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Louise Michel and William Morris

Linda Richardson

1989, Spring

In 1870 the government of France began negotiating the surrender of Paris to the invading Prussians. The people of Paris refused to countenance this surrender and spontaneously united under the direction of a loose coalition of left-wing activists to form the Commune, an independent city-state which immediately came under siege from its erstwhile rulers. The French army ultimately routed the defenders who took to the barricades, but the brief existence of the Commune nevertheless provided a source of heroic legend for leftist revolutionaries.

As the Commune vainly defended itself during the bloody spring of 1871, William Morris seems to have been oblivious to its struggle: perhaps hoping to distract himself from his personal troubles he was immersed in Icelandic studies. But in the last fifteen years of his life, as a left-wing propagandist, he was inspired by the Commune. His 1886 poem *The Pilgrims of Hope*, as well as that year's *A Short Account of the Commune of Paris* (co-authored with E. Belfort Bax and Victor Dave), amply attests to this. However, it was not from printed records that Morris received his inspiration: it was from living contact

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The William Morris Website, converted from .PDF at
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with the refugee Communards with whom he was acquainted. Victor Dave, for example, was one, and Louise Michel was another. This woman had an appreciable influence on important aspects of his work and thought, but she has been undeservedly overlooked by Morris scholars.

Louise Michel was born in 1831, just three years before William Morris. Like him, Michel spent her childhood on the edge of a forest, in which she loved to wander. But where Morris rode his pony through a forest securely planted in the midst of Victorian respectability, his head filled with adventures from the novels of Walter Scott, Michel, the illegitimate daughter of an impoverished aristocratic family, wandered barefoot and isolated in the remnants of the primeval European forest. Her grandfather lived surrounded by great piles of books, which she read voraciously. Thus sometimes she imagined the forest peopled again with the Gallic tribes who fought the Roman legions. Or, influenced by the story-telling of the villagers, other times she ran home from the forest believing she was pursued by demons or werewolves. She, like Morris, was a poet.

But she was trained as a schoolteacher, and on the death of her grandparents she moved with her mother to Paris, living and teaching in Montmartre. She gravitated toward the revolutionary cafés and clubs, and was in the forefront of the agitation as the French government made its truce with the invading Prussian army in 1870. When the Commune was declared, she devoted herself to it. She became an ambulance woman, but she was certainly not the model for Morris's ambulance-woman in *The Pilgrims of Hope* (he did not yet know her). Where Morris's heroine is passive, Michel was a force to be reckoned with. She was in charge of recruiting women to serve in the ambulance corps, and welcomed all women, especially the prostitutes who were ostracized by the male officials of the Commune. "Who

She managed to gain temporary freedom, and used the opportunity to escape to London, a city which had welcomed her before. She lived in London until 1895, where she was a central figure in communist-anarchist circles, and where no doubt she met Morris often. Sylvia Pankhurst, later a militant suffragette, recalled both Michel and Morris from various leftist gatherings in the early 1890s. By then Michel was "a tiny old woman in a brown cloak, intensely lean, with gleaming eyes and swarthy skin", but still a "tremendous heroine".⁵ Michel's English was not fluent enough to enable her to make her living on the lecture circuit, so while in exile in London she tried to return to her profession of teaching. She began a school for the children of political refugees, and William Morris was on its Committee. But she was surrounded by police spies and agents, who discredited her efforts, although she herself was never thought to be an agent by the socialists, nor a criminal anarchist (although she often defended those who used bombs and assassination), not even by the English police, who refused to inculpate her at the behest of their French counterparts. In 1895, assured her freedom of movement, she voluntarily returned to France, lecturing and urging revolution until her death in 1905.

has more right than these women, the saddest victims of the old world, to offer their lives to the new?"¹ she demanded.

Morris and his co-authors complain in their account of the Commune that its tragic flaw was the failure of its leaders to understand their place in the revolutionary struggle. Louise Michel wrote a manifesto during the final weeks of the Commune on behalf of the Union of Women for the Defense of Paris and the Care of the Wounded which shows that she did not fail to comprehend the larger importance of their fight: "The women workers of Paris have come to demand not peace but war to the death. Today, reconciliation would be treason. It would be to deny all the aspirations of women workers who acclaim complete social change, the annihilation of all existing social and legal relations, the suppression of all special privileges, the end of all exploitation ... United and resolute, the women of Paris are matured and enlightened by the suffering that social crises bring. The women of Paris are deeply convinced that the Commune, representing the international and revolutionary principles of peoples, carries in itself the germ of Social Revolution. When the moment of greatest danger comes, the women of Paris will prove to France and to the world that they know how, at the barricades and on the ramparts ... to give their blood like their brothers, to give their lives for the defense and triumph of the Commune—for the people ... Long live the Republic of all persons! Long live the Commune!²

These are not empty, ringing phrases. Michel was not content with being an angel of mercy, she would be an angel with a fiery sword. Her colorful memoirs, published in Paris in 1886, read like an adventure tale, and the reader might be tempted to discount the picture she presents of herself as a fearless martial

⁵ Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* (London: Virago 1977), p. 90.

¹ Edith Thomas, *Louise Michel, ou, La Velleda de l'anarchie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 96. [My translation.]

² *The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel*, ed. and trans. Bullitt Lowry and Elizabeth Ellington Gunter (Alabama: University Press, 1981), p. 83.

virago, but everything she recalls is corroborated and, indeed, amplified by other sources.

Throughout the siege of Paris she carried her rifle with her, and she used it. On both sides of the conflict, Michel was singled out for her valour. In the *Journal Officiel* of the Commune they said: "In the ranks of the 61st Battalion there fights an indefatigable woman. She has killed many ..." ³ The dossier which accompanied her through her trial after the fall of the Commune describes her as among the fiercest defenders of the barricades at Issy, at Clamart, and at Montmartre.

Even if William Morris did not read her memoirs—although I think it quite likely that he did—the tales of her exploits were legendary amongst the refugee communists and anarchists in London. How could he have failed to be inspired by what he heard of this woman? And, indeed, Morris's women warriors in his two historical romances of the late 1880s, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, owe a great deal, I suspect, to Louise Michel. These warriors are unlike the women in any of his other writings. They are determined, courageous, ruthless when forced to fight. For example, the Bride, in *The Roots of the Mountains*, is no passive Pre-Raphaelite maiden: "She was a fair woman, and strong: not easily daunted amidst perils: she was hardy and handy and light-foot: she could swim as well as any, and could shoot well in the bow, and wield sword and spear ... tall she was and of excellent fashion, but well-knit and well-measured rather than slender and wavering as the willow bough." When her Gothic tribe battles against a seemingly endless army of Huns: "amongst the bowmen forth came the Bride in her glittering war-gear, and stepped lightly to the front of the spearmen. Her own yew bow had been smitten by a shaft and broken in her hand: so she had caught up a short horn bow and a quiver from one of the slain of the Dusky Men; and now she knelt on one knee under the shadow of the

spears ... and with a pale face and knitted brow notched and loosed, and notched and loosed on the throng of foemen, as if she were some daintily fashioned engine of war."⁴

By holding her mother hostage, the reactionary forces laying siege to Paris were able to obtain Michel's surrender. At her trial she defiantly challenged her captors to take her to the fields at Satory, where she estimates some 35,000 Communards and neutral Parisians were summarily executed. But they didn't wish to martyr her: convicted of crimes including dressing as a man (that is, in the uniform of the National Guard), she was transported to New Caledonia, a penal colony where even in the harshest conditions of squalor and deprivation Louise Michel refused to give way. She regularly gave what time was left after her enforced labour to the education of prisoners' children and the fomenting of revolution amongst the native Kanakans. Finally, ten years after the fall of the Commune, the French people demanded the release of imprisoned Communards, and she returned to France a celebrated hero.

However, the French government was not willing to allow her to go on preaching revolution: she spent much of the 1880s in prison. But she was too well-known to be imprisoned without cause for long periods of time: in England news of her arrests, trials and incarcerations could often be found in the columns of Morris's revolutionary newspapers, *Justice* and *Commonweal*. Nor did prison frighten her: she used the opportunity to write. Her memoirs were produced in prison. The diligent French secret police had to find another way to terrify Louise Michel. A woman who acts in so unwomanly a fashion, they reasoned, is evidently mad. And so Michel was seized and carried to an insane asylum in 1890, a fate we now recognize as all to often being the means of silencing troublesome women.

³ Thomas, *Louise Michel*, p. 93 [My translation.]

⁴ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1910-1915), XV: 332.