voice with which he had left off. (Ch. IV)*

With Ball's endorsement and with the Adam and Eve banner, the rebels march to, and then win, the battle of Township's End. They drive out the knights and kill the sheriff, lawyers, and bailiffs, among others. Ball now talks to an enthusiastic crowd about the imminent march on London. He reminds the crowd of the importance of fellowship and tells them to stand firm and keep their wits about them in the face of devious opponents who "shall lead you astray" (Ch. VII; cf. Matthew 24:4, 24; Mark 13:5–6, 22; Luke 21:8).

After eating at Will Green's house, Ball and the Man from Essex go to a moonlit church to reflect on mortality, fellowship, and the "Days to Come" (Ch. X), the "days that are to be on the earth before the Day of Doom cometh" (Ch. IX). The Man from Essex explains what will happen to Ball and the fate of the revolt in London, a future which Ball stoically accepts. But while this included hope that sacrifice in battle would soon bring the end to villeinage, Ball learns that this would not be accompanied by a new era when exploitation of labour would cease, when happiness would ensue, and when people would enjoy "the goods of the earth without money and without price." Ball discovers instead that there would be a long time before such a fulfilment of his dreams would emerge.

Before that, there would be a new era of exploiters and exploitation, and the Man from Essex as the "wondrous seer" provides an explanation of the rise of capitalism couched in the language of prophecy (Ch. XI). The Man from Essex makes clear that "in the time to come," lords will find out that labourers have more than they need and would demand their surplus. "In those days" trade will increase and land use will change to produce for this new economic system. Rather than villeins in England, supposedly free people will help produce for the market by selling their labour to the new masters. People will struggle as they "feel the plague and yet not know the remedy." Workers will grow helpless and sometimes even believe that moderate improvements are like the "kingdom of heaven" (Ch. XI). This new system will bring technological developments while producing more workers than masters, which will lead to workers undercutting one another and providing a supply of willing slaves. In these latter days of monopolists, there will be "times of famine" and "times of plenty." Goods and bread may be cheap "in those days" but people will pray for price rises in order to drive up profits in the hope that wealth would trickle down.

As the church lightens with the coming morning, so Ball's understanding increases. He now wonders about the "first coming of the kindly day." The pair discuss the nature of struggle against dominant masters and how the struggle can at times appear unbearable. However, even though workers will not always be aware of their shared interests, "in the end" they will; the struggle will not have been for nothing, and they will bring forth the remedy. The Man from Essex explains that the "Change beyond the Change" will come and the “Fellowship of Men shall endure” whatever the “tribulations.” As with the glimmer of day in the backdrop, so “wise men and valiant souls” will see the remedy and the poor will become a serious threat to the rich in these end times. Despite the strife, murders, failures, internal disputes, and doubts, victory will come. At the “end of all,”’ people will enjoy the “fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil…without money and without price.” The “time will come” when Ball’s dream will be realised, and the name ‘John Ball’ will be remembered and inspire hope for this future world (Ch. XII).

After Ball bids farewell to the Man from Essex, the latter returned to his nineteenth-century present on his familiar bed. His eyes were drawn away from the miseries of London towards the countryside with a desire to carry on a daydream about the friends he had made in the “dream of the night,” only to be interrupted by the humdrum realities of everyday life.

Eschatology of Socialism

As an indication of his authority and importance, Morris has Ball using language associated with Jesus (Crossley 2022, 291–94). Ball speaks in terms of Jesus’s authority as an interpreter of scripture in using the phrase, ‘I say to you’ (e.g., Chs. IV, VI, X; cf. Matthew 5:17–48), and in terms of Jesus as a prophet of end times in warning about the perils of being led astray (Chs. IV, VII). With similar echoes of gospel passages, Ball talks of the possibility of repentance (Ch. IV; cf. Luke 15) and gives notice that “in these days are ye building a house which shall not be overthrown” (Ch. VII; Mark 14:58; Matthew 26:61; Acts 7:47–50; Revelation 21). Again, alluding to the gospels of Matthew and Luke, he advises to take care of the dead now in the light of the urgent mission for “after tomorrow let the dead abide to bury their dead” (Ch. VII; Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60). But that this language is so heavily Christianised is simultaneously an indication that Ball’s vision, for all its progressiveness, is still rooted in the wrong period of history for it to be enacted. However, the more knowledgeable Man from Essex then takes over the language of Jesus as presented in the gospels when he explains the future to Ball, thereby signalling the beginning of the absorption of religion into socialism. Ball-the-disciple now has to ask the authoritative seer from Essex to explain “what shall befall” (Ch. X; cf. Matthew 24:3; Mark 13:3–4; Luke 21:7), with the latter now using the “I say…” idiom (Ch. X). The Man from Essex explains what things will be like “in those days” and makes predictions of great wars arising “in the beginning of these evil times” (Ch. XI; cf. Matthew 24:6–8; Mark 13:7–8; Luke 21:9–10).

On one level, the driving idea of fellowship is manifest in medieval Christian form which looks to a time when the lords are gone, when people lack masters, and when there are fields aplenty. The people will not mow the “deep grass for another” while “his own kine lack cow-meat.” In the tithe barn there will be “wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward.” This agrarian vision is infused with Christianity, hence everyone will “keep the holidays of the Church in peace of body and joy of heart” and the saints in heaven will be glad that “man shall help man” (Ch. V). On another level, however, the fellowship will evolve in accordance with the transformation of history. As an indication of the new growing out of the old, the Man from Essex could see “beyond this church” (Ch. X) and look to a time when there would be no abbeys, no priories, no monks, no friars, and, indeed, nothing religious (Ch. XIII). With the removal of such potential religious opponents, the more secularised version of the fellowship could be realised (Chs. X, XIII). But Ball too hints at a future when the new will grow out of the old. While Ball’s idea of fellowship is emphatically Christian, there are indications of a secularisation or demythologising of concepts like heaven and hell. As Ball puts it:

> *Forsooth, ye have heard it said that ye shall do well in this world that in the world to come ye may live happily for ever; do ye well then, and have your reward both on earth and in heaven; for I say to you that earth and heaven are not two but one; and this one is that which ye know, and are each one of you a part of, to wit, the Holy Church, and in each one of you dwelleth the life of the Church, unless ye slay it. Forsooth, brethren, will ye murder the Church any one of you, and go forth a wandering man and lonely, even as Cain did who slew his brother? Ah, my brothers, what an evil doom is this, to be an outcast from the Church, to have none to love you and to speak with you, to be without fellowship! Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane. (Ch. IV)*

Despite their differences, this notion of fellowship and communal strength connects both Ball and the Man from Essex and the two different eras (Boos 1992).

Moreover, the romanticised fourteenth-century society presented in *A Dream of John Ball* also had something to offer the future. It was a society that contrasted sharply with the misery of the capitalist nineteenth century. It was a society which formed the basis for speculation about what a socialist or communist future might look like. Morris was keen to stress the importance of socialism and the future in this respect. In a letter from 6 October 1894, he claimed that when he wrote the book, he "did it more with the intention of bringing in the Socialistic dialogue at the end rather than of dealing with the literary and dramatic side of the story" (Kelvin 1996, 212). And so, in the final chapters the authoritative seer uses prophetic and eschatological language in the service of explaining the emergence of a religion of socialism. It is significant that the setting for the conversation between Ball and the Man from Essex is in a church with a "chancel arch the Doom of the last Day, in which the painter had not spared either kings or bishops, and in which a lawyer with his blue coif was one of the chief figures in the group which the Devil was hauling off to hell." It is in this setting that Ball wishes to "talk of the days that are to be on the earth before the Day of Doom cometh" (Ch. IX). Indeed, while Ball himself was ahead of his time, his behaviour served as a model to bring about future change. Ball's revolutionary attitude, determination, disciplined use of violence, and heroism in the face of potential defeat were precisely what was now needed under capitalism in the late nineteenth century (cf. Kinna 2000, 41–42, 114, 97, 98–99, 130, 138, 162–63, 174–77; Eisenman 2005, 93). Thus, martyrdom is another feature of fellowship and a connection between past and present—and necessary for the transformation of society (Hanson 2013, 205, 209, 219).

Foreshadowing the Future

Details on the future world beyond capitalism are light in *A Dream of John Ball* and Morris later speculated in detail about a suitably medievalised future in his fiction, *News from Nowhere* (1890). But there are further indications in *A Dream of John Ball* of the medievalism of the rebels' setting and their communalism foreshadowing this future. Among the most significant examples involves the relationship between the worker and their craft. Ball’s famous saying, the rebels’ banner, and Burne-Jones’s frontispiece all emphasise the labours of Adam and Eve which are comparable to the labour of the medieval worker, namely, that these workers were not alienated from their labour (see further Eisenman 2005, 93, 95).

Such foreshadowing also takes place across various themes in *A Dream of John Ball*. The story implies a transformation of gender roles as seen, for instance, when the medieval characters effectively challenge gender stereotypes of the late nineteenth century, as men openly cry and women stare and talk back at men rather than flirting or fluttering (MacCarthy 2010, loc 10305). This hope for gendered transformation was anticipated in an almost forgotten past and the most prominent example in *A Dream of John Ball* are the roles of Adam and Eve between whom the division of labour is along gendered lines (Adam dug, Eve spun). This reflects Morris’s wider interests beyond *A Dream of John Ball*. Morris supported women’s equality, including suffrage for adult women and women being involved in universities and public life. But he also believed in roles (stereo)typically and physiologically suited to men (e.g., handicrafts) and to women (e.g., housekeeping), though he stressed that they should be valued equally, and that men and women could produce according to their respective abilities (see further, e.g., Kinna 2000, 130–37, 152–53; Tooley 2005).

For Morris, as long as women were compelled to marry for the sake of a livelihood, marriage was effectively prostitution or legalised rape (e.g., Morris in a letter to George Bernard Shaw [18 March 1885], Kelvin 1987, 404; cf. Socialist League 1885). With the future transformation, this relationship would also change. Formal marriage would be downgraded, free love would be more likely, and communal support for children would be normative and help safeguard against potentially abusive parents (Kinna 2000, 152–53). These gendered ideas of the future modelled on an idealised medieval past were developed further by Morris in *News from Nowhere*. But this line of thinking was also anticipated by Morris’s presentation of Ball. Most strikingly, when Ball and the Man from Essex spoke about the future, it is revealed by Ball that he had an “unwedded wife with whom I dwelt in love after I had taken the tonsure,” though she had since died (Ch. X).

While a priest involved in a romantic relationship was unlikely to gain official Catholic Church approval, Catholic aesthetics were important for Morris. Ball and the rebel community in *A Dream of John Ball* were presented as emphatically Catholic at a time when a Protestantising of Ball was commonplace (Vaninskaya 2010, 130–33; Crossley 2022, 294–97). Ball mentions the “blessed saints and the angels” (Ch. IV), hopes for a time when “Faithfully and merrily then shall all men keep the holidays of the Church in peace of body and joy of heart” (Ch. IV), and is understood to “say mass” (Ch. VIII). In this context, the “priest blessed the meat in the name of the Trinity” which prompted the automatic response from the Man from Essex and his company: “we crossed ourselves and fell to” (Ch. VIII). Elsewhere, Ball “crossed himself” and provides “holy water” (Ch. IX). This is a certain type of popular Catholicism away from the church elites. Ball is the “rascal hedge-priest” (Ch. IV) and “another sort of priest” when compared with the local parson who had scuttled off “to his monastery with the two other chantrey priests who dwelt in that house.” The people (especially women) were happy that Ball is now the one saying mass (Ch. VIII).

This Catholicising of Ball was not aesthetics for its own sake. Ball had elsewhere argued that medieval Christianity blended the idea of the spirit of the kingdom of heaven with temporal power and ideally provided a degree of protection for the social order, including the lower orders. When the system was abused, this provoked protest movements and a protest mentality (Morris and Bax 1994, 502–3). In *A Dream of John Ball*, it is important, then, that a ballad of Robin Hood is sung as Ball is ushered in (Ch. II) (cf. Salmon 2001, 33; Basdeo 2019, 52–63).

This Catholicising is also important because of what it is not: Protestantism. For Morris, puritanical Protestantism was hypocritical and was important in the rise and consolidation of capitalism which, in Morris's Marxist schema, was just beginning to emerge towards the end of the fourteenth century. Here we might also note a passing reference to the Lollards in *A Dream of John Ball*. The Lollards were a movement associated with John Wycliffe (d. 1384) and deemed heretical by the Church in the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth century. In nineteenth-century reconstructions, the Lollards were popularly seen as a proto-Protestant movement and, rightly or wrongly, there had been a long history of interpretation (which exists to this day) associating Ball with them (Crossley 2022). In *A Dream of John Ball*, however, the Lollards were more associated with the lords and potential conspirators in the removal of the existing religious life that benefited the medieval worker. As the lords' plans were summarised:

> *So let us get the collar on their necks again, and make their day's work longer and their bever-time shorter, as the good statute of the old king bade. And good it were if the Holy Church were to look to it (and the Lollards might help herein) that all these naughty and wearisome holidays were done away with; or that it should be unlawful for any man below the degree of a squire to keep the holy days of the church, except in the heart and the spirit only, and let the body labour meanwhile; for does not the Apostle say, 'If a man work not, neither should he eat'? And if such things were done, and such an estate of noble rich men and worthy poor men upholden for ever, then would it be good times in England, and life were worth the living. (Ch. II)*

Despite Morris being the most influential interpreter of Ball for the following several decades, he could not dislodge the dominance of the idea that Ball was connected to the Lollards and/or proto-Protestantism, even to the point that *A Dream of John Ball* could be cited as an example of a radical English Protestant heritage (Vaninskaya 2009, 54–55; Crossley 2022, 296–97).

Legacy

Through trade publishers, *A Dream of John Ball* reached a popular audience, though its sales figures were modest. The Kelmscott versions were expensive and for a niche audience (Vaninskaya 2010, 43). Nevertheless, its Victorian medievalism and themes relating to the transformation of the social order were ongoing features of the popularity of *A Dream of John Ball* well into the twentieth century. Morris's personal and political networks and the networks of the emerging labour movement which lauded Morris enabled this popularity. There is evidence of its popularity among the working class, with miners notably mentioned as owning copies (Glasier 1919, 220; Eisenman 2005, 105). *A Dream of John Ball* became one of the major authoritative books across the varieties of English socialism (e.g., anarchism, Communism Party of Great Britain, Labour Party, Independent Labour Party), suffragism, and even liberalism, and its influence on understandings (fictional or not) of Ball was probably unmatched until the mid-twentieth century. It was even a favoured text of future Prime Minister Clement Attlee. As a generation of socialists brought up on Victorian medievalism died off, as latest technological developments became a central feature of socialist thinking, and as women's movements began to develop their own canon, so the dominant influence of Morris and *A Dream of John Ball* went into steep decline. While the influence of Morris and *A Dream of John*

Ball can still be detected, of course, it is dwarfed by the levels of influence in the early twentieth century (on the reception of *A Dream of John Ball*, see Crossley 2022, 298–367).

Editions, Sources, and Scholarship

A Dream of John Ball was first serialised in the journal *Commonweal* (1886–1887) and later published as a book by, for instance, Longman, Green, and Co. (1888) and a deluxe edition with Morris's publishing house, Kelmscott Press (1892).

For his source material, Morris used the earliest chronicles of the 1381 uprising, including that of Jean Froissart (Ray 1869). Scholars have pointed to influences from chronicles such as those by Henry Knighton and Thomas Walsingham (Dobson 1983; Martin 1995; Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss 2003), as well the sixteenth-century chronicles associated with Raphael Holinshed (Archer, Heal, Kewes, and Summerson 2008–2013) and historians from Morris's day (e.g., Edward Freeman, John Richard Green, James Thorold Rogers). Morris was also a friend of Charles Edmund Maurice who wrote on Ball and Wat Tyler (Maurice 1875). For discussion of influences on, and sources used by, Morris, see, for instance, Silver 1981, 124; Holzman 1990, 102; Faulkner 1992; Salmon 2001, 29–38; Vaninskaya 2009, 50–52; Vaninskaya, 2010, 125–29; Hanson 2013, 206–7; Courtney 2015, 11–12. Morris was also aware of the visual portrayal of Ball added to Froissart's account by way of a copy made by Henry Noel Humphreys and published in Humphreys 1845, 73–74. See Morris's letter in Kelvin 1984, 136.

The scholarship on William Morris and *A Dream of John Ball* is vast. The *Journal of William Morris Studies* has a range of relevant articles going back to 1961 and is an important resource for further study. Those works cited here and in the References below are a selection typically with relevance for the themes of religion, eschatology, martyrdom, sacrifice, fellowship, and historical transformation.

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