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The English Radical Tradition and the British Left 1885-1945

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The English Radical Tradition and the British Left 1885-1945

by

John Stephen Enderby

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 2019

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Abstract

This thesis is an intellectual history of the British left and explores the conscious appropriation of an English radical tradition during the formative years of the British labour movement. At the heart of the thesis is an assessment of the ways in which this radical democratic history came to shape the core identity and political values of the new labour movement, rooting it in a national democratic history rather than an imported European Marxist tradition. The thesis explores the evolution of this democratic tradition within the British labour movement and assesses the ways in which the British past offered up a deeply contested history, as each faction within left/labourism claimed exclusive ownership of this democratic master narrative. I explore this complex process within a linear narrative history, which begins with the early socialist movements of the late nineteenth century and ends with the turbulent period of the Popular Front, when the major intellectual figures of the period became engaged in a fierce battle for the ownership of this national democratic past. The time-frame is a long one, but the expansive chronology of the thesis allows the opportunity for an analysis of key themes that emerged within the narrative of the British progressive tradition over time. Above all, this thesis is a history of ideas, rather than of organisations, and analyses their impact on key thinkers and strategists on the political left during the period.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
List of Abbreviations.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1 The First to Claim a Radical Past: A Powerful Tradition.....	33
Chapter 2 The Inheritors of a Radical Past.....	84
Chapter 3 The Deliberate Appropriation of a Radical Past	191
Chapter 4 Guardians of the Radical Past: The WEA and the Intellectuals of the Left.....	286
Conclusions.....	335
Bibliography.....	342

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Abbreviations

CND -	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPGB –	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPHG –	Communist Party Historians' Group
ILP -	Independent Labour Party
SDF –	Social Democratic Federation
TUC -	Trades Union Congress
WEA –	Workers' Educational Association

Introduction

This thesis explores the conscious appropriation of an English radical past by the British left and its labour movements within the formative years of 1885 to 1945. Indeed, it aims to demonstrate the ways in which this democratic history became an integral part of the memory and traditions of the British labour movement, helping to shape its ideological values and political trajectory throughout this eventful and formative period in labour history. This was a rich and eclectic historical tradition that was rooted in a colourful pageant of heroes and heroines which featured important political movements from England's turbulent democratic past. It was a rich narrative incorporating the radical-liberal figures of John Wilkes, Thomas Paine, William Cobbett and Richard Cobden, and the revolutionary movements of the Levellers, Diggers and Chartists.

This was a significant democratic tradition with a historical lineage reaching back to John Ball and the peasants' revolt of the middle ages. It was a powerful tradition which was consciously appropriated for the new cause of socialism and became deeply ingrained in the core identity of the British labour movement. This, then, is a thesis that in the words of Ross McKibbin, seeks out and scrutinises in detail 'the English road to socialism'.¹ My research was initially inspired by the work of the labour historian, Raphael Samuel, who first identified an intimate link between the British left and an earlier radical tradition. Samuel was the first historian, who, building on the work of

¹ Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010), pp. 140-176.

Raymond Postgate and others within the Plebs League,² set out to explore this rich democratic history and the process by which it was plundered and recycled by an emerging labour movement. With its colourful figures and dissenting factions resurrected for the new cause of socialism, this history became integral to the later radical platform. The defining article of this new historiography was 'Sources of Marxist History', which was first published for *New Left Review* in March 1980. Samuel tended to paint his socialist history with a broad brush though he gave important attention to the period of the Popular Front between the years 1935 to 1939. This focus was more than justified as the Popular Front was to witness the publication of two crucial histories which came to symbolise the new inspiration derived from an earlier radical past. A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* in 1938, and Christopher Hill's *The English Revolution, 1640* published in 1940 became the defining texts of the Popular Front era, reproduced in cheap, easily available editions, and with an influence and legacy that lasted long after the Popular Front and its political vision had ended.³

Peter Karsten is another non-Marxist historian who has researched this deliberate seizure of an earlier radical past. Karsten's *Patriot Heroes in England and America* takes a transatlantic and transnational view of the process and explores the resurrection of the key radical figures, Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Paine, within a wider political framework. Indeed, Karsten believes the appropriation of this radical past was not

² Raymond Postgate, *A Short History of the British Workers* (The Plebs League, London, 1926) p.112. See for Samuel's approach to the heritage and history of the British Labour movement, Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, London, 1994), pp. 288-312.

³ A.L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (Left Book Club: London, 1938), ch. 1 and Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution, 1640* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1940), ch. 1. See for the impact of these texts, Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1984), chs. 3-4.

exclusive to the British left or to the labour movement. Socialism was not the only political movement to claim this rich democratic heritage, though the historians of the left had by far the greatest impact on its restoration.⁴ There are other historians who have touched on some of the broader themes within this field of research. Particularly relevant is the work of Robert Colls and Philip Dodd in a collection of essays entitled, *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880-1920*; also of equal interest is *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*, a collection of essays edited by Maurice Glasman, which looks at the past and uncertain future of the labour movement within Britain. Another interesting article, which has focused on the period of the Popular Front is 'The Popular Front Pageant: Its Emergence and Decline' by Mick Wallis. This looks at the Communist Party and its appropriation of an English radical past in the 1930s, through its rallies, pageants and plays. In much of this work, the emphasis is on the symbolic and rhetorical, rather than purely ideological, appropriation of the events of the national past.⁵

Paul Salvesson's *Socialism with a Northern Accent: Radical Traditions for Modern Times*, is another work which takes a regional approach to this area of research. Salvesson believes these radical traditions were firmly embedded within a cultural environment unique to the Pennine region of the North of England incubating elements

⁴ Peter Karsten, *Patriot Heroes in England and America* (The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisc., 1978) p.159

⁵ See Philip Dodd, 'Englishness and the National Culture' in *Englishness, Politics and Culture, 1880-1920*. Ed. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (Bloomsbury, London, 2014), pp. 53-84, Ben Jackson, 'Labour History and Glasman's Labour Tradition' in *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*. Ed. Maurice Glasman, Mark Rutherford, Mark Stears and Stuart White (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2011), pp. 38-42 and Mick Wallis, 'Heirs to the Pageant: Mass Spectacle and the Popular Front,' in *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*. Ed. Andy Croft (Pluto Press, London, 1998), pp. 48-67.

which played a significant role in the early success of the ILP.⁶ Background reading on the British labour movement has also included the work of the historians Kevin Morgan, John McIlroy, the late Nina Fishman, including the important work of Alan Campbell and Andrew Thorpe. Also of interest is Gidon Cohen's study of the ILP for the central material of chapter two.⁷

Much of the primary source research was completed at The Working-Class Movement Library and the People's History Museum, which are located in Salford, and Manchester respectively and are a treasure trove for pamphlets, booklets, manifestos and newspaper articles from this period. Also relevant are the Communist Party Archives which are a crucial source for the often-overlooked Communist historian, Dona Torr.

The thesis attempts to explore three core themes within this field of research. A primary theme is the deliberate appropriation of an English radical past by key intellectual figures of the British left and the labour movement. Pivotal figures, such as William Morris, G. D. H. Cole, A. L. Morton and Christopher Hill became part of an explicit political project to root the labour movement within a much older democratic narrative. The SDF and the Socialist League, the ILP and the Communist Party, as well as a key educational arm of the British labour movement, the WEA, became consumed with

⁶ Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent: Radical Traditions for Modern Times* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2012) p.63

⁷ Gidon Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream: The Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation to World War Two* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2007); Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions 1933-1945* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 1995), ch. 2; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, *Communists in British Industry 1945-1991* (Routledge, London, 2007), ch. 4, Kevin Morgan, *The Webbs and Soviet Communism: Bolshevism and the British Left, Part 2* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006), pp. 11-22, and Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2015), ch. 1.

the project of claiming an older democratic past. A second and important theme is the shifting focus of interest within this radical historiography, as different figures and movements became the centre of focus, interest and inspiration. From the liberal reformers of the Victorian age, to the revolutionaries of the English Civil War, all were subject to appropriation. This was a deeply contested history and tradition, as witnessed by the fierce rivalry between a broad liberal left and the Communist Party, at a time when each sought to claim this radical democratic past as their own. This ideologically driven contest of ownership is a third and central theme of the thesis. It reflects a fierce collision of ideas that was to take place in the turbulent period of the Popular Front, when a democratic past was recruited for the struggle against fascism and Baldwinite Conservatism.

Although drawing on an approach that foregrounds the history of ideas and of political thought, this thesis locates its arguments in the broader debates about the direction taken by the British left. It acknowledges that many of the ideas and tropes that inspired English radicalism had a 'mythic' quality, drawing on an 'invented' set of events and individuals that laid down a usable past for British platform radicalism and its adherents, and inspired many of those who sought to further progressive goals during the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.⁸ In this sense it is noteworthy that Eric Hobsbawm, a life-long Communist inspired by the Popular Front tradition, should have highlighted the importance of 'invented' traditions in the creation of nations, movements, institutions and identities in a famous series of edited articles assembled in

⁸ Jon Lawrence, 'Labour – the Myths it has Lived by' in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000), pp. 341-366.

1983.⁹ This thesis demonstrates that the radical tradition stands at the juncture between ideas and political action; it is, in fact, the place where ideas and political action intersect. Moreover, the radical tradition is part of the movement culture of the British left and is grounded in the work of historians and activists who sought to create a body of doctrine consonant with the history and traditions of England. It thus has implications for the making of labour history itself and has shaped the approaches that have defined the study of labour history since the 1930s. The thesis references in particular recent tendencies towards continuity in the study of British radicalism, notably in Biagini and Reid's seminal edited collection, *Currents of Radicalism* and in the work of Jon Lawrence.¹⁰ Their research postulated a network of continuities across a broad range of liberal and labour cultures, rather than the abrupt rupture between liberalism and labourism detected by some who saw the emergence of socialism as signalling a marked departure from the movements that had gone before. A number of authors have addressed Labour's resultant debt to liberalism, and the closeness of the links between labour and the older Liberal party that set the British political tradition somewhat apart from that of Europe.¹¹ In common with the approach taken by Biagini and Reid, this thesis seeks to emphasise the continuities that enabled the historians of the Popular Front period to define themselves as operating in the same tradition that had inspired the Chartists, and, before them, the Levellers and the Diggers. In addition,

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1-14. See for Hobsbawm and the Popular Front tradition, Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019), chs, 2-3.

¹⁰ Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid 'Introduction' to Biagini and Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism 1850-1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), pp. 1-20 and Jon Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), pp.163-186.

¹¹ For example, Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party: Continuity and Change in the Making of New Labour* (Palgrave, London, 2003), pp. 39-40.

this thesis takes issue with Christopher Hill's argument that the radical tradition had a recognisable end point in the 1890s, after which many of the traditional tropes of the radical platform like the 'Norman Yoke' ceased to retain their hold on the radical political imagination.¹² Indeed, as Antony Taylor demonstrates, many specific radical movements like the land reform campaign and the tradition of direct action politics continued to channel the memories of Anglo-Saxon dispossession by the Normans and the history of peasant revolt into the recent past; they remain a live presence in current environmental campaigns against fracking.¹³ Overall, the strength of the thesis presented here is that it lays out a line of thought with its origins in the 1880s that can still be recognisably identified in the work of E. P. Thompson in the 1960s. Thompson's own reverence for this tradition is made clear in his essay 'Homage to Tom Maguire' which appeared in a volume of essays dedicated to the memory of G.D.H. Cole.¹⁴

It should be noted that this tradition is a profoundly male one. With the exception of the Communist historian Dona Torr, honoured by John Saville in his collection of essays *Democracy and the Labour Movement*,¹⁵ the historians who sought to excavate and preserve the radical tradition were men, who contributed very little to debates about gender. They engaged barely at all with the role of women within radical culture. In an absence that was recognised from the 1970s onwards, it was for a later generation of

¹² Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke' in John Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1954), pp. 11-66.

¹³ Antony Taylor, *'Down with the Crown': British Anti-Monarchism and Debates about Royalty since 1790* (Reaktion Books, London, 1999), chs., 2-3, Taylor, *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocracy in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Palgrave, London, 2004), ch. 2 and Taylor, *'London's Burning': Pulp Fiction, the Politics of Terrorism and the Destruction of the Capital in British Popular Culture, 1840-2005* (Bloomsbury, London, 2012), ch. 1.

¹⁴ E.P. Thompson, 'Homage to Tom Maguire', in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History: In Memory of G.D.H. Cole* (Macmillan, London, 1960), pp. 276-316.

¹⁵ Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, x.

women historians to put this right and to address an analogous tradition amongst women in the workplace and in the home.¹⁶

This thesis is a work of intellectual history, but uses a methodology driven by the work of Gareth Stedman Jones and Stefan Collini to excavate and re-examine the language and rhetoric used by radicals and reformers in the past and to situate them in the intellectual landscape they inhabited. It draws especially on the medium of printed pamphlet material and newspapers and presents arguments retrieved through close readings of the language of surviving texts.¹⁷ Aligned less with social and economic readings of the radical past, than with the circulation of ideas, this thesis is attuned to the continuities in language apparent from the eighteenth-century civic tradition of reform radicalism, and the commonwealth tradition that featured in the work of Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger movements and recurred in the work of Tawney and others. In this it follows the work of Gareth Stedman Jones and Tim Rogan in its emphasis on language and its political uses.¹⁸ This moral and political narrative is dissected throughout the thesis. The thesis also emphasises the willingness of English radicals into the Popular Front period to sideline ideology and doctrine in favour of a much more entrenched British tradition of popular constitutionalism that revolved around the restoration or protection of lost and endangered liberties. This approach could claim the historical benediction of the Levellers and the Chartists and drew on the

¹⁶ See, for example, Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 4.

¹⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), ch. 3. and Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1939* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993), ch. 1.

¹⁸ Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2017), pp. 16-46.

work of liberal historians like the Hammonds.¹⁹ It also provided a strong sense of a moral mission or crusade that emphasised the righting of past wrongs, but often had rather less to say about proposed blueprints for the future. Nevertheless, in its energy and vigour it captured the radical imagination and provided the inspiration for the popular reform platform in a patriotic rhetoric of progress²⁰ Here this thesis provides an answer to Ross McKibbin's question of 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?' – the radical tradition provided an acceptable substitute for continental socialist ideas and a patriotic narrative for domestic reform at home.²¹ This thesis also seeks to broaden out the discussion of the radical tradition by moving beyond widely analysed historians like E. P. Thompson, to return to more neglected figures like G.D.H. Cole and those radicals who counted themselves as the generation who were formative in the work of recovery and communication of a 'lost' political tradition.²²

An underlying theme throughout this narrative is the way in which an English radical past came to shape the unique identity of the British left and the British labour movement. In rebellion against a conventional 'drums and trumpet' history, this alternative history provided a strong narrative thread that emphasised lost rights, and a democratic tradition appropriated in the name of the people. It was grounded especially

¹⁹ Stewart A. Weaver, *The Hammonds: A Marriage in History* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1997), ch. 3.

²⁰ Hugh Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism, 1750-1914', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 12 (1981), pp. 8-33. Sometimes this narrative intersected with ideas of a national interest, free of international entanglements, see Richard Gott, 'Little Englanders' in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 vols (Routledge, London, 1989), vol., 1, pp. 90-102.

²¹ Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?' *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), pp. 297-331, McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975), chs, 2-3 and McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), ch. 1.

²² See especially the figures responsible for the reclamation of the Levellers described in Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil War and the Passions of Posterity* (Penguin, London, 2002), ch. 12.

in periods like the English Civil War that witnessed profound constitutional upheaval and saw an alteration in the balance of power between the monarchy and parliament. It had rather less to say about periods of stability like the eighteenth-century which was represented as a particular *longueur*, interrupted only by the emergence of the satirical and irreverent 'grub street' culture typified by Jonathan Swift and John Wilkes.²³ In its emphasis on upheaval and constitutional change, this alternative historical tradition was construed as a narrative of expanding democratic struggle. As a reading of the British past it was propounded by a generation of liberal historians preceding labourism who established many of the traditions that moulded the outlook of prominent Labour politicians.²⁴ It provided a counterpart to the institutional Whig history of the period, but one that served the interests of those apparently excluded from power and position.²⁵ Moreover, it acted as an antidote to the cerebral, technocratic and statist Fabian tradition drawn on by the Labour party in power.²⁶ Liberalism and labourism became intertwined around the legacy of the radical tradition, creating an entangled platform that carried implications for both movements.²⁷ In addition, Tory radicalism, espoused by some prominent Chartists, had a significant presence on the radical platform, and fed, in the later nineteenth-century, into the politics of protest, manifesting itself particularly in the outlook of Robert Blatchford and

²³ See, for example, the study of John Wilkes by the former Communist, Raymond Postgate, *That Devil Wilkes* (Constable and Co, London, 1930), chs., 4-5.

²⁴ See the literature and texts cited in W.T. Stead, 'The Labour Party and the Books that Helped to Make it', *Review of Reviews*, 33 (1906), pp. 568-582.

²⁵ J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp. 11-61 and for recent readings of usable radical memory, Stefan Berger and Bill Niven, 'Writing the Memory of National History' in Stefan Berger and Bill Niven (eds.), *Writing the History of Memory* (Bloomsbury, London, 2019), ch. 6 .

²⁶ A. M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1962), ch. 3.

²⁷ Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978), chs, 1-2.

his outrage at the 'stolen' land plundered from the people by the Normans.²⁸ In its emphasis on tradition, village culture, rural pastimes, anti-urbanisation, nostalgia for lost certainties and hostility to liberalism, Tory radicalism fitted neatly into the radical critique of industrialisation and *laissez-faire* that characterised the apparent excesses of the nineteenth-century.²⁹ The ways in which this national democratic history came to mould the labour movement by binding it to an older set of political values and beliefs is an agenda that is explored throughout this thesis.

British socialism possessed its own unique character and identity which was firmly rooted in a much older English libertarian tradition. As L. P. Carpenter noted as he looked at the central ideas which had influenced the labour historian G. D. H. Cole, a key figure in the socialist project of reviving an English radical past:

Part of Cole's importance as an educator was that he kept people from seeing Marx in an exclusively Communist light. He usually preferred to say he was 'Marx influenced' rather than Marxist - Cole could accept this kind of Marxism because Marx's philosophy of history contains basic insights reached independently by libertarian British socialists.³⁰

This was an English libertarian tradition - but was also part of a broader radical tradition which encompassed insurgents, radicals, reformers and dissenters from across the British Isles. It was a colourful pan-island democratic tradition which had absorbed

²⁸ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (The Clarion Press, London, 1908 edn.), pp. 66-67.

²⁹ Rohan McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England* (Routledge, London, 1998), pp. 81-97 and Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973), pp. 87-108..

³⁰ L. P. Carpenter, *G. D. H. Cole: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973), p. 227

an older Celtic tradition of dissent. Keir Hardie had been inspired by Wat Tyler, Thomas More and Oliver Cromwell, but was equally enthused by the border ballads and Covenanting tradition of his native Scotland.³¹ In both Wales and Scotland, the radical tradition reflected Anglophone tendencies frequently seen as more formative for the Labour movement than the Welsh-speaking culture of North Wales, and also current in the Scottish Lowlands, where, as Colin Kidd has pointed out, society and culture was often seen as more aligned with the outlook of the Protestant north of England and immersed in a broader imperial milieu into the later nineteenth-century, rather than sharing affinities with the Catholic Gaelic culture of the Highlands. This led to some oddities.³² The ILP propagandist, David Thomas, for example, drew on the panoply of English radical history, but wrote about Wat Tyler in the medium of the Welsh language, to bring the socialist message to his national/regional audience.³³

It is this constant reference and deferral back to an older political authority and earlier democratic tradition, which marks out the labour intellectuals of the period. Indeed, the British left has continued to claim its origins in the political authority of an older radical past. From Michael Foot's, *Debts of Honour*, in which he surveys the democratic heroes of his Liberal father, Isaac Foot³⁴ - to Billy Bragg's, *The Progressive Patriot* - there has been an attempt by the British left to recreate a national pantheon of

³¹ J. Keir Hardie, *From Serfdom to Slavery* (London: George Allen, 1907), pp. 28, 40-41 and 48

³² Colin Kidd, 'Race, Empire and the Limits of Nineteenth-Century Scottish Nationhood', *The Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), pp. 873-892 and for debates on Welsh identity and the Labour tradition, R. Merfyn Jones, 'Ethnicity and Class in the Penrhyn Lock-Outs, 1896-97: 1900-03', in Lex Heerma Van Voss and Herman Diederiks (eds.), *Industrial Conflict: Papers Presented to the Fourth British-Dutch Conference on Labour History* (International Institute for the Study of Labour History, Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 41-48.

³³ R. Merfyn Jones and Ioan Rhys Jones, 'Labour and the Nation' in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkins (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (University of Cardiff Press, Cardiff, 2000), pp. 142-3

³⁴ Michael Foot, *Debts of Honour* (Faber & Faber, London 2000), p. 22

liberty and a broad malleable tradition which can be used to deal with current political debates on Englishness and identity.³⁵ In his recent work, *The Leveller Revolution*, John Rees has followed a long tradition of left-wing homage to the radicalism of the English Civil War:

A considerable part of the wealth and land of the defeated cavaliers was taken from them, sequestered and used to pay for the war and given to the victors. It is hard to think of another decade in English history, with the possible exception of the 1940s, which saw so much political and social change.³⁶

The key focus of this research is the period 1885 to 1945. These crucial years began with the creation of the first socialist parties in Britain, and ended in the election of a majority Labour government, voted into power on a broad labourist platform. Indeed, these were important years for the formation of a unique British labour movement, which had developed a broad appeal through its continual reference to an older democratic past.

In addition to being a powerful symbol of historical precedent, English radicalism offered its own unique language of powerful primal ideas, which were appropriated by the key intellectuals of the British left. This ancient symbolism included the powerful idea of a lost utopia from a distant past, and a lost common-law commonwealth of collective rights and freedoms which were brutally crushed in the Norman invasion and

³⁵ Billy Bragg, *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging* (Black Swann, London, 2006), pp. 83-114

³⁶ John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (Verso, London 2016) xviii

the imposition of a 'Norman Yoke'.³⁷ English socialism was to inherit the mantle of a millenarian struggle to restore the lost rights and liberties of a distant mythical age. For Clement Attlee, this accumulation of radical energies reached its apogee with the formation of the Labour Party which united under one banner what was otherwise a heterodox tradition. He commented: 'The Labour Party was the inheritor of the achievements of those who fought for liberty in the past.'³⁸ Appropriating not only radical history, but a unique symbolism which was deeply anchored to an ancient national past, this tradition was a common thread of powerful symbolic ideas which came to inspire left-wing intellectuals from William Morris to E. P. Thompson. Moreover, it provided a unifying narrative that united activists of the left and of the Labour party around a common inheritance, but one that might also open up parties of the left or centre-left to accusations of anti-parliamentarianism, republicanism, and opposition to the state.³⁹ The early labour movement tended to focus its attention upon the radical figures of the Peasants' Revolt as the first martyrs of socialism⁴⁰. Thereafter, during the Popular Front period, the English Civil War provided a new pantheon of heroes and figures for the British left, including radical figures who had often clashed over crucial ideas and beliefs, such as Oliver Cromwell and Gerrard Winstanley. Most of the recent historiography of English radicalism has tended to focus on the figure of E. P. Thompson and specifically on the impact of this radical tradition on the New Left in the

³⁷ The best overview of the 'Norman Yoke' by a historian strongly influenced by the radical tradition is the article 'The Norman Yoke' in Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (1958; new edition, Panther, London, 1968), pp. 58-125.

³⁸ Clement Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective* (the Camelot Press, London, 1937), p. 22.

³⁹ Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Labour's Grassroots: The Politics of Party Membership* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992), p. 171.

⁴⁰ *International Socialist Review*, vol.14 (1913), p.260

post-war era.⁴¹ Very little attention has been given to the key intellectual figures who preceded Thompson in the resurrection of this radical history and the appropriation of this democratic past, the exception being Lawrence Goldman's recent biography of R. H. Tawney.⁴² The research presented within this thesis is my own attempt to redress this imbalance within the historiography of the British left. This research highlights the important contribution of Communist figures such as A. L. Morton, Dona Torr and Christopher Hill, but also the significant contribution of broad-left figures such as G. D. H. Cole, H. N. Brailsford and Fenner Brockway. It also seeks to explore the ways in which an English radical past fed directly into the powerful idea of a national identity which was rooted in a rich democratic history.

This idea was grasped to great effect within the work of George Orwell, who sought to wrest this democratic past from the hands of the Communist Party. It was always a deeply held conviction of the British left that socialist ideas had their roots reaching into our democratic past. The labour movement of the late nineteenth century was also viewed through this prism, as the latest incarnation of a long democratic tradition. English socialism was viewed as the unique product of an honoured history of radical democratic struggle, upheaval and reform. In his *Handbook of Socialism*, which was published in 1895, W. D. P. Bliss places the origin of English socialism within the era of England's first great revolution of the 17th century:

⁴¹ Michael Kenny, 'E.P. Thompson, Last of the English Radicals', *The Political Quarterly*, 88 (2017), pp. 579-88.

⁴² Lawrence Goldman, *The Life of R.H. Tawney: Socialism and History* (Bloomsbury, London, 2013), especially ch. 7

The contest with Charles, the Puritan Commonwealth, the English Revolution, were not movements of the industrial classes; yet they have made English legislative Socialism possible, and, though based upon an individualistic philosophy, contained many noble lessons of equality, and produced many a brave democratic spirit.⁴³

These are ideas and sentiments which also find clear expression in the work of many key figures of the 20th century British left. This was a radical tradition championed within the works of A. L. Morton and Christopher Hill, both founders of the Communist Party Historians' Group, and fiercely claimed by the labour historian G. D. H. Cole, but most emphatically claimed by the Christian and libertarian socialists, R. H. Tawney and George Orwell.⁴⁴ This radical tradition lived on in the broad-left and became embedded within the work of Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot and Tony Benn, figures who shared a similar background which was rooted in a Nonconformist, radical and ILP platform. Both Benn and Foot had fathers who adhered to the political Liberal tradition. Michael Foot was from staunch radical liberal stock, his father worshipping the dissenting heroes of William Tyndale, Hampden, Cromwell and John Milton.⁴⁵ This was a very diverse and diffuse political tradition which influenced a crucial figure of the modern British left, Tony Benn. Benn drew heavily on this older libertarian tradition of the past, and upon a regional religious radicalism which was inherited from his mother's background in the ILP and mediated through his family's firm Congregationalism. He was so immersed in the traditions of militant evangelism, that K.O. Morgan saw his

⁴³ W. D. P. Bliss, *A Handbook of Socialism* (Swann Sonnenschein & Co, London 1895) p. 51

⁴⁴ See R.H. Tawney, *The Radical Tradition Twelve Essays on Politics, Education and Literature* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1964), chs, 1-3

⁴⁵ Michael Foot, *Debts of Honour*, p.18 and K.O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life* (Harper, London, 2007), ch.11.

appeal as that of 'a new Wycliffe or Wesley, evangelising, prophesying, crusading with missionary zeal'.⁴⁶ This was a tradition which had little connection to the socialism of Marx, but remained a political current powerfully expressed in Aneurin Bevan's *In Place of Fear*. Bevan himself had been expelled from the Labour Party in 1939 along with Sir Stafford Cripps for advocating co-operation with the Popular Front.⁴⁷

This radical tradition was deliberately appropriated by the Communist Party in the period of the Popular Front, between the years 1935 to 1945. This was part of a centrally planned strategy to seize on national democratic traditions to forge a wider anti-fascist alliance with the broader liberal-left. The Communist Party sought to place its own roots within a native national revolutionary tradition by recruiting the Levellers, Diggers and Chartists as forerunners of the Communist cause. A clear example of this was 'The March of English History Pageant', which the Party had organised in 1936. It involved a mass rally to Hyde Park on the theme of England's radical democratic past.⁴⁸ The Levellers, Diggers and Chartists became intertwined in a deliberate propaganda drive which was specifically designed to increase membership and support for the party. This was part of a deliberately orchestrated strategy which was directed from the centre of Soviet power in Moscow and first articulated by Georgi Dimitrov at the 7th Congress of the Comintern in 1935. It was not always welcomed in

⁴⁶ K.O. Morgan, *Labour People, Leaders and Lieutenants: Hardie to Kinnock* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 302. For Benn's beliefs see David Powell, *Tony Benn: A Political Life* (Continuum, London, 2004), pp.13-17

⁴⁷ Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (Simon and Schuster, London, 1952), pp. 1-5 and for Bevan's expulsion from Labour, Paul Ward, 'Preparing for the People's War: The Left and Patriotism in the 1930s', *Labour History Review*, 67 (2002), pp. 171-185.

⁴⁸ Here the issue was one of memory as performance. See Emily Robinson, *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2012), pp. 73-79.

Britain or abroad, and there was some opposition to the strategy from fervent Communists like Earl Browder of the American Communist Party who argued that it diluted the fundamental message of Communism and aligned Bolshevik ideology with the interests of failed bourgeois parties.⁴⁹

This, however, was the era of A. L. Morton's acclaimed, *People's History of England*, which quickly established itself as the first popular 'people's history'.⁵⁰ This looked at history from the view of working people with a strong emphasis on the democratic struggles of the past. There was a resurgent interest in the radicalism of the civil war amongst Communist intellectuals, which singled out the revolutionary impact of Protestant Nonconformity and dissent. This new interest became a focal area of research for the Communist Party Historians' Group and was central to the work of the historian Christopher Hill. The Popular Front was to witness a new unorthodox fixation on Protestant religious radicalism which produced a novel recognition of the revolutionary potential within religious ideas. Marxist 'history from below' continued long after Soviet communism had fallen from favour amongst the left. Reaching its apotheosis in E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, which became a potent legacy of the Popular Front and its history, English radicalism was often viewed as a form of primitive, underdeveloped, pre-Marxist socialism, even though its amorphous traditions could conceal an extraordinarily rich diversity of ideas and beliefs. Many historians have questioned the very idea of an English radical tradition,

⁴⁹ Andrew Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British Politics', *History*, 83 (1998), 608-627. For the Popular Front in the United States, see Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994), pp. 283-284.

⁵⁰ Philip Bounds, *Orwell and Marxism: The Political and Cultural Thinking of George Orwell* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2009), pp. 41-50.

though this was certainly viewed as a tangible historical tradition for more than a century within the circles of the British left.⁵¹ As W. D. P. Bliss was to note in his 1895

Handbook of Socialism:

A sturdy independence coupled with a genius for political organisation is the birthright of every Englishman; and could, when the times were ripe, only produce socialism.⁵²

In the 1890s this socialism was still a new political movement, though a movement which tapped deep into the roots of a much older radical past. With his pamphlets and hidden printing press the radical of the past was perceived as the Nonconformist ancestor of the modern socialist agitator. This pre-Marxist past can be seen reflected in the Labour Church movement of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Bliss, himself came from a Christian socialist tradition that equally reflects this unique milieu of the early British left. The Protestantism invoked here was an activist movement symbolised by Puritanism and was seen as reaching its highest expression during the political convulsions of the sixteen-forties.⁵³ The social conflict of the 17th century, which was dramatically represented in the English Civil War, had not always been the central focus of interest and identification. In his article, 'British Marxist Historians', Raphael Samuel

⁵¹ Stefan Berger, in particular has questioned the idea of labour movement exceptionalism: see Stefan Berger, 'European Labour Movements and the European Working Class in Comparative Perspective' in Stefan Berger and David Broughton (eds.), *The Force of Labour: The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century* (Berg, Oxford, 1995), pp. 245-261

⁵² W. D. P. Bliss, *A Handbook of Socialism*, p. 50

⁵³ See S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England, 1920-1960* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010), chs. 2 and 4.

had observed a notable difference of historical emphasis between the 19th and 20th century British lefts:

In the 1880s it was the Middle Ages which captured the socialist imagination, both in the historical representation of class struggle, and as a benchmark by which to measure subsequent degradation and loss. The Anabaptists rather than the Levellers and the Diggers appear as the forerunners of socialism, hedge priests and heretics as the heralds of popular revolt.⁵⁴

Samuel saw this medievalism powerfully reflected within William Morris' *Dream of John Ball*, and in H. M. Hyndman's *Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, both published in the 1880s. Samuel contrasted this Marxist medievalism of the 19th century, with a 20th century emphasis on the radicalism of the English Civil War. Samuel regarded the 1930s and 40s as the high point of a Marxist interest in the 'Good Old Cause' of the Civil War, which became the main thrust of British left-wing history in the period of the Popular Front. Writing in the 1980s he noted:

⁵⁴ Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History', *New Left Review* No 120 (Aldershot Press, Oxford 1980) p. 28 and Bill Schwarz, 'The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-1956' in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (Hutchinson and Co., London, 1982), pp. 44-95.

Forty years ago the heaviest concentration of Marxist historical work was in the field of 16th and 17th century England. The Good Old Cause invoked by socialist historians of the time was that not of Cobbett or the Chartists, but of left wing democracy in the English Civil War, and insofar as there was a point of inspiration, it was to be found not in factory councils but in the words of the Putney debates.⁵⁵

Of course, English radicalism was never the exclusive property of the Marxists, or indeed the wider British left. Its roots can also be traced back within an older tradition of radical liberalism which claimed a long history of opposition to the power, politics and policies of a ruling aristocratic elite. It was this tradition of liberal dissent which the historian A. J. P. Taylor championed in his book, *The Trouble Makers*, which was published in 1957 in the aftermath of the failed imperial venture that prompted the Suez Crisis, and which set out to excavate the long history of opposition to imperialism and empire in Britain. This gives us a much wider definition of what constitutes an English radical tradition, which Taylor describes as a tradition of radical liberal dissent. Taylor himself was part of this political tradition and was proud of his descent from a Peterloo radical. As he noted:

All change in history, all advance, comes from the Nonconformists.

⁵⁵ *ibid* p. 26-27

If there had been no trouble-makers, no Dissenters, we should still be living in caves. As to being 'rootless intellectuals', the Dissenters have been deeply English in blood and temperament- often far more so than their respectable critics. Paine, Cobbett, Bright, Hobson, Trevelyan - what names could be more redolent of our English past?⁵⁶

This English radical tradition was also to have an important influence on an immigrant community escaping persecution within tsarist Russia. This community arrived into the East End of London only to find itself trapped in the sweatshops of the area's garment industry. These Russian Jewish refugees brought with them the socialist and revolutionary ideas which were stirring within their native land of Russia and produced their own radical newspaper in Yiddish, the *Arbeter Fraint*, or *Workers' Friend*. This new community was also introduced to a native radical tradition, which was launched into the East End of London by the anarchist Rudolf Rocker and the socialist William Morris. Rocker, a German born anarchist, viewed the Levellers, Luddites and the Owenite trade unions of England's radical past as the first to champion syndicalist socialism via a libertarian socialist tradition well established within England.⁵⁷ For Rocker, the traditions of workshop-based activism and community radical organisation introduced by the incomers harmonised well with the devolved and localist socialism of the English radical tradition.⁵⁸ He envisaged the workshops as cultural in the broadest sense, hosting educative functions that were also creative and

⁵⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (Pimlico edition, London 1993) p. 14. For Taylor's links to Peterloo see A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (Coronet Books, London, 1983), p. 3.

⁵⁷ Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years* (Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham 2005), pp.102-103

⁵⁸ Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism* (Verso, London, 2017), ch. 1.

political in equal measure.⁵⁹ This was a variant of anarchist socialism which found considerable favour amongst the Society of Jewish Socialists and their International Workingmen's Educational Association, which was set up in London's East End in 1884, becoming a centre for radical literature and for the new syndicalist movement in England, and which was often visited by William Morris in his socialist campaigns. Jewish and Irish immigrant communities were to play a prominent role in the growing labour movement within Britain and produced many of its pre-eminent figures and campaigners. These communities also played a significant role in the fight against Mosley's Fascist Blackshirts during the turbulent period of the Popular Front and exemplified in the famous 'Battle of Cable Street' which caused a severe blow to the growth of the fascist movement.

English radicalism could inspire an exclusive sense of national identity which was based on unchanging democratic principles but could also inspire an inclusive sense of collective values that reflected a wider sense of community, and of rallying together for the common cause that was inclusive of incomers and outsiders. This radical tradition was as much about history, identity and collective values, as it was about the conscious attempt to remould the past.

In many ways, this thesis is an attempt to reclaim a lost narrative of the past. It is also an intellectual history of the key ideas which came to shape and inspire the labour movement through its turbulent early history. These were ideas and ideals which gave the labour movement a sense of identity and which defined it within a shared English

⁵⁹ 'The Anarchist Leader: Interview with Rudolf Rocker', *Morning Post*, 7 January 1911.

democratic past. This was an identity rooted to a long historical narrative which reached back to Magna Carta and the defining figures and movements of a radical past. The British labour movement was defined by a lack of attachment to any rigid ideology. It was a movement far more at home in the Putney debates of the English Civil War than with the proletarian class struggle of Marx or Lenin.

The thesis takes both a narrative and thematic approach, which is developed through the various chapters. The focus is on primary source material from the period that comes in the form of books, pamphlets and manifestos published by the British labour movement and its key intellectuals. In many ways, this is also an intellectual history of the British labour movement and of the explicit ideas which came to shape its unique identity between the years 1885 to 1945. This builds upon the earlier work of Raphael Samuel in its attempt to unpick the historical ideas which drove the British left.

I am deeply aware that this is now a largely lost narrative and historiography. It is a lost democratic tradition which is almost overlooked and forgotten. There are insights and limitations to the primary source material used for this research. These sources deal with the explicit appropriation of history, with an explicit attempt to impose a view of the past upon a party membership. These sources cannot uncover the implicit beliefs of the members themselves. In this sense, any intellectual history can often become a 'history from above', of imposed ideas and beliefs by a party hierarchy and elite. With this point in mind, a researcher must tread carefully with any source material when drawing broader conclusions.

The thesis is divided into four linear narrative chapters which in turn explore the three core key themes of the study. The three underlying themes of appropriation, historical focus and ideological contest are paramount in the claiming of this radical democratic past:

- **Appropriation** - How a radical democratic past was claimed by the British left and its labour movement between the formative years of 1885- 1945. The thesis analyses the appeal of a particular kind of democratic 'people's history' and considers the educative and performative aspects of radical and labour culture that enabled that narrative of the past to be conveyed through the work of workers' educational organisations, theatrical and agitprop performances, and newspaper and pamphlet literature.

- **Historical focus** - The shifting areas of focus within this radical historiography, as movements and figures came to the fore, while interest in others receded into the background. This thesis explores the determining factors that allowed particular periods and aspects of the historical past to be incorporated into an overarching radical narrative of reform and assesses the reasons why some historical episodes were privileged over others.

- **Ideological contest** - The fiercely fought contest for the ownership of this democratic past between the various factions of the British left. The arguments set out here demonstrate the contested nature of some of the episodes and chronologies annexed by reformers and consider the debates and tensions between competing and

rival reform groups that resulted from different and frequently conflicting readings of the national past.

Chapter One is entitled 'The First to Claim a Radical Past', and explores the first socialist movements to appropriate this radical history and tradition. It examines in detail H. M. Hyndman's pioneering Social Democratic Federation and William Morris's Socialist League. Chapter Two is entitled 'True Inheritors of a Radical Past', and scrutinises the Independent Labour Party, depicting it as the true heir to this democratic tradition and dissecting its role as staunch defender of it during the turbulent rise of Bolshevism. Chapter Three is entitled 'The Deliberate Appropriation of a Radical Past', and explores the calculated seizure of a radical past by the Communist Party within the period of the Popular Front at a period when the Party sought to manipulate this historical tradition for its own political ends. Chapter Four, entitled 'Guardians of a Radical Past', explores the Workers Educational Association and its key intellectuals who came to promote this radical past as a specific British labour tradition and one rooted within a national democratic history.

The key intellectual figures of the British left are a major focus for this thesis and it scrutinises the significant role they were to play in forging a new popular democratic history for the masses. They created a history specifically shaped for the new labour movement in Britain. I explore these core themes within a linear historical narrative which gives flow to the events and political movements of the study. Beginning with the early socialist movements of the late nineteenth century, and ending with the period of the Popular Front which led up to the second world war, this narrative structure was deliberately chosen to give both force and depth to the key arguments of the thesis.

The evolving nature of this historical tradition through the period of study also lends itself to this methodological approach which considerably expands upon previous research from my earlier MA thesis. This is a broad intellectual history which examines the long labourist engagement with a radical democratic past and draws on platform rhetoric and the writings of many of the key political figures involved in the crafting of this British political tradition. I examine the shifting areas of focus within this democratic history, and the fiercely contested politics and ideology of its radical historiography.

This English radical tradition became deeply intertwined within the history and development of the British labour movement and inspired its major intellectual figures. It was a tradition which was used and shaped by political events, as each group sought to legitimise its own ideological position through the continual reference to an older democratic past. In this research, I attempt to explore this continual engagement with a national past and to chart the ways in which the past both shapes, and is shaped itself, in this process and internal debate with history

Chapter 1

The First to Claim a Radical Past: A Powerful Tradition

The early socialist movement of late nineteenth century Britain was the first to consciously appropriate an English radical past in order to deliberately root itself to an older political tradition. The poaching of a democratic past was the key ingredient of a wider political strategy to win new members from the radical wing of the Liberal Party for the new cause of socialism. This opening chapter investigates the foundation of the Social Democratic Party, analyses its origins and seeks to locate the organisation within the established traditions of popular radicalism in the period 1881-1914. In so doing, it scrutinises the SDF's policy positions, and considers the role and position of Henry Hyndman as a platform politician channelling the legacy of the radical inheritance. This chapter emphasises the ways in which the radical democratic past exerted a powerful influence on the heritage, identity and core beliefs of an aspiring British labour movement at a time when it emerged as a new and growing force within British politics.

The Origins of the SDF

The first self-proclaimed party of the British left to be founded upon a specifically Marxist platform was the Social Democratic Federation, created by the charismatic figure of Henry M. Hyndman in 1881 as the Democratic Federation out of a loose amalgam of radical groups, and later figures which included William Morris and Eleanor

Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx.¹ This became the first political party in British history to campaign on a programme directly inspired by the socialist ideas of Karl Marx.

Indeed, Hyndman had read and re-read Marx's *Capital* and sought to bring about a new revolutionary socialist party whose grand aim was to abolish the 'evils' of a capitalist system and replace it with a new social order, based upon the socialist principles of collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. This was a new movement which sought to inherit the mantle of a radical past while rejecting the earlier politics of a failed radical liberalism.²

In 1884 the Democratic Federation became the Social Democratic Federation or SDF, but not before a fatal split had occurred which halted the momentum of this new socialist movement. Indeed, this became the first of many splits within the history of the British left with William Morris, Eleanor Marx, Edward Carpenter, Walter Crane and the trade union organiser Ben Tillet leaving Hyndman and the SDF to form the Socialist League. The new party rejected the SDF policy of fielding candidates for parliament and instead advocated a programme of more direct political action, coupled to closer links with a new and growing trade union movement. The split also emphasised the growing personality differences between two giants of the early socialist movement in Britain, H. M. Hyndman and William Morris. Hyndman had focused his energies on creating a political party which was under his personal direction and control, funding the SDF through his own considerable personal wealth. Morris, in contrast, was an eclectic

¹ Rachel Holmes, *Eleanor Marx: A Life* (Bloomsbury, London, 2014), pp. 230-234 and Martin Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele University Press, London, 1994), ch. 1

² See David Murray Young, 'People, Place and Party: The Social Democratic Federation, 1884-1911. (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Durham, 2003), pp. 177-194.

figure with a utopian vision of socialism that rejected the central authority of Hyndman's personal party machine. But there were far wider dimensions to the split between the SDF and the Socialist League, as Morris sought to heal the growing rift which had occurred between the socialists and anarchists after the collapse of the First International in 1872. Morris was very sympathetic to the idea of a decentralised communist society which removed the need for a state or a controlling political party. These ideas also chimed with his vision of a return to a rural handicraft-based society, untainted by the evils of a modern industrial capitalism with its smoke, grime and mass production. Indeed, Morris counted the noted Russian exile and anarchist Peter Kropotkin as a close friend. Morris' political vision had much in common with Kropotkin's anarchist communism, and with an earlier English radicalism which championed the rights of the independent craftsman and yeoman smallholder.³

There was a national and international dimension to the new socialist movement in Britain. Both in terms of its political ideas and in terms of the political figures involved. Many see this new movement reflected in the wider growth of socialism within Europe at the time. Others have been less convinced, and view this movement continuing an older political tradition which had adopted the label of socialism.⁴ The seminal labour historian G. D. H. Cole was unconvinced that these movements were ever truly socialist in character, rather they represented a continuation of traditional English radicalism,

³ See Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (G.P.Putnam, London, 1901), ch. 1.

⁴ These debates are summarised in Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation, 1880-1885: From O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37 (1992), pp. 207-229 and Bevir, 'Henry Hyndman: A Rereading and a Reassessment', *History of Political Thought*, 12 (1991), pp. 125-145.

rebadged under the new name of socialism. Of Hyndman's Democratic Federation he notes:

The Democratic Federation, however, was not at the outset in any sense a Socialist or Marxist body. Its demands were for the most part those of the Chartists and of earlier generations of Reformers from the days of Major Cartwright. It stood for Universal Suffrage, Equal Electoral Divisions, Payment of Members, Abolition of the House of Lords, Prevention of Bribery and Corruption, and Triennial (instead of Annual) Parliaments. Its only other claims were for Self-government for Ireland and the Colonies and Dependencies, and for Nationalisation of the Land. In fact, Hyndman, Socialist as he himself had become, set out to create, not a Socialist Party, but an independent working-class agitation for Reform on old Chartist lines.⁵

Cole did recognise that by the time the SDF was formed in 1884, it did adhere to a more 'distinctly socialist programme'⁶. E. P. Thompson takes a similar position to Cole in his work on the life of William Morris, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*. Examining Hyndman and his Democratic Federation, Thompson notes:

⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement 1789-1927* (Volume 2) (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1932) p. 148

⁶ *ibid* p. 149

At its first Conference Hyndman distributed copies of his own *England for All*, in two chapters of which he borrowed liberally (and without acknowledgement) from Marx. But, despite the Socialist content of these chapters, the Jingoism present in the previous years programme was still apparent. The demand for a strong Navy (persistent throughout Hyndman's later career), and the presentation of the Colonies as the special heritage of the English working class- these ideas were set forward in rolling passages of rhetoric.⁷

In Thompson's view Hyndman was simply a Tory-radical in socialist clothing, advocating socialism at home and imperialism abroad. Indeed, Martin Pugh, in his recent history of the Labour Party, entitled *Speak for Britain*, has noted this Tory radicalism as an important strand running through both the SDF and the early Labour Party.⁸ The self-government which was offered to the colonies and dependencies was nothing more than rule through the hands of a white Anglo-Saxon elite. As Thompson goes on to remark, this new movement had a long way to travel to become truly socialist in the modern sense of the word:

When William Morris joined the Democratic Federation in January, 1883, modern Socialism was on its point of emergence from the advanced radicalism of the previous decade, and the teething troubles of the new organisation were scarcely begun.⁹

⁷ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (Merlin Press, London 1996) p293

⁸ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain: A New History of the Labour Party* (Bodley Head, London, 2010) pp. 1-13.

⁹ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 297

In both *Speak for Britain* and the *Making of Modern British Politics*, the historian Martin Pugh is more convinced that Hyndman's party can be viewed as a modern socialist movement. Though he is less convinced of its effectiveness in converting working class support within the 1880s and 90s, he, nevertheless, states:

The Social Democratic Federation represented the nearest approach to a Marxist socialist party- however- like most organisations that took their socialism seriously the SDF attracted articulate middle-class people, but men like H. M. Hyndman, H. H. Champion and William Morris tended to reduce the Federation to disputatious fragments all energetically defining their ideological position in numerous journals rather than converting the working class.¹⁰

By the 1890s, Hyndman's SDF claimed to have over 10,000 members, though most modern estimates now believe the figure to be no more than 2,600. This was hardly a major onslaught on the established political order of the time. These numbers represented little challenge to a dominant Liberal Party which still claimed the lion's share of radical working-class support in the country. In his book, *Political Movements in Urban England*, the historian Matthew Roberts echoes Martin Pugh in his assessment of Hyndman as a socialist:

¹⁰ Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939* (Blackwell Ltd, London 1998) p. 79

Hyndman did more than most to popularise the ideas and works of Marx and Engels before they were made available in English.¹¹

However, Matthew Roberts also echoes G. D. H. Cole in his earlier assessment of the Democratic Federation:

The Democratic Federation had restricted itself to what were largely Chartist objectives for parliamentary reform, although it did anticipate the socialism of the SDF with its demand for land nationalisation.¹²

Policies and Programme of the SDF

Although Hyndman was given the title 'The Father of English Socialism', his movement has received a mixed set of reviews over the intervening years. Many have been unconvinced that a label of 'socialism' could be used for either his Democratic Federation, or the SDF. There is one thing which is hard to dispute, and that is the continued influence of an English radical tradition on this new socialist movement: a movement which was inspired by the ideas of a German radical, Karl Marx.

Following its formation in 1884, the Social Democratic Federation followed a programme that made a clear division between its immediate political aims, which were radical and reformist, and its long-term political objectives, which were clearly more Marxist. If we look through the political programmes which were produced by the SDF

¹¹ Matthew Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England 1832-1914* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009) p. 132

¹² *Ibid*, p. 132

throughout the period, we can clearly see a striking division between its immediate aims and long-term objectives. In its *Programme and Rules*, produced for its annual conference in London 1892, the SDF declared its long-term Marxist objectives as a new socialist movement:

The means of Production, Distribution, and Exchange to be declared and treated as Collective and Common Property. The Land with all the Mines, Railways and other Means of Transit to be declared and treated as Collective and Common Property.¹³

Many of these new socialist objectives went much further than the demands of traditional radicalism. This contrasted with the immediate political aims of the SDF which were put forward in a later 'Programme and Rules from 1903':

Abolition of the Monarchy. Democratisation of the Government machinery viz, Abolition of the House of Lords, Payment of Members of Legislative and Administrative bodies, Payment of Official Expenses of Elections out of the Public Funds, Adult Suffrage, Proportional Representation, Triennial Parliaments. ¹⁴

These were political aims that were clearly within the tradition of liberal radicalism and its struggle to extend democratic rights through franchise reform. They were aims which were very much within an earlier tradition of Chartism and its fight to widen the

¹³ *Programme and Rules of the SDF: as revised at the Annual Conference held at the hall of the SDF. 337, Strand, London August 1st 1892* (Twentieth Century Press, London, 1892) p. 1

¹⁴ *Programme and Rules of the SDF: as revised at the Annual Conference held at Shoreditch Town Hall, Easter 1903* (Twentieth Century Press, London, 1903) p. 2

franchise through the abolition of aristocratic power and privilege. These were the older demands of English radicalism, championing the cause of universal adult suffrage, payment of members and proportional representation. All these were ideas which had been at the fore of liberal radicalism and were now absorbed into the new socialist movement.¹⁵ In many ways, this represented the survival of Chartist assumptions within the modern labour movement.¹⁶ By 1892, William Morris had decided it was now time to heal the rift between himself and Hyndman in the name of greater socialist unity. He created a Joint Committee of Socialist Bodies with the aim of bringing together the Socialist League and the SDF, and a new and growing Fabian movement which sought an alternative path to socialism through gradual reform.

In 1893 a *Joint Manifesto* was produced which tempered the revolutionary aims of the Socialist League, replacing them with a cautious mix of radical liberalism and a Fabian gradualism for the achievement of their common socialist goals. The manifesto also included a new recognition of the equal status of women within society, both in the economic sphere of work and political sphere of democratic rights. As well as older political aims, which chimed with an earlier Victorian reformism:

¹⁵ For the SDF as a continuation of an older style of Nonconformist-driven radicalism, see M.S. Wilkins, 'The Non-Socialist Origins of the of England's First Important Socialist Organisation,' *International Review of Social History*, 4 (1959), pp. 199-207.

¹⁶ Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996) Ch.1

An Eight Hours Law, Prohibition of Child Labour for Wages, Equal Payment of Men and Women for Equal Work, Together with: Universal Suffrage for all Adults, Men and Women Alike, and Public Payment for all Public Service. ¹⁷

The signatories to the above document include H. M. Hyndman and William Morris, together with two illustrious figures of the Fabian movement, Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw. As the manifesto statement declared in a Fabian tone:

The first step towards transformation and re-organisation must necessarily be in the direction of the limitation of class robbery, and the consequent raising of the standard of life for the individual.¹⁸

The SDF and the Radical Past

It is the popular pamphlets and booklets of the early socialist movement that best illustrate the continuing influence of an English radical tradition on the new British left. This was a tradition that was co-opted to recruit new members from the radical wing of a still dominant Liberal Party. Hyndman and Morris believed the Liberal Party was now a political dead end, having outlived its usefulness to the working class and to its democratic struggle. Karl Marx was now the new Thomas Paine of a new radical movement of socialism. This was a movement which needed to be located within the context of many centuries of democratic struggle to arrive at the final goal of a socialist

¹⁷ *Manifesto of the Joint Committee of Socialist Bodies*, London (Twentieth Century Press, London, 1893) pp. 6-7

¹⁸ *ibid*, pp. 6-7

society in which people gained both economic rights and the political franchise. Before their acrimonious split at the end of 1884, Hyndman and Morris had produced a booklet entitled, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism*. This was nothing less than a potted history of English radicalism and of the struggle for democratic rights which began in the mists of the middle ages, England's liberty being first established by the independent yeomen of a medieval past:

England, was in fact inhabited by perhaps the most vigorous, freedom-loving set of men the world ever saw, who, having shaken themselves free from the slavery of the feudal system, were still untrammelled by the worse slavery of commercialism and capital.¹⁹

This passage is redolent with the fashionable Victorian sentiment for an idealised medieval past, unsullied by the grime and grim materialism of the industrial revolution. This idealised past was amply illustrated in the art of the Pre-Raphaelite painters and was also given expression in the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement of Morris himself. It is also displayed within the lavish prints of Walter Crane, produced for the socialist cause and for Morris's Socialist League. This image famously comes alive in William Morris', *A Dream of John Ball*, a poetic novel set within the events of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in which the turbulent radical preacher foresees a future socialist society. In their joint booklet, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism*, Hyndman and Morris were keen to pay tribute to the radical democrats of a more recent past, especially notable as the narrative moves on to the 17th and 18th centuries, and the

¹⁹ H. M. Hyndman, William Morris, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (Modern Press, London 1884) pp. 12-13

English and American revolutions. These were important seminal events, and the crucial foundations upon which the modern socialist movement was to build:

The English Revolution, the American War of Independence, stirring the middle-class and the people.²⁰

The images from these radical narratives are of freeborn Anglo Saxons fighting a 'Norman Yoke', of independent yeomen pitted against feudal and arbitrary aristocratic power, and of independent artisans struggling against enclosure and the growing power of capital with its factory system. There was a Radical Whig narrative of democratic struggle against absolute power, and of steady progress towards an inevitable future of common collective rights. This Whig tradition was the political narrative of an educated cultural elite which looked to the democratic heroes of classical Athens for its inspiration. But there was also a popular plebeian tradition here whose heroes were the peasant rebels and small property owners like Gerrard Winstanley. In this sense, the term 'radical' could embrace both an elite and grassroots political tradition.²¹ The Liberal Party had been the political vehicle for the radical platform, now it was socialism and the SDF. As the narrative turns to the events of the early 19th century, the point was often made that liberalism had distracted the Chartists from a true radical path:

²⁰ Ibid, p.29

²¹ Stephen Yeo, 'Socialism, the State and Some Oppositional Englishness' in Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd (eds.), *Englishness, Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (1988: new edition, Bloomsbury, London, 2014) pp. 331-387).

But for the counter-agitation got up by the capitalists in favour of Free Trade in corn it is even possible that the Chartists and Socialists together might have achieved a temporary success for the cause of the people. As it was the Corn Law League drawing people off on a false scent, the leaders were left almost without followers; and though in 1848 the renewed stir on the Continent of Europe gave the workers in this country every encouragement and an exceptional opportunity, they failed to resuscitate the energetic movement of 1842.²²

The message from Hyndman and Morris was clear, the radicalism of the past had been led astray by a campaigning liberalism. It was now the turn of the socialists to be true heirs to a long tradition of democratic struggle, in which the Chartists had once been at the forefront in the 1840s. This was a clear attempt to position socialists at the spearhead of the radical movement within the politics of late nineteenth century Britain. But it also illustrates the continued pull of liberalism on the labour movement, and the Liberal Party on working class support within the period.

There was a conscious attempt by this new movement to bring people over to the 'new cause' through an appeal to an older political tradition. The Chartist past was still within the living memory of many people when these socialist pamphlets and booklets were produced. The old veterans of the Chartist movement were the living embodiment of an older radical tradition which the new socialist movement was keen to incorporate and embody. For the historian, Antony Taylor, these stubborn rebels of the past

²² *ibid* p. 42

represented figures who were fiercely independent of both liberalism and Toryism, men who represented a living link to an independent democratic tradition from the past. This was a tradition to which liberalism had some considerable ambivalence if not hostility, being both democratic and progressive but also violent and subversive. These for their successors were the communists and anarchists of their age, indeed many of these veterans of democracy had received lengthy prison sentences for their previous struggles and agitation. This was the radical tradition, and the men, the socialists now wished to embrace. Many of these radical survivors were invited to rallies and meetings to bolster the crowd and legitimise events. Several veterans of the Chartist movement of 1848 appeared at an SDF meeting which was organised at Victoria Park in Hackney 1884. As Antony Taylor notes:

The appearance of Chartist veterans in the crowd allowed later movements to claim the blessing of the agitation's survivors and assume the mantle of the radical inheritance.²³

These old Chartists represented a living link into a pre-Marxist radical past, stretching back into English history and the mists of time. As Taylor states:

Old Chartists were a link with the past, a solemn survival of more turbulent times. Their presence at public meetings or in the audience demonstrated a lived lineage of radical struggle.²⁴

²³ Antony Taylor, 'The Old Chartist': Radical Veterans on the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth-century Platform (*History*: Volume 93, Issue 4 Blackwell Publishing, 2010) p467

²⁴ *ibid* p. 466

Many of these Chartist veterans also contributed rallying articles to *Justice*, the bimonthly paper of the SDF. As Taylor notes:

Former Chartists often recorded their experiences in the radical press to bolster the resolve of a younger generation of reformers in the present. These letters sought to inspire, to encourage and sometimes to warn. Often such correspondence was intended to rekindle radical faith and energies.²⁵

Before the split with Hyndman and the SDF, William Morris had used *Justice* to recruit radicals away from the Liberal Party in a propaganda effort to bolster the new socialist movement. Writing for *Justice* in March 1884, he states:

The conscientious Radical will see when his eyes are cleared from the mist of words and names that there are but two camps; one is the camp of those who are the exponents of the change which is taking place; the other of those who are striving to insure Society against that inevitable change; if he chooses this latter he may remain a Radical in name to-day, but to-morrow will be called by his right name 'reactionist'; but if he chooses the former camp he will keep his Radical principles though he will have to undergo the shame of being called a Socialist.²⁶

²⁵ *ibid* p. 468

²⁶ William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal 1883-1890* (Thoemmes Press, London, 1994); *Justice* Volume 1, Number 7, 1st March 1884, p. 4

William Morris and the Socialist League

For Morris, the new political landscape was creating two fundamentally opposing parties: one which represented progressive revolutionary change, the other which opposed that change in the name of vested financial and political interests:

It takes no prophet to see that Society will presently wake up and find the Whigs extinct, the Liberals extinct, the true Radicals rapidly becoming Socialists and facing a party which will have been forced to drop its mask; which may be called Tory, but which proclaims a last without hypocrisy its real maxim, 'Keep them Down'.²⁷

This vision of ideological polarisation was more a prophecy of the next century, than of the one in which Morris lived. It would be another forty years before Britain moved towards a two-party political system of the left and right, much of this evolving out of the shock of the First World War. The Liberal Party would maintain its dominance for many years, continuing its radical appeal despite this new movement for the working class.

With the split of 1884, Morris and his Socialist League moved further to the left of the political spectrum, denouncing Hyndman's SDF and its attempts to gain seats in Parliament, plus its lack of interest in, or engagement with, a new and growing trade union movement. The new Socialist League was to produce its own newspaper, *Commonweal* to spread the true socialist gospel:

²⁷ *Justice*, Volume 1, Number 46, 29th November 1884, p. 4

The Commonweal will steadily continue to put forward the principles of International Revolutionary Socialism; will deprecate all meddling with parliamentary methods of 'reform'. Constitutionalism means the continuance of the present system; how can Socialists, therefore, who aim at abolishing the system, support its support?²⁸

As the Socialist League moved further to the left, Hyndman's SDF attempted to bring together a broader coalition of radical groups which included Christian Socialists and the up and coming Fabians. Morris also used his *Commonweal* newspaper to bring radicals in from the Liberal Party, appealing for any remaining true radical to join the new Socialist League. This was particularly so after the failure of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill in Parliament, which had been an important rallying point and a cornerstone of the radical cause within the Liberal Party:

Whether they are conscious of it or not, they are waiting for Socialism to take up the work of progress. They are not convinced Socialists; many of them probably have never taken the trouble to understand what Socialism means; but they are nevertheless waiting for its approach.²⁹

Morris berated liberalism as a political dead end for the wider radical movement, and a lost cause in the continuing battle for democracy. The radicals within liberalism had clearly outlasted their usefulness to 'the cause' and must now join with the socialists to ensure any future political progress:

²⁸ *Commonweal*, Volume 2, Number 16, 1st May 1886, p. 33

²⁹ *Commonweal*, Volume 4, Number 121, 5th May 1888, pp. 137-138

The Radicals represent the economical slavery of a class, joined to political freedom, which was also once necessary for progress; the Socialists represent progress itself with no temporary veil distorting its features.³⁰

Morris' breakaway Socialist League was now portrayed as true heir to the radical inheritance of the Chartists. Indeed, Morris portrayed the Chartists as the original socialist pioneers of 'the cause'. They were portrayed as pioneers who became ostracised by a bourgeois political establishment that had coalesced into the Liberal Party and its reformist movement. This was a Liberal Party which became hostile to the very memory of Chartism, completely distancing itself from the radical roots from which liberalism itself had sprung:

Far from its receiving any of the middle-class sympathy which had been accorded to the Radical agitation, Chartism was looked upon as the enemy, and the bourgeois progressive movement was sedulously held aloof from it.³¹

The late 1880s were to witness two events which brought the new socialist movement into direct confrontation with the authorities and the established social order. The first of these events was the mass demonstration organised against unemployment which took place in Trafalgar Square on the 13th of November 1887. This was forever known as Bloody Sunday for its agitation and violence. Over 10,000

³⁰ *ibid* pp. 137-138

³¹ *Commonweal*, Volume 2, Number 33, 28th August 1886, pp. 170-171

protestors faced two thousand police and 400 armed troops, deployed to stop the political demonstration. Both the SDF and the Socialist League were to play a prominent part in what eventually became a full-blown riot that placed the 'social question' firmly onto the national agenda. The second crucial event was the London Dock Strike of 1889, which resulted in a victory for the 100,000 striking London Dockers and was to play an important part in establishing an effective trade union movement in Britain for the first time in history. Another important event was the founding of the Independent Labour Party in 1893. This was the first attempt to bring a working-class party with direct trade union links into Parliament. As Martin Pugh has noted of this new movement:

A far more realistic and pragmatic approach than that of the SDF was adopted by the Independent Labour Party founded in Bradford in 1893. Though socialist, the ILP displayed a certain flexibility absent from the SDF, for it espoused a shrewd mixture of radical Liberal causes and current trade union demands. Also its members reflected much more closely the working class of provincial England.³²

From this period on, it was parliament and the need for working class representation which became the focal point for the socialist movement in Britain. The new Independent Labour Party would achieve what Hyndman and Morris had failed to do, which was the difficult task of bringing over radicals from the Liberal Party and into the ranks of a new socialist movement. The SDF was to survive into the twentieth century with the Socialist League seeing the exit of its most important member, William Morris

³² Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, p. 7

in 1890, with the party effectively disbanding in 1909. As the father of English socialism, Henry Hyndman was to continue to produce pamphlets and booklets extolling the virtue of the socialist cause, well into the early years of the new century. His pamphlet, *John Ball, Priest and Prophet of the Peasants' Revolt*, was published by the SDF in 1909 and strongly expressed the continued pull of an English radical past on the new movement of socialism. Hyndman makes his point in a typical rhetorical style:

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 commenced the historic class-conscious struggle of the workers, the first object of which was to free themselves from the immediate and personal control which the lords had over them.³³

This was the beginnings of a radical struggle that was far from over in the modern age:

The great social question of the fourteenth century, to the solution of which the martyr, John Ball, contributed his life, and to which millions of lives have been sacrificed since, is with us now.³⁴

John Ball is portrayed as the first true champion of a long historical struggle against injustice, poverty and social inequality. Hyndman's pamphlet reiterates the Marxist creed, that the workers are the true vehicle for social change, and the socialist

³³ H. M. Hyndman, *John Ball, Priest and Prophet of the Peasants' Revolt* (Social Democratic Federation, London, 1909) p. 9

³⁴ *ibid* p. 12

movement the true inheritor of a radical past. Hyndman moves his narrative on to the era of liberal radicalism, echoing the arguments made earlier by William Morris:

Politically, the workers have made great strides towards democratic power since the Peasants' Revolt. It was with the assistance of the working class that the capitalists finally gained political dominance by the passing of the Reform Bill, 1832, but not a single worker was then included in the franchise. Since then, through their own efforts in the great Chartist movement, the Workers have obtained the right to govern, but have not yet learned to use it. It is the mission of the Socialist movement to teach the workers to use their vote, and their right to organise in the interest of their class. The Socialists alone fully realise the truth of John Ball's prophecy, 'that things will not go well in England till all things be held in common'.³⁵

It was Hyndman's insistence on the parliamentary route to socialism that eventually won the day within the circles of the British left; the ILP was to follow this strategy first put forward by Hyndman and the SDF in the 1880s, though with greater political success. Gaining votes and seats in parliament was now seen as the only path towards achieving the goal of a socialist society. In this respect Hyndman was an old fashioned liberal-radical himself, though he would have disdained such a name and title and instead adopted the title Marxist to describe his political views. The pamphlet finishes with a rallying mix of both radical history and Edwardian national pride:

³⁵ *ibid* p. 18

We have enough patriotism left to hope that this country will yet take the lead in this great movement. Here is the centre of capitalism, here the commercial world has its nexus. Tyler and Ball, Cade and Ket, More and Vane, and Blake and Harrison – those are the names of men of the past who will be the heroes of the future.³⁶

Henry Hyndman and National Identity

England was indeed at the centre of a powerful world empire and Hyndman's Marxism was strongly influenced by the nationalism and imperialism of the age, as noted in Paul Ward's study *Red Flag and Union Jack* (Woodbridge, 1998).³⁷ As the historian Raphael Samuel suggested, Hyndman adopted many ideas that had their origin within Victorian liberal history, and placed a strong emphasis on England's constitutional development and Protestant past. Samuel notes this history begins with a captivating picture of life in England prior to the Norman Conquest and the imposition of a 'Norman Yoke'. This was the lost Saxon England of the past, a 'farmer-commonwealth' of independent landowners enjoying lost rights and freedoms. This liberal history moved on to a 'Golden Age' of freeborn Englishmen in the fifteenth century, and to the forging of a Protestant world empire:

³⁶ *ibid* p. 19

³⁷ Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, 1998), ch. 2

This was the version which the Marxist leader H M Hyndman retailed in his *Historical Basis of English Socialism*.³⁸

The strong pull of nationalism would have a devastating effect on the socialist movement in 1914, when Hyndman, along with many of his Marxist contemporaries, chose support for their own nation's cause in the forthcoming conflict.³⁹ For Hyndman, this continued the tradition of freeborn English small yeoman proprietors defending country and kin against France in the Middle Ages and holding their own 'in the French wars and...against every Continental army'.⁴⁰ This support for national defence submerged the greater cause of socialist internationalism and brotherly solidarity. Hyndman himself was fiercely opposed to what he saw as German militarism and believed that firm support for the war was the only way to halt its growth in Europe. The growing force of nationalism, unleashed by the ensuing conflict, would ultimately break the back of an international socialist movement that was proudly founded back in 1889. It led to the collapse of the Second International, with its egalitarian global vision, in the opening shorts of the First World War.

In 1911, Hyndman published his colourful autobiography entitled, *The Record of an Adventurous Life*. The work is a fascinating and detailed account of Hyndman's life both in and out of politics. The autobiography gives some particularly fascinating details of the major political figures he encountered, many of whom were to influence his political thought and beliefs. On the infamous split with William Morris, Hyndman writes:

³⁸ Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians 1880-1980' (*New Left Review* 120, March/April 1980) p. 40

³⁹ Chushishi Tsuzuki, *H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961), ch. 4.

⁴⁰ H.M. Hyndman, *England for All: The Textbook of Democracy* (1881; Harvester, Brighton, 1977), p. 7.

I cannot exonerate Morris and his group from the responsibility of having done more to hinder the progress of genuine Socialism in England than any people who have ever opposed it or been connected with it. The Labour Party could never have existed, as a virtual subsidised wing of the Liberal Party, had Morris and his friends remained with us throughout.⁴¹

Hyndman viewed the acrimonious rift with Morris as a major blow to the establishment of a successful socialist party in Britain. The growing and successful Labour Party was viewed as nothing more than the radical wing of a bedraggled liberalism, rebadged and repackaged under its new and misleading name. Indeed, this was the same radical wing of liberalism which both Hyndman and Morris had failed to attract to their respective socialist parties in the 1880s and 1890s. The most intriguing aspect of Hyndman's autobiography is his detailed account of his later friendship with Karl Marx. This took place in the immediate years prior to the philosopher's death in 1883. Hyndman describes the relationship as that of a master and student, in which Hyndman had nothing but admiration for the great man's intellectual genius:

I had the advantage of very frequent conversations with the Doctor, and gained a view of himself and his genius, his vast erudition and his masterly survey of human life which I think was accessible to very few outside his immediate family circle.⁴²

⁴¹ H. M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (Macmillan, London 1911) p. 330

⁴² *ibid* p. 250

Hyndman also describes his mentor's important links to English radicalism and his longstanding friendship with the leading figures of the Chartist movement. Addressing Marx's extensive knowledge of English democratic history with its important revolutionary traditions. Hyndman recalls Marx's views on Chartism, and his own idea of reviving this earlier radical movement with the help of his old mentor:

I frequently spoke with him about the Chartist movement, whose leaders he had known well and by whom, as their writings show, he was greatly esteemed. He was entirely sympathetic with my idea of reviving the Chartist organisation, but doubted its possibility.⁴³

Hyndman clearly sought to link Marx to the older Chartist movement and to an English radical and revolutionary tradition. Some contemporaries disliked the SDF because they saw it as an attempt to revive the spirit and style of the bankrupt Chartist movement. As George Bernard Shaw noted, it was: 'As if Chartism and Feargus O'Connor has risen from the dead, (or so) the Democratic Federation of Mr H. F. Hyndman appeared!'.⁴⁴ There is also an attempt to portray Marx as a prophetic and visionary figure, foreseeing a socialist victory in the future. As with the old Chartist veterans who were proudly paraded at the rallies and events of the SDF, Marx is also portrayed as a visible link to an older radical tradition from the past. He was a rough and seasoned warhorse of radical protest and political dissent, to be admired and respected by a new

⁴³ *ibid* p. 251

⁴⁴ George Bernard Shaw 'Transition' in George Bernard Shaw (ed.) *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (London: Walter Scott, 1889), p.186

generation of revolutionaries. The image of Marx as the grizzled old radical comes across immediately in Hyndman's first meeting with the great man:

The first impression of Marx as I saw him was that of a powerful, shaggy, untamed old man, ready, not to say eager, to enter into conflict and rather suspicious himself of immediate attack.⁴⁵

For Hyndman, Marx was the philosopher who gave the clearest vision of a socialist future through a detailed analysis and powerful critique of capitalism. This was a view unsullied by the confused aims of earlier political movements. Marx embodied the hopes and aspirations of the Chartist movement and gave new clarity to the political ideas of an earlier radical past. Hyndman was a great admirer of Marx, the radical, and was especially impressed with Marx, the philosopher; he was however far less enamoured with Marx the man. Marx had lingering financial problems and frequently fell into poverty, as Hyndman was at pains to recall in his autobiography. Marx had been in such financial straits he had once been forced to pawn some household silver, only to have the added humiliation of being detained by the pawnbroker, who called the police in a mistaken belief that Marx had acquired the silver by theft! Hyndman's ironic account of the incident carries more than a hint of Victorian antisemitism, something which later came to haunt the SDF and much of the early socialist movement:

⁴⁵ Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life*, p. 247

On one occasion Marx himself being in great need went out to pawn some household silver. He was not particularly well dressed and his knowledge of English was not so good as it became later. The silver, unfortunately, as it turned out, bore the crest of the Duke of Argyll's family, the Campbells, with which house Mrs Marx was directly connected. Marx arrived at the Bank of the Three Balls and produced his spoons and forks, Saturday night, Foreign Jew, dress untidy, hair and beard roughly combed, handsome silver, Noble crest- evidently a very suspicious transaction indeed. So thought the pawnbroker to whom Marx applied. He therefore detained Marx, on some pretext, while he sent for the police.⁴⁶

Hyndman had begun his political career as a sympathetic Tory-radical, as he notes in his autobiography:

I was then an out-and out Radical, believing that if all the people only had the vote and a good secular education they would soon put a new and better face upon the world. In fact my Radicalism, tempered with a certain appreciation of the good things of this world, and a knowledge of how to get and use them, was regarded by my friends as only skin-deep.⁴⁷

Hyndman never stood as a Tory candidate, preferring instead to stand as an independent for the constituency of Marylebone in the 1880 General Election. Though it

⁴⁶ *ibid* p. 254

⁴⁷ *ibid* p. 47

was clear his politics remained strongly influenced by a Tory-radical perspective despite his late conversion to socialism within the same year. Hyndman had stood on an independent ticket but was still roundly denounced as a Tory by Gladstone in the ensuing and bitter election campaign. In many ways, Tory-radicalism was the product of changing dynamics within 19th century British politics. This was a movement that was not unlike socialism in giving its support for wider electoral reform to enfranchise the working-class masses. Its aim however was to gain wider support against the growing forces of capitalism and industrialisation that were now seen to threaten the established landed interest and an older world of social deference. It was these dynamic forces which many believed now threatened the very fabric of British society, particularly the traditional structures of power, deference and belief which were being swept away amid the growth of industrial cities with their teeming and turbulent populations. Matthew Roberts succinctly describes the movement:

Broadly defined, it refers to the coming together of Tories and radicals in opposition to the unrestrained forces of industrialisation and its harmful and disruptive social consequences.⁴⁸

This was the clear impetus behind Disraeli's 1867 Reform Act which gained working class support from Gladstone's Liberal Party. Hyndman had great admiration for the Tory-radical Disraeli and describes him as an early sympathiser for the democratic cause of the Chartists. This is in stark contrast to Gladstone's Liberals whom he describes as the party of, 'middle-class Liberal hypocrisy and chicanery'.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Matthew Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, p. 100

⁴⁹ H. M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life*, p. 212

William Morris also shared this Tory-radical attitude towards industrialisation which had come to him through the work and ideas of Thomas Carlyle, and his own mentor John Ruskin. It was these romantic ideas which informed his strong belief in a return to a pre-industrial craft-based society of the past, a society in which the artisan reclaimed the skills and rewards of his own craft and labour. The potent idea of a purer pre-industrial past remained with Morris long after his conversion to Marx and the modern socialist cause.⁵⁰ It was an idea informed by an older Tory-radicalism which was struggling to come to terms with a modern industrial capitalist world. Hyndman and Morris had shared a contempt for liberalism and the Liberal Party and a strong antipathy towards middle-class support for laissez faire economics and an unrestrained industrialisation, and both were to bring this instinctive antipathy to inform their respective socialist movements. Indeed, much of their energy became consumed with a Tory-radical fight against liberalism and industrialisation, highlighting its abject failure for working people and society. Ironically, William Morris began his involvement in politics within the radical wing of the Liberal Party, though he soon became disillusioned with liberalism and the contradiction which lay at the core of many of its philosophical beliefs. There was a strong element of paternalism which lay at the heart of Tory-radicalism and much of this is embodied in Hyndman's attitude towards Britain's foreign empire, and towards a new and growing trade union movement which he especially chose to ignore. This paternalistic attitude is summed up by the historian Martin Pugh, who notes:

⁵⁰ See Ruth Kinen, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2000), ch. 4.

In the nineteenth-century context the deferential and the pragmatic element was combined in the concept of Tory paternalism in the sense of government by hereditary leaders fully alive to their obligations, material and moral, towards the lower orders of society.⁵¹

The negative reaction to industrialisation that was implicit within Tory-radicalism, finds a clear expression in William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, which was published in 1890 and describes the future vision of a socialist utopia free of the smoke, grime and noise of the industrial revolution. The novel is an early form of science fiction and inventive social speculation, not dissimilar to the contemporary work of H. G. Wells. The main character falls asleep after a long meeting of the Socialist League, only to re-awaken into a future egalitarian society that is the complete antithesis of Victorian Britain. This is a new socialist society founded upon a semi-rural and craft-based economy, where the horrors of the industrial revolution have long been left behind. Morris' description of a future London blends his Tory-radical antipathy towards industrialisation with a newer socialist vision:

⁵¹ Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, p. 89

I was going to say, “But is this the Thames?’ but held my piece in my wonder, and turned my bewildering eyes eastward to look at the bridge again, and thence to the shores of the London river; and surely there was enough to astonish me. For though there was a bridge across the stream and houses on its banks, how all was changed from last night! The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer’s works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering came down the west wind.⁵²

Gone are the large ugly buildings of Victorian London, together with its smoke-filled industry and busy roads chocked with traffic. This is a new world which is free from the noise and hustle of excited crowds packed into omnibuses. The new vision of Trafalgar Square is one of semi-rural peace and tranquillity, an age away from its previous incarnation as the busy centre of empire:

I opened my eyes to the sunlight again and looked round me, and cried out among the whispering trees and odorous blossoms, “Trafalgar Square!”⁵³

Morris uses the novel to advance his own view of a future socialist society. This utopia has no imposing government or central authority, with parliament indignantly relegated to a dung-heap. Hammond, one of the main characters of the novel, describes the political philosophy of this new society:

⁵² William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Longmans Green and Co, London, 1905) p. 7

⁵³ *ibid* p. 45

The government itself was but the necessary result of the careless, aimless tyranny of the time; it was but the machinery of tyranny. Now tyranny has come to an end, and we no longer need such machinery; we could not possibly use it since we are free. Therefore, in your sense of the word we have no government.⁵⁴

The novel offers its libertarian vision of a future world in which all political authority and coercive power has vanished forever. This was, in part, an anarchist vision which Morris espoused, and had brought him into conflict with Hyndman in 1884. Morris was particularly influenced by the anarchist ideas of Peter Kropotkin, an exiled Russian prince who shared a similar vision of a future socialist society freed from the oppressive apparatus of the modern capitalist state. Morris used his novel in an imaginative attempt to elucidate this future socialist society. He was also keen to resolve a growing ideological rift within his own movement, between the communists and the anarchists. Despite his valiant efforts, the rift proved a terminal source of disunity within the Socialist League and resulted in the movement's eventual demise once Morris left. Morris always retained a strong sympathy for the political ideas of Peter Kropotkin, as E. P. Thompson notes in *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*:

⁵⁴ *ibid* p. 87

Morris acknowledged his sympathy with the “Anarchist-Communist” position- by temperament he was opposed to a great industrial civilization, centred on large towns, and he looked forward impatiently to the re-emergence in Communist society of a life based upon small communes and villages.⁵⁵

William Morris was to leave the Socialist League in 1890, with the anarchist Franz Kitz becoming editor of its newspaper, *Commonweal*. In 1894 the renamed *Commonweal* Anarchist Group published a pamphlet entitled *Why We Are Anarchists*, stating the new ideological direction of the movement. This completely rejected the socialist aim of collective ownership through the state in the name of the people, a political objective of the original Socialist League. The new movement also rejected the political process as a means of achieving any socialist goal:

It may be preferable to a great number of careless people to be looked after by the state in a paternal and tutelary way, as they fancy, not seeing the claws of oppression and exploitation behind the bland demeanour and glib phrases of politicians; and these people may rejoice if they see the care of the State for their own well-being constantly extended by State-interference with everything, but these are not the people we appeal to.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 550

⁵⁶ *Commonweal* Anarchist Group, *Why We Are Anarchists* (*Commonweal*, London, 1894) p. 5

This was a rejection of the collective idealism which had inspired the SDF and the Socialist League in the 1880s. Indeed, these libertarian ideas seem far more in tune with the neo-liberalism of our own age. Particularly marked was the ideological rejection of an overarching state and its growing interference in the life and liberty of the individual. These new ideas discard the long democratic struggle for collective economic rights, which were the cause of the Chartist movement, and became the inspiration for the early socialists, replacing this with an anti-state, anti-authoritarian individualism, though some links can be seen between these anarchist ideas and the more revolutionary beliefs which were found in an earlier 'physical force' Chartism, a movement which had inspired the Newport uprising of 1839 and had rejected all forms of existing state authority. Speaking of the radical Chartist, Henry Vincent, whose lectures came to influence events in Newport and inspire a later generation of anarchists, the historian David Jones notes:

They had, he declared, been held down long enough, and when the word was given the whole rotten super-structure of crown, army, government, lawyers and parsons would come crashing down.⁵⁷

There was a wider dimension to the socialist and anarchist movement of late 19th century Britain. Both the SDF and the Socialist League had strong links to the international socialist movement and to the many socialist parties throughout Europe and America. This internationalism had important roots reaching back into English

⁵⁷ David J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising, The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985) p. 60

radical history and was significant for the previous Chartist movement. As the labour historian and radical champion, G. D. H. Cole was to note:

In its latter days the Chartist Movement had taken on a markedly international character, and a tradition of sympathy with revolutionary agitations on the Continent survived its eclipse as a national movement.⁵⁸

This internationalism continued within the socialist movement that replaced Chartism to pick up the baton of democratic struggle. There were strong links between socialist parties and anarchist groups on both sides of the Atlantic, and many of these links favoured the anarchist movement. As E. P. Thompson notes, in a somewhat polemical tone, concerning the Socialist League:

The decisive factor in turning the league in an Anarchist direction, however, was not Kropotkin's teaching but the great inspiring example of the Chicago Anarchists, whose brutal judicial murder on the eve of Bloody Sunday had both shocked and inspired Socialists of every opinion.⁵⁹

Rudolf Rocker and Anarchism

International events in Tsarist Russia were to have an equal effect back in England, following the Russian government's persecution of socialists, anarchists, political dissenters and trade unionists; together with harsh pogroms enacted against the Jewish

⁵⁸ G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement*, Volume 2, p. 81

⁵⁹ Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 506

population. These events inspired both condemnation and protest from the British left and a wider spectrum of liberal opinion back at home. These events were to bring large numbers of Jewish refugees into London's poverty-stricken East End, fleeing the pogroms and the grinding poverty within their own country. Many young men also fled to escape a forced conscription into the Russian Imperial Army. Many of these immigrants found themselves working in the sweat shops of the East End which were associated with the garment industry. The long hours for poor pay within these sweat shops quickly bred a new militancy amongst the newly settled immigrant workforce, many of whom had brought socialist ideas from their native Russia.

The poor living and working conditions endured by the new immigrant community were exacerbated by a 'sweated' sub-contract labour system which was endemic within the garment industry. This reduced workers' wages but increased the hours they had to work to make a meagre income, causing growing discontent amongst the new workforce. In July 1884, a discontented Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, Morris Winchevsky, was to found the first socialist newspaper produced for the Yiddish language. This became the *Arbeter Fraind*, or *Workers' Friend*. As the East End historian William Fishman noted:

Its expression of non-alignment, that it was originally open to all radicals, social democrats, collectivists, communists and anarchists, brought in the support of Socialist groups, whose differences were not yet irreconcilable. There were certain features it maintained throughout a long and chequered existence. It stressed a global view of Socialism, yet betrayed the paradox of the outcast Jew in the diaspora.⁶⁰

The *Arbeter Fraint* soon became the radical voice for the new immigrant community in the East End of London. It also to became the voice of a new independent Jewish labour movement, which was affiliated to the newly formed International Workers' Educational Club in the East End. As Fishman notes:

Radical organisations allied themselves and grew with the journal. In 1884, a Society of Jewish Socialists had inaugurated an International Workers Educational Club, and its founders became patrons of the *Arbeter Fraint*. In February 1885, the club took over the premises of 40 Berner Street, a narrow slum thoroughfare off Commercial Road, and reconstituted itself the International Workingmen's Educational Association. It offered a base for radical and trade union movements in the East and West End.⁶¹

The new International Workingmen's Educational Association became a gathering place of Russian, Jewish, French, Italian, Czech and Polish radicals, and became a place

⁶⁰ William J Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (Five Leaves Press, Nottingham 2004) p. 151

⁶¹ *ibid* p. 153

of frequent pilgrimages for many British radicals, including William Morris and his Socialist League. The club was described as a 'cradle of liberty', attracting many of the important socialist and trade union figures of the day who gave speeches to its thronged hall. The Berners Street Club was also an important melting pot where Russian and English radicals exchanged their revolutionary ideas and beliefs, and became the place where many Jewish immigrants became exposed to the new political ideas of the day. These ideas included the revolutionary beliefs of Russian anarchists, and radical democratic ideas of an older English Chartism. This political fusion was articulated by the German anarchist Rudolf Rocker, who argued that his anarchist beliefs were inspired by an earlier pre-Marxist tradition of English and French radicalism. The Berners Street Club also became a focal point for trade union activity, particularly against the sweated system within the garment industry. As William Fishman notes:

After a series of meetings at Berners Street the desirability having for some time been felt amongst the organised Jewish workers of the East End to federate under one head led to the call for a mass rally. At three p. m., on Saturday 28th December 1889 at the Great Assembly Hall, Mile End, 4000 Jewish workers attended.⁶²

A wave of antisemitism was to sweep across London in the period, particularly after the unsolved Ripper murders in the East End, with many believing the Ripper to be from within the new immigrant Jewish community. There were also many people who supported the new immigrant community, as on November 1st 1890, when a mass rally

⁶² *ibid* p. 183

was organised to protest against the brutal pogroms in Tsarist Russia.⁶³ The event involved many leading figures from the Socialist League, including William Morris, Eleanor Marx, and the Lib-Lab MP, Robert Cunninghame Graham, who later went on to found the Scottish National Party. An influential figure within the circle of East End socialists was the German immigrant and anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, a figure who became adopted by the Jewish community as a trade union organiser and political pamphleteer. After studying Yiddish, Rocker became editor of the socialist paper *Arbeter Fraind* and under his leadership the paper became a vehicle for renewed trade union activity against the sweated system. The paper also became an important vehicle for Rocker's anarcho-syndicalist views. Under his editorship the newspaper morphed into the Yiddish journal *Germinal*, which introduced its readership to the wider intellectual world of literature and philosophy.

Rocker was to develop into a successful trade union organiser for the East End of London and brought together Jewish and English trade unions which had been highly suspicious of each another. Under his leadership *Arbeter Fraind* organised important support for the striking London Dockers, and in act of solidarity Jewish families took in some of the Dockers children in their effort to assist the strike. As Rocker noted:

⁶³ For philosemitism and left support for a Jewish homeland, see Paul Keleman, *The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2012), pp. 11-43.

They were in a terribly undernourished state, barefoot, in rags. We placed over 300 Dockers' children in East End Jewish homes. Shopkeepers gave us shoes and clothes for them.⁶⁴

The success of Rocker and the anarchists was in large part due to a willingness to engage in direct grass-roots trade union activity, particularly amongst workers within the poor immigrant communities of London's East end. This was in contrast to the socialist groups who tended to ignore direct trade union activity in favour of the grand arena of parliamentary politics, and the stage of public debate. In some ways, the founding of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 was an attempt to bridge the gap between trade union activity and parliamentary campaigning. The SDF and the Socialist League remained movements that were largely composed of a middle-class intellectual elite, a group that had little physical contact with the immediate issues facing working people in the poor city slums.

Rocker, in contrast had embedded himself within the working-class community and had voiced that community's concerns. He was more than willing to get his hands dirty in the business of direct political action within the slums of London's East End. Rudolf Rocker's anarchist ideas had much in common with those of William Morris, seeking a socialism which eliminated the need for an overarching state, party or bureaucracy. This was in essence a libertarian vision of socialism. Rocker claimed this brand of socialism was the true inheritance of an English and French radical tradition, a tradition which was founded upon the radical ideas of William Godwin and Pierre Joseph

⁶⁴ Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years* (Five Leaves, Nottingham 2005) p. 131

Proudhon. It was a tradition also reaching back to the Levellers and Diggers of the English Civil War. This libertarian socialist tradition was a rejection of mainstream Marxism, which had sought to concentrate economic and political power in the hands of an all-powerful state, albeit in the name of the people. It was one that appealed to many Jewish and Continental refugees who saw in it a 'primitive communism' and utopian inheritance that incubated a culture of instinctive liberty, and informed the outlook of German-Jewish émigré Marxists like Max Beer.⁶⁵ Rocker believed William Morris had shared this essential libertarian view of socialism:

To him socialism was something much more than a scientific economic theory. He had no patience with Marxism. Economic justice and security was no ideal for him; it was only the necessary basis for a new community life, where people would be free and would be able to express themselves freely in life, in art, in culture and civilisation. Man's free spirit was what mattered to him most. He made that clear in his books, *News from Nowhere*, and *The Dream of John Ball*, and in his many other writings and poems.⁶⁶

Rocker's anarchist movement, based at the Berners Street Club, came under suspicion after the infamous Sidney Street siege of January 1911. Three Latvian anarchists were surrounded after the fatal shooting of three policemen in a failed robbery at a Houndsditch jewellers. Anarchist literature was found by the police which

⁶⁵ Max Beer, *Social Struggles and Socialist Forerunners* (Leonard Parsons, London, 1924, 2 vols) II, pp. 147-170.

⁶⁶ Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years*, p. 103

associated one member of the gang with the Berners Street Club, though Rocker had no association with the gang or even knew them individually. The British press were quick to use the event to whip up a public frenzy against anarchists, immigrants or any perceived foreign malefactors. The leading newspaper purveying this view was the infamous *Daily Mail*. Many anarchists found themselves arrested and questioned by the police in wider inquiries into the Sidney Street incident.⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that when recalling these turbulent events Rocker was not unduly harsh in his criticism of the press, as a radical journalist himself. Indeed, he was even granted an interview with the *Morning Post* to give his side of the story:

The next day the Morning Post carried nearly three columns of my interview, giving almost everything I had said, and in the way I had said it, including even my remark about the British and French financiers. Several other papers were as decent as the Morning Post, notably the Manchester Guardian, the Morning Leader, and the Weekly Times and Echo. The Manchester Guardian fought courageously against the attempt to make a political issue of the criminal murders in Houndsditch.⁶⁸

The point was not lost of Rocker, a syndicalist and revolutionary incendiary, defending the journalistic integrity of an English liberal press: something no Marxist would have done in similar circumstances. The Sidney Street siege was also ruthlessly exploited by the SDF to discredit the rival anarchist faction within the socialist

⁶⁷ Colin Rogers, *The Battle of Stepney, The Sidney Street Siege: Its Causes and Consequences* (Robert Hale, London, 1981), chs, 24-5.

⁶⁸ Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years*, p. 121

movement. Harry Quelch, the editor of *Justice*, who was forced to answer a charge of antisemitism at the SDF Conference in 1900, published an article which implicated the Jewish American anarchist Emma Goldman as a Russian spy and agent provocateur. Quelch also claimed most of the Berners Street anarchists were Russian double agents, sent to foment trouble amongst the immigrant community to revoke their political asylum in England. As Rocker noted in his autobiography, recalling the event:

There was a very unpleasant sequel. And neither the police nor the sensational press were at fault; the organ of the Social Democratic Party, published a note in its issue of 13th May about the Houndsditch and Sidney Street affairs, which went on to suggest that anarchists incited people to such crimes, and that one explanation was that there were agents provocateurs amongst the anarchists, who tried in this way to discredit the socialist movement, and to get the right of asylum withdrawn in England!⁶⁹

The incident powerfully illustrated the intense animosity between the socialist and anarchist camps in the early British left. This had now developed into irreconcilable political differences between the two radical factions. As a response to growing disunity and a culture of anti-Semitism the editor of *Arbeter Frait*, K Gallop, was to write:

⁶⁹ *ibid* p. 123

We do not sit on both stools, but perhaps on a shaky stool. We can do with the help of both social-democrats and anarchists. We tell ourselves not to go hand in hand with either one or the other. As long as it is unnecessary to quarrel about the fall of the still living bear, we say Fools! First shoot the bear!⁷⁰

The obvious enemy in front of everyone was the bear of capitalism, lost in the feud between the SDF and the anarchists. As with many in the Jewish left, Gallop found himself in a precarious position between anti-Semitism and the growing response of a nascent Zionism which was drawing many away from the socialist cause. At the beginning of World War 1 Rocker was arrested and interned as an alien German immigrant, a result of the growing anti-German sentiment in the country. A Rocker Release Committee was organised with many prominent figures from the trade union movement and the left giving their support. The notable exception was H. M. Hyndman, who failed to give his support to the petition. Alexander Shapiro, the secretary of the Rocker Release Committee, wrote to Hyndman, but as Rocker later noted:

Hyndman never answered this letter. He was not a small man and he rendered much service to the socialist movement in many ways. But he was so carried away, as many others were at that time by the war emotion that he could not judge fairly.⁷¹

⁷⁰ William J Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals* p. 196

⁷¹ Rocker, *The London Years*, p. 172

Rocker did make a prophetic comment on the oncoming war, which was published in the editorial of the *Arbeter Fraind* on August 7th 1914:

We have entered a period of mass-murder such as the world has never known before. All the wars of the past will pale before this, will look like child's play against it. No one knows what awaits us. Those of us who will live to see the end of it will tell of experiences such as no human tongue has told of before.⁷²

There was a strong influence of English radicalism on the anarchist ideas of Rudolf Rocker. This came mainly through the libertarian beliefs of earlier radical figures such as William Godwin and Thomas Paine, and through the tradition of direct action which had inspired radical groups such as the Luddites and Chartists. Rocker had a radical's instinct for the power of the written word, and a radical's respect for a free liberal press. His ideas are important for their attempt to re-connect to a pre-Marxist socialist past. The anarchist movement had made a clean break with Marxism, and with the social democratic parties which had sprung up under its influence. The inspiration was a tradition of direct action, which had been championed by the Chartists and the radical groups of the past:

⁷² *ibid* p. 143

Chartism had a large number of intelligent and self-sacrificing spokesmen (such as William Lovell, Feargus O'Connor, Branterre O'Brien, Henry Hetherington, James Watson, Henry Vincent, John Taylor, A H Beaumont, Ernest Jones, to mention only a few of the best known.) It commanded, in addition, a fairly widespread press, of which papers like *The Poor Man's Guardian* and the *Northern Star* exerted the greatest influence. Chartism was, as a matter of fact, not a movement with definite aims, but rather a catchbasin for the social discontent of the time, but it did effect a shaking-up, especially of the working class, whom it made receptive to far-reaching social aims.⁷³

Rocker makes a conscious parallel between earlier Chartists and modern anarchists. In their use of a radical press to spread the word, and in their use of direct action as a political tool in the hands of the working class, he saw the anarchists as Chartism's heirs. Speaking of the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union of Great Britain and Ireland, also known as the GNC and founded in the era of Chartism, Rocker writes:

⁷³ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism* (The Anarchist Library, London, 1938) p. 25

The GNC was conceived as a fighting organisation to lend all possible aid to the needed betterment of their condition, but it had at the same time set itself the goal of overthrowing capitalist economy as a whole and replacing it with the co-operative labour of all producers, which should no longer have in view profits for all individuals, but the satisfaction of the needs of all.⁷⁴

Rocker viewed the Owenite trade unions and Chartist movement as earlier forerunners of the syndicalist trade unions and anarchist movement of his own day - consciously seeking to re-connect his own movement to this pre-Marxist tradition of radicalism and libertarian socialism. This was a tradition which had sought both individual rights and workers' control through a co-operative system of economy, a tradition which had rejected the need for control through the state, or the Marxist call for a proletarian dictatorship. For Rudolf Rocker, the older political tradition of Godwin, Owen and the Chartists was the true inspiration for his anarcho-syndicalist movement, a movement which had come to reject the statist ideas of Marx and mainstream social democracy. This syndicalism championed an international revolutionary trade union movement where the workers appropriated the means of production for themselves, taking over factories, businesses and financial enterprises to run them as individual co-operative enterprises in the interests of the workers. This was a process which involved no revolutionary political party, bureaucracy, or centralising state, as became the Bolshevik model after 1917 and located its roots deep in the British past in the decentralised Medieval trade guilds tradition 'overthrown and robbed by Henry VIII.'⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *ibid* p. 2

⁷⁵ Philip Snowden, *Socialism and Syndicalism* (Collins, London, 1915), p. 46.

For anarchists, such as Rocker, trade unionism became central to this socialist vision: a trade unionism which first emerged in the age of Chartism and the Owenite socialists.

However, as Peter Marshall notes in his history of the movement:

Anarchism made little inroads in the British Labour movement. Despite the anti-political example of Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, syndicalism developed late in Britain and failed to win over the reformist trade union movement.⁷⁶

The anarchists firmly believed the political route to power chosen by Marx and Engels was the wrong strategy for a true and empowering social revolution. As Rocker noted of an early Marxism, and the political parties which followed in its influence:

⁷⁶ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Harper Perennial, London, 2008) p. 491

It was precisely Marx and Engels who tried to force the organisations of the old International to go in for parliamentary activity, thereby making themselves directly responsible for the wholesale bogging down of the socialist labour movement in bourgeois parliamentarianism. The International was the first attempt to bring organised workers of every country together into one big union, the ultimate goal of which would be the economic liberation of the workers. With the various sections differing in their thinking and tactics, it was imperative to lay down the conditions for their working together and recognise the full autonomy and independent authority of each of the various sections. Whilst this was done the International grew powerfully and flourished in every country. But all changed completely the moment Marx and Engels began to push the different national federations towards parliamentary activity.⁷⁷

These national labour federations ultimately chose the path of nationalism, above and beyond international socialism, at the outbreak of conflict in 1914. The Great War also dealt a severe blow to the anarchist movement, with its leaders arrested and interned and its radical newspapers closed down by the authorities in both Britain and America. As the main Marxist party in Britain, the SDF continued its arms-length approach towards trade unionism, as the Annual Conference of the SDF in 1904 strongly illustrates:

⁷⁷ Rudolf Rocker, *Marx and Anarchism* (The Anarchist Library, London, 1925) p. 11

This Conference, further, while declining all alliances with trade unions or other bodies which might commit the SDF to the support of men and measures with which it is not in agreement, counsels the cultivation of good feeling between the Socialist Party and the trade unions, and assures the unions of its sympathy with their struggles for better conditions for the workers.⁷⁸

The newly formed Independent Labour Party offered the trade union movement much more than the 'cultivation of good feeling', and gave British labour a direct voice within parliament for the first time in its history. The direct-action approach of syndicalism was largely rejected, though not completely abandoned, by labour activists as the strategy of the ILP became the main route of travel for both socialists and radicals. Perhaps we should leave it to William Morris, restating the words of the radical preacher John Ball, to outline the vision of a socialist future which many in the labour movement believed was in their grasp:

Therefore, though the eyes of my mind see a few lords and many slaves, yet can they not see many lords as well as many slaves; and if the slaves be many and the lords few, then some day shall the slaves make an end of that mastery by the force of their bodies. How then shall thy mastership of the latter days endure?⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *Report of the Twenty Fourth Annual Conference of the SDF, St James Hall, Burnley* (Twentieth Century Press, London, 1904) p. 32

⁷⁹ William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball and a King's Lesson* (Kessinger Publishing, London, 2010) pp. 113-114

Conclusions

The tradition outlined here was the stirring radical tradition appropriated by liberals, socialists and anarchists, as each sought to place themselves as inheritors of this rich democratic history. Everyone looked back to a radical democratic past as the inspiration for their own ideological position. In this introductory chapter I have attempted to show the ways in which the SDF and the Socialist League prepared the path for later movements of the left in their appropriation of an English radical past. This path was followed by the Communist Party in the period of the Popular Front, and by the WEA and the labour movement in response to Communist incursions. This is an intellectual history, but one which is intimately intertwined with the development of the British labour movement as it rose from factional obscurity to become a key force in British politics. For figures, such as William Morris, this venture embraced a wider intellectual and artistic vision and a return to the lost utopia of a distant pre-industrial past. This was a radical tradition which held a wide appeal, as illustrated in its appropriation by Rudolf Rocker and the anarchist movement, as they also sought to jostle for position as a political force amongst the working class.

Chapter 2

The Inheritors of a Radical Past:

The ILP and the labour movement

The ILP and the labour movement successfully inherited the mantle of radical-liberalism, transferring this radical democratic tradition to the new movement of social democracy. Indeed, the ILP was shaped and formed from this older political tradition and was deeply indebted to its history, figures and ideological outlook. This chapter analyses the impact of this older history on the evolution, form and direction taken by the ILP. It assesses the organisation's relationship to liberalism, considers those aspects of liberalism that it sought to preserve, addresses the issue of continuity in the British radical tradition, and charts the debates around policy priorities that emerged from the interlinked liberal and labour platform of the 1890s onwards. In addition, it addresses the complexities injected into the radical tradition by engagement with foreign affairs and analyses the competing interpretations that moulded the outlook of proponents of the ILP platform. Discussing the centrality of the radical past to the appeal of its political platform, this chapter also assesses the ways in which appropriation of past radical struggles became the subject of 'history wars' that led the ILP to oppose and contest attempts by the Communist Party of Great Britain to harness the radical past to the purposes of Bolshevism and for support of the early Soviet state.

Radical Origins of the ILP

The Independent Labour Party was founded in 1893 to become a 'big tent' for the labour movement and the British left at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was

particularly so after the failure of the SDF, and the demise of the Socialist League in the concluding years of the nineteenth century. The ILP was to be a central focus of socialist activity in the early years of the new century until the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in August 1920. The new movement was a broad church of the left and brought together eclectic groups and figures within a broad coalition of democratic socialism. This new eclectic movement proved to be successful where the old Marxist parties had failed, by gaining large numbers of converts from the radical wing of the Liberal Party. This was achieved in large part by the appeal to a broader democratic tradition which both socialists and radicals could inhabit. This was a new movement which comprised many political hues and colours, from Marxists and Christian socialists, temperance advocates and land reformers, to trade unions and older radicals once happily at home in the ranks of traditional liberalism.

The ILP was first established in Bradford in 1893 by Keir Hardie, a pro-labour Liberal Party activist who saw the growing need for direct working-class representation in Parliament. Hardie came out of a long tradition of liberal-labourism, where working-class candidates from a trade union background would stand on the Liberal ticket. Indeed, many within British trade unionism remained faithful to the liberal cause, until the decisive break occurred with the founding of the official Labour Party in 1906, with which the ILP affiliated. In many ways, events forced the hand of the trade union movement with the growing threat of anti-union legislation as exemplified in the Taff Vale case. From now on the old *laissez faire* attitude of liberalism seemed out of step with the new mood of the times, and as the new trade unionism fought for its very survival, it could no longer rely on the liberals to deliver benefits for labour. Keir Hardie, though, always argued that the resistance of the local Liberal parties to the fielding of

Lib-Lab candidates had left the Labour interest no option but to leave the Liberal party. Thus they were expelled, rather than choosing to leave of their own volition.¹ The ILP brought into its ranks many socialists from the SDF, Socialist League and the Fabian Society, as well as many members who had once considered themselves traditional liberals. The ILP appealed to this latter group and represented a legitimate and acceptable vehicle for disillusioned radicals within the ranks of the Liberal Party. Some of the folklore, traditions, political ideas and notions of classical liberalism that characterised the Whigs, migrated from liberalism into the platform and historical perspectives of the ILP. This had implications for a radical tradition which found its fullest expression in labourism, and the post-labourism of the Popular Front.

The new party could call itself 'socialist' but was mainly a party of political reform in the mould of Gladstone's old Liberal Party, with its inclusive broad-church approach to various radical groups. The ILP appealed to radical liberals and to areas in the north with a strong tradition of radical Nonconformity and Chartism. The ILP soon became the main opposition to Toryism in the West Riding, and within parts of Manchester and the North-West. As has been noted by the historian David Howell,² this was a socialism which advocated legislation, rather than revolution, steering the future course for the British labour movement in the twentieth century:

¹ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist* (Paladin, London, 1975), chs. 1-2 and Fred Reid, *Keir Hardie: The Making of a Socialist* (Croom Helm: London, 1968), ch. 4 and "The Mid- Lanark Election: the Claims of the Poor - 'The Gallant Six Hundred', in Emrys Hughes (ed.) *Keir Hardie: His Writings and Speeches 1888-1915* (Forward, London, 1924), pp. 7-10.

² David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983), chs, 8 and 9

As Ramsay MacDonald's address to the 1907 Annual Conference of the ILP illustrates: To us Socialism is a guiding idea for legislation, for administration, for all constructive work of a social character.³

The political ethos of the ILP reflected a Fabian evolutionary socialism grafted onto an all-important collaboration with a growing trade union movement. As MacDonald clarified in his address:

The ILP method has been essentially independence in politics as against the existing political parties and a co-operation with the Trade Union movement – There is perhaps another characteristic of the ILP which may very properly be considered to be essential. We believe in evolution.⁴

The labour historian G. D. H. Cole, viewed the ILP as a broad egalitarian socialist movement, but with its political roots firmly embedded within traditional radicalism:

The Independent Labour Party, led and personified from the first by Keir Hardie, sought above all to make Socialism a broad, human movement on behalf of the bottom dog. It was not Social Democracy in the Marxian sense; it was rather Radicalism adopting a Socialist policy as the means to a more equal distribution of wealth and happiness.⁵

³ Independent Labour Party, *Report of the Fifteenth Annual Conference, Derby 1907* (ILP, 23 Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London 1907) p. 33

⁴ Ibid, p. 33

⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement 1789-1927* (George Allen & Unwin, London 1932, 2 vols) vol., 2, p. 22

If the ILP was the soul of the new labour movement, the Fabians were its controlling brain. This new movement was very different from the earlier and ideologically driven SDF and Socialist League, indeed the Fabians intellectuals at the centre of this new movement were: 'Aggressively non-Marxist in habit of thought.'⁶ The Fabians were firmly wedded to an older Whig concept of steady progress and social evolution in which history slowly climbed the ladder of democracy, founded upon the holy writ of Magna Carta and a constitutional arc of liberty in the British past. Cole notes a symbiotic relationship between Fabian intellectuals and the ILP, a relationship which benefited the Fabians by giving them a practical route to their often-esoteric ideas:

If there had been no ILP, the Fabians might easily have become a group of influential theorists wholly unconnected with the working-class movement or at least no more connected with it than Jeremy Bentham was with the followers of Cobbett and 'Orator' Hunt. The existence of the ILP, led them away from theorising to the formulation of a practical and constructive programme which they could persuade the ILP to accept.⁷

Cole believed the new trade unionism was also a product of this older radical liberalism and was largely unconcerned with the socialist ideas of Marx, a radical liberalism which was equally reflected in the ethical ideals and political values of its intellectual leaders:

⁶ *ibid* p. 24

⁷ *ibid* p. 24

The movement among the masses, in so far as it was Socialist at all, created a Socialism almost without doctrines; and the new Socialism of the intellectuals began far more as an ethical than an economic movement. It owed more to Mill than to Marx, and, if it sought a radical reconstruction of the social system, was strongly disinclined to accept the class-struggle as the instrument of change.⁸

The historian Martin Pugh also notes the deliberate exclusion of the word 'Socialist' from this new political party of the working class. He sees this as a calculated attempt to entice new members from the ranks of the Liberal Party, by refraining from the use of any overt socialist language, or Marxist ideology:

The deliberate inclusion of the word 'Independent' indicated the new party's intention to outflank the Lib-Lab members who took the Liberal whip. On the other hand, by excluding the word 'Socialist' from its title the ILP served notice of its flexible, all-embracing attitude; as it aspired to harness the resources of the unions there was no sense in frightening them away at the start.⁹

The ILP was a practical political movement which sought to capture both working-class Conservatives and political activists who declared themselves socialists. The crucial ingredient to this strategy was the key support of a trade union movement that was still largely wedded to its radical-liberal roots. Martin Pugh's analysis considerably

⁸ *ibid* p. 22

⁹ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party* (Vintage Books, London, 2011) p. 38

downplays the influence of socialist ideas within the trade union movement of the period. As he tellingly notes:

The ILP put together a programme comprising a vague commitment to nationalisation, interventionist social reforms such as pensions, free education, land reform and the eight-hour day, plus the standard Radical political causes. This was calculated to be sufficiently socialist to appeal to the activists but not too extreme to offend the unions.¹⁰

The Liberal Legacy and the ILP

The historian Paul Salveson takes a very different approach to G. D. H. Cole and Martin Pugh and places his emphasis on the strong regional influences within the ILP. The SDF and the Socialist League had been political movements which were largely centred around the urban metropolis of London. In contrast to these earlier movements, the ILP was far more centred around the provinces having been founded in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and with equal appeal across the Pennine hills in the cotton towns of Lancashire. Salveson believes this regional strength came from the ILP's ability to build on to an indigenous radical tradition which incorporated another important northern invention, the co-operative movement:

¹⁰ *ibid* p. 38

The North was the birthplace of a specifically 'British' socialism as well as Co-operation. The Independent Labour Party was founded in Bradford in January 1893 and was preceded by the emergence of many grass-roots socialist groups in the industrial areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire during the 1880s and 1890s. It was predated by the Social Democratic Federation, but the SDF was more patchy in its coverage of the North. As with Co-operation, the growth of socialism was a bottom-up thing –locally rooted and finding inspiration from thinkers such as Ruskin, Carlyle, Morris and Whitman, but little influenced by the metropolitan socialists such as the Webbs.¹¹

Salveson believes the ILP had built upon an indigenous Nonconformist tradition in the North of England, a religious tradition which had been strongly allied to a grass roots radical liberalism. The ILP was far more the party of 'Methodism than of Marx', placing a strong emphasis on an ethical and moral socialism as befitted its Victorian radical roots:

¹¹ Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent: Radical Traditions for Modern Times* (Lawrence& Wishart, London 2012), p. 63

The politics of the ILP have been described as 'ethical socialism' with a much greater emphasis on socialist morality than the austere Marxism of the SDF. Many of its leaders, particularly Philip Snowden, who was brought up in the Yorkshire village of Cowling, and Scotsman John Bruce Glasier, adopted a quasi-religious style that was popular with working-class audiences used to the trappings of nonconformist religion. The socialist movement of the 1880s and 1890s is often described as a quasi-religious movement, with mass meetings at which people suddenly converted to the cause.¹²

Crucial to the early success of the ILP was its incorporation of a regional democratic history which had strong links to the liberal tradition within English radicalism. This was strongly reflected in the political background of many of its new members, not least its founder, Keir Hardie. Many of the pamphlets and books that were produced by the ILP in its early years reflect this ideological link to an earlier liberal tradition within English radicalism. This was a radicalism which had once been a crucial component within the broad church of Gladstone's grand old Liberal Party. A striking early example of this is a two-volume biography on the life of Robert Owen. This was produced by the Co-operative socialist and radical Malcolm Lloyd Jones in 1889, and became an important text for the early ILP. Jones sets himself the task of linking this new movement to an older tradition of radical liberalism, with its values of freedom and liberty gained through the process of progressive democratic reform. This is contrasted

¹² *ibid* p. 66

to a revolutionary politics of sudden, turbulent, and often violent struggle and change.

Of Robert Owen, he states:

He did not believe that the emancipation of the human race was not worth fighting for, but rather that there were other and far better ways of obtaining it, and that it was the people's duty to adopt these. Liberty of thought and speech was what he asked for, and this once granted, he never doubted that the accomplishment of desirable ends must follow.¹³

In his biography, Jones attempts to recast the new labour movement in the mould of the grand liberal project of the past. He seeks to reconnect with what he believed was the reformist tradition of Owen, and rejected the revolutionary tradition exemplified by the Chartists:

At a time of widespread popular discontent, and, it may be added, of real danger to the peace of the country, the Socialists of England considered it a duty to calm public excitement; to explain the mistakes by which misery and suffering were produced; to devise and recommend remedies involving no injury to no man or class of men, and free from conflict with any political party.¹⁴

This was a very different view of Owenism from the one given by the anarchist writer Rudolf Rocker, in which Robert Owen was the early champion of a new and

¹³ Lloyd Jones, Malcolm L., *The Life and Labours of Robert Owen: Volume 1* (The Labour Association, The Strand, London 1889, 2 vols), vol., 2, p. 210

¹⁴ *ibid* p. 210

revolutionary trade unionism. The new labour movement of Lloyd Jones decided instead to reconnect with an older liberalism, which is mediated through the ethical values of Christian socialism. This was a message and morality guaranteed to appeal to older radicals within the ranks of the Liberal Party:

The French Revolution of 1848, and the disturbances that followed on the continent led to much discussion as well as to some very important public action in England. Christian socialism, with the Rev. F D Maurice at its head, was a far more important movement than it at first appeared to be. The foremost actors, being for the most part men of exceptional ability, soon came to exercise a strong influence on public opinion, and though the old Socialists did not rally to them as a body, very large numbers individually sought to forward their objectives. What they had to say reached the ears of the most intelligent and thoughtful of the Old Socialists and Chartists, and their appeals were made on the ground of a lofty and liberal Christian unity, and in a profound conviction of the necessity of peaceful effort, there can be no question that their influence was not only well-timed, but most wholesome and valuable in its results.¹⁵

Most of the early publications of the ILP focus directly on this strong liberal inheritance. A striking example is a publication which celebrated the life of a key icon of 19th century liberalism, Richard Cobden. This recalls the life and politics of the famous

¹⁵ *ibid* Volume 2 p. 197

Anti-Corn Law League campaigner. Entitled, *Richard Cobden and the Land of the People*, it was published by the ILP in 1909 and authored by his daughter, Anne Cobden-Sanderson. Throughout a strong emphasis is placed on Cobden's anti-imperialism and his social campaign for 'land for all'. These were radical sentiments which found resonance within the ranks of the ILP.

The pamphlet has one implicit purpose, to directly connect the new labour movement to a radical tradition formerly at the heart of Victorian liberalism. This is a Cobden who campaigned against aristocratic power and privilege on behalf of the common man., and for non-intervention in international affairs, a wealthy Victorian mill owner now recruited to the cause of independent labour. In a forward to the pamphlet, Keir Hardie uses the old arguments of the Victorian radical to make an important point about a modern era that was dominated by an imperial arms race with the Kaiser's Germany:

"It is no use" wrote Richard Cobden, "telling me of your army and navy, your exports and your imports", what is the condition of the people? Are they better or worse off than the people of other lands? That, to Cobden, was the one test by which the greatness and progress of a nation could alone be tested. Cobden died in 1865, and now in the year of 1909 our talk is still of armies and navies, of territorials and Dreadnoughts, of exports and imports, but, what about the condition of the people?¹⁶

¹⁶ Anne Cobden-Sanderson, *Richard Cobden and the Land of the People* (ILP Publications, 23 Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London, 1909) p. 1

These are the liberal, anti-imperialist sentiments which are reflected in earlier liberal biographies of Richard Cobden, published up until the end of the Great War and beyond, in which foreign wars of empire emanate from the machinations of dark aristocratic forces and a residual feudalism at work within government and society.¹⁷ This pamphlet also champions a broad liberal argument against the more potent radicalism of the Chartists. When the country was alarmed by the Chartist uprisings of 1838-39, Cobden was the hero who rescued the cause of radicalism and democracy:

Reason, he believed, would in the future take the place of brute force, and freedom and example would replace repression and punishment. It was this desire for social and economic well-being which made Cobden able to see beyond mere political considerations and kept him aloof all his life from party politics.¹⁸

ILP Literature

These early publications of the ILP display a sharp contrast to the publications of the SDF and Socialist League. These earlier socialist parties stressed a direct link to a revolutionary radicalism of the past. Proudly invoking the Peasants' Revolt of the middle ages or the Chartist struggles of the 1830s-40s, they stood in contrast to the literature of the ILP which links itself to the figures of 19th century liberal reform and an additional cast of reformist and Whiggish barons, aristocrats and clergymen in the

¹⁷ J. A. Hobson, *Richard Cobden: The International Man* (T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1919), pp. 387-409.

¹⁸ Anne Cobden-Sanderson, *Richard Cobden and the Land of the People*, p. 8

mould of Archbishop Anselm and Simon de Montfort.¹⁹ The radical tradition of the past is still seen as important, but treated with a good deal more caution and less reverence than in the works of Hyndman, Morris or Rocker. The ILP displayed its intentions through the historical company it kept, though this was to change in later years, when the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party and moved further to the left of British politics and came to embrace a more revolutionary past.²⁰

The ILP also published a short biography of Keir Hardie in 1916, written by Frank Smith. This presents a more traditional pen-picture of the radical founder of the labour movement. *From Pit to Parliament*, portrays Hardie as a true folk hero, rising from his humble origins in poverty to become a leading champion of the working man. Smith places a strong emphasis on Hardie's impoverished rural Scottish background, rooted in the radical teachings of the Bible and ancient folk-tales imparted by the flickering fireside flames. This was a radicalism which was rooted in both a Scottish and English working-class tradition. This was a lonely childhood, with his father often away at sea for long periods of time:

¹⁹ See the work by the ILP member, Joseph Clayton, *Leaders of the People: Studies in Democratic History* (Martin Secker, London, 1910), pp. 3-30 and 117-138.

²⁰ See K. Laybourn, 'The Independent Labour Party and the Second Labour Government c. 1929-31: The Move towards Revolutionary Change', in *Britain's Second Labour Government, 1929-31: A Reappraisal*. Eds J. Shepherd, J. Davis and C. Wrigley (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011), pp. 100-116

The loneliness of the day was, however, in those early years compensated for by the night gatherings. Then, stories full of folk-lore were told, varied on Sundays by chapters from the Bible. They were abiding memories, those gatherings round the fire, the fitful flame of which had to do duty for light when his uncle's miner's lamp, or old-time 'dip' candle was not available.²¹

Smith acknowledges other early influences on the young Hardie, particularly the influence of the two leading philosophers of Tory radicalism and nineteenth century liberalism:

His first saved pence had been invested in some second-hand works by Carlyle and Stuart Mill. From the former he learned to hate shams; from the latter to love liberty.²²

As with his forerunners Hyndman and Morris, Hardie chooses socialism as the new direction for his older radical beliefs:

Toryism, on the one hand, represented the tyranny of landlordism, while on the other hand, Liberalism and Commercialism were but interchangeable terms, emphasising the tyranny of wage slavery.²³

²¹ Frank Smith, *From Pit to Parliament: Keir Hardie's Life Story* (National Labour Press, St Brides House, London, 1916) p. 2

²² *ibid* p. 4

²³ *ibid* p. 5

Hardie was now a committed socialist; though a socialist firmly rooted in a strong Christian and radical upbringing in semi-rural Scotland. This is expressed very strongly in his pamphlet that constitutes the only real attempt to bring together all his thinking and ideas about socialism entitled *From Serfdom to Socialism* where he describes socialism as 'if not a religion in itself, at least a handmaiden to religion'.²⁴ This Christian socialist tone is powerfully echoed in another ILP publication from 1908 entitled *The Labour Pilgrim's Progress* by H. T. Muggeridge, the father of the broadcaster and writer, Malcolm Muggeridge. The booklet is partly a parody, imitating the language of John Bunyan for the socialist cause of the modern age. In language reflecting the 17th century Puritan radical, throughout London is the City of Destruction with its grinding urban poverty and greedy capitalism. Contrasting sharply with the socialist Commonwealth of Heaven, the Porter has instructions to exclude: only those who seek to live idly upon the labour of others.²⁵ Though the booklet was partly written as an ironic parody of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the 17th century language also conveys the serious message of the new movement:

²⁴ J. Keir Hardie, *From Serfdom to Socialism* (George Allen, London, 1907), p. 44.

²⁵ H. T. Muggeridge, *The Labour Pilgrim's Progress* (Independent Labour Party, 23 Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London, 1908) p. 24

Some there be who have sought to force open this gate with a golden key, saying that they would buy their way into the promised land. But them I have refused admission for indeed they would not be happy in the land Commonwealth, where no man is allowed to own that which giveth him power over his neighbours: for the way of their kind is to strive only for the happiness which is gained at the cost of that of others.²⁶

The literary style of the pamphlet is not dissimilar to William Morris' *A Dream of John Ball*, or his equally popular, *News from Nowhere*. The message carries the same vision of a socialist commonwealth free from both class division and economic exploitation. Here the new socialist message is couched within the older language of English religious and dissenting radicalism. It reflects a successful ILP method of employing an older tradition to grab new membership from the radical wing of the Liberal Party. It draws on the more effective language of religious Nonconformity and Methodism in preference to the modern dialectic of Marx.

As the new century progressed the literature of the ILP moved further toward the left. An interesting example is W. Riddick's, *A Short Primer of Industrial History*, which was published in 1926. This was produced by the ILP during the era of the General Strike and draws heavily on the same radical revolutionary tradition exploited by Hyndman and Morris, when the British left was less cautious about its revolutionary tone. Riddick draws his inspiration from the Lollard radicals of the Peasants' revolt era

²⁶ *ibid* p. 24

during a period of intense industrial conflict, and echoes the earlier literature of the SDF and the Socialist League:

It was at this period that a body of social and religious teachers, known as the Wycliffe Friars, appeared on the scene. They were guilty of committing what almost amounts to sacrilege to the orthodox mind: that is, they brought politics into their religion. They denounced the system by which the Lords of the Manor held the people in serfdom. They denounced the Church for supporting the existing system of feudalism, and declared that the tenant would be justified in withholding tithes. They told the workers that it was out of the fruits of their labour that the leisured class enjoyed their ease and luxury. They urged the workers to combine and in their united strength to throw off their shackles.²⁷

Riddick also drew inspiration from the Chartists and believed their lasting influence lay in the emergence of a new and better organised trade union movement. He saw this as a trade unionism which was more able to achieve the failed objectives of the Chartist revolution:

²⁷ W. Riddick, *A Short Primer of Industrial History* (Independent Labour Party, Fleet Street, London, 1926) p. 14

The influence of the Chartists continued to percolate through the minds of the workers, and the effect of political defeat was not to lesson labour activity but to divert it towards industrial organisation. While political action had apparently failed, combination in industrial affairs had produced hopeful results. The miners, carpenters and masons, three well-organised bodies of workers, were enjoying, as a result of organised effort, better conditions than obtained among unorganised workers. The working class began to see that real power must be built upon the foundation of organised co-operation.²⁸

Riddick had moved away from the earlier liberalism of the ILP, and echoed Rocker and the anarchists in drawing a strong parallel between the growing success of the trade union movement and its militant roots within the radicalism of Robert Owen and the early Chartists, a theme outlined earlier. The early ILP had been built upon a strong liberal and Christian socialist tradition, which it could never fully jettison.²⁹ It also drew on an important tradition of libertarian socialism that found inspiration within the same radical sources as Rudolf Rocker and the earlier Socialist League. This libertarian tradition was to become increasingly important to the ILP with the emergence of a British Communist party that was ideologically bound to the authoritarianism of Soviet Russia. It explains much of the ILPs early antipathy towards the regimes of both Lenin and Stalin, an antipathy also in tune with its independent liberal inheritance. This was an important stream of libertarian socialist thought and history which drew heavily on an English radical democratic past. This was a tradition that was picked up again by the

²⁸ *ibid* p. 35

²⁹ Stephen Major, *The Churches and the Labour Movement* (Independent Press, London, 1967), ch. 5.

New Left in the second half of the twentieth century - after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 - and highlighted in E. P. Thompson's contributions to the *Mayday Manifesto* of 1968 condemning the over-bureaucratisation of mainstream social democratic parties.³⁰ The ILP had inherited much of this libertarian tradition from the Socialist League of William Morris and had much in common with this earlier and eclectic radical movement. Indeed, the ILP shared the same intellectual sensibilities, which saw art, poetry and romantic radical history as having an equal role in promoting 'the cause'.

This was clearly more than a narrow labour movement promoting a narrow political agenda, even if it possessed a clearer political objective than the Socialist League of William Morris. An example of this eclecticism is *The New Crusade*, produced by A. G. Sparrow and published by the ILP in 1908. Keir Hardie wrote a telling introduction to the work which sets out the role of poetry and art for the new movement and pays particular tribute to the radical poets of England, and his native Scotland:

³⁰ Stuart Hall, Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams (eds), *The Mayday Manifesto 1968* (Penguin Special, London, 1968), chs, 42, 44 and 45.

The poet is essentially a Rebel. In that dim borderland twixt the seen and the hidden in which his soul wanders when gathering its choicest morsels. He gets away from the sordid and material side of life and comes into contact with its actualities. He feels more acutely than less gifted mortals the shams and conventionalities in which all society is more or less thrall'd, and against which he finds himself in perpetual revolt.³¹

This is pure Victorian romantic idealism and contrasts with the rigid socialist materialism often attributed to Marx and his followers. It also recurs in the sentimental life story of Robert Burns by Hardie's biographer, William Stewart, that focusses on 'Burns the Rebel'.³² It was an intellectual and philosophical divide that placed liberals, anarchists and libertarian socialists in sharp opposition to a narrower view of Marxism. They became fellow travellers in the socialist journey, but could never fully bring themselves to join the party. Hardie's introduction connects the ILP to this older radical romantic tradition, and equally to an ethical Christian socialism that was above and beyond the constraints of a narrow political movement:

³¹ A G Sparrow, *The New Crusade* (Independent Labour Party, 23 Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London 1908) p. 7

³² William Stewart, *Robert Burns and the Common People* (ILP, George Street, London, 1910), pp. 57-66.

The poem which follows is in the direct line of succession from Piers Ploughman, down to Southey's Wat Tyler and Robert Burns' 'Twa Dougs.' It not only depicts graphically the sorrows and sufferings of the people, but seeks to awaken the reader to a sense of his responsibility in the matter- The New Crusade lifts the conception of the Socialist movement out of the narrowing groove of politics and raises it to the plane of a religion.³³

The Christian socialist tradition embedded within the ILP is strongly illustrated in the publications of the affiliated Labour Church Movement that expanded across the industrial north. An example is John Trevor's, *Labour Church Tracts*, which were published by a fledgling ILP in 1892. The Labour Church was based upon five founding Christian socialist principles:

That the Labour Movement is a Religious Movement

That the Religion of the Labour Movement is not a Class Religion, but unites members of all classes in working for the Abolition of Commercial Slavery

That the Religion of the Labour Movement is not Sectarian or Dogmatic, but Free Religion, leaving each man free to develop his own relations with the Power that brought him into being

³³ *ibid* p. 7

That the Emancipation of Labour can only be realised so far as men learn both the Economic and Moral laws of God, and heartily endeavour to obey them.

That the development of Personal Character and the improvement of Social Conditions are both essential to man's emancipation from moral and social bondage.³⁴

³⁴ John Trevor, *Labour Church Tracts* (Independent Labour Party, John Heywood, London 1892) p. 1

There is a strong sense of the Nonconformist-driven liberal temperance movement about these tracts, which still had a powerful influence on working class politics at the time.³⁵ They also illustrate the eclectic inheritance of the early ILP, with its strong tradition of Christian socialism which was rooted in an older tradition of religious Nonconformity and dissent. The historian Paul Salveson has pointed to this eclectic mix of radicalism and religion, emphasising the regional aspects of these traditions. Salveson also points to the strong links between socialism and the Nonconformist tradition within the North of England: a tradition which was integral to the moral ethos of the ILP from its very beginnings as a provincial socialist movement. This was a tradition which incorporated Socialist Sunday Schools, Miners' Galas, local radical newspapers, co-operation and socialist cycling clubs. As Paul Salveson notes, the ILP did more than any previous movement to reach into local communities which already had a strong tradition of local radicalism: 'There was a close but highly complex relationship between religion and socialism, stretching back to Owenism. Many of the early radical handloom weavers were 'freethinkers'.³⁶ He also highlights the influence of the Quakers and Unitarians on radical politics in the North in the early nineteenth century.³⁷ As he points out:

³⁵ See on the background to the temperance crusade, Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (2nd edition, Keele University Press, Stafford, 1994), chs. 13-14.

³⁶ Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent*, p. 32.

³⁷ See for this tradition the novel by Marc Rutherford, *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (T. Fisher and Unwin, London, 1887) and captured in the figure of Zachariah Coleman in the novel as described in E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1959), p. 146.

The ILP, supported by *The Clarion* and local socialist newspapers encouraged a plethora of cultural groups to get established, and the socialist club movement resulted in local bases in every town and often reached down to local village communities.³⁸

Tory Radicalism and the ILP

The 'big tent' approach of the ILP brought within its ranks many new members who came from a background of Tory-radicalism. The historian Martin Pugh has placed an emphasis on this influence on the ILP and its ideas. He describes this as a form of 'tory-socialism', which he sees as having an important input on the new working-class movement:

In some respects, the movement grew closer to Tory-socialism during the Edwardian period, and at the grass roots the ILP itself turned out to be much less left wing than its national leaders.³⁹

The evidence for this view is somewhat contradictory, though many new members clearly brought these ideas into the movement, the ILP was never the party of King or Empire, though as the founding father of the movement, Keir Hardie represented many of these contradictions himself. However, in *My Confession of Faith*, which was published by the ILP in 1900, Hardie launches into a critical tirade against the SDF and its leading figures, H. M. Hyndman and Robert Blatchford, for their Tory-radical

³⁸ Salvesson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent*, p. 103

³⁹ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!* p. 59

imperialism and jingoistic support of Britain's involvement in the Boer War. These were Socialists who now supported an imperial arms race with the Kaiser's Germany:

Mr Blatchford and Mr Hyndman are lending the weight of their influence to swell the war whoops of the Jingos who want more Dreadnoughts and more soldiers as a defiance to Germany. On both these occasions, the Boer War and Naval Scare, the Labour party stood firm and solid as a piece of unyielding granite resisting the waves of popular passion which beat around it.⁴⁰

Though this was clearly a piece of self-propaganda on behalf of the ILP, the party remained consistently anti-war and anti-imperialist in its general policy. Sentiments which were radical, but hardly Tory-radical as Martin Pugh suggests. Indeed, for most of its early years the Labour Party itself shared these views. As the radical historian A. J. P. Taylor has noted:

The Labour party's manifesto for the general election of 1906 devoted one half-sentence to foreign affairs. It was this: 'Wars are fought to make the rich richer'. Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and other labour leaders attended meetings of the Socialist International where they heard Marxist speeches and even made them: Capitalism was the cause of war; the general strike was the only effective anti-war measure at the moment, International Socialism the only lasting solution.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Keir Hardie, *My Confession of Faith* (ILP Publications, 23 Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London 1900) pp. 6-7

⁴¹ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (Pimlico Edition, London, 1993) p. 104

The influence of Tory-radicalism was not immediately apparent when we examine the official literature of the ILP, though imperialist and racist attitudes were not far beneath its socialist veneer. In an ILP booklet which was edited by Ramsay MacDonald and authored by Sydney Olivier in 1906, and entitled *White Capital and Coloured Labour*, these ideas are quite evident. The booklet addressed the contentious issues of race and imperialism within the context of the European empires of Africa, and the continent of America. Olivier echoes an earlier Hyndman and much contemporary Edwardian sentiment, with his emphasis on socialism at home, together with the beneficial influence of British imperialism abroad. The British administration in Jamaica is taken as a favourable example to be emulated by other less enlightened European powers and even the United States of America, powers which failed to share an English aptitude for good government and the just rule of law:

The Englishman did in Jamaica what he has so often and so well done elsewhere. He organised his colony; he established good local courts, which gained by square treatment the confidence of the blacks. The judges of such courts were Englishmen. The English ruler also provided a good country constabulary, in which native blacks also found service, and in which they could exercise authority over other blacks. Black men in other words, were trained, under English management, of course, to police black men. A sound civil service was also organised; and in that educated negroes found in due time their place, while the chief of each branch of the service were, or are, in the main Englishmen.⁴²

Though such racism was hardly unusual for the time- the fact that it came from an avowedly socialist organisation is problematic for the modern reader. There was also a rise in anti-semitism which had emerged during the Boer War period. This is highlighted in Robert Fine and Philip Spencer's book, *Anti-Semitism on the Left*.⁴³ Hyndman had blamed the Boer War on Jewish banking interests and many socialists were caught up in a patriotic and nationalist frenzy, defending British White interests throughout the White settler colonies. Even Hardie was caught up in this, supporting a White Australia policy and campaigning to end the free movement of Chinese labour throughout the empire. Indeed, the historian Fred Reid believes Hardie had shared some of the attitudes of David Livingstone, a near neighbour in Blantyre, on the imperial mission: he comments that he 'also shared his fellow Congregationalist's confidence in

⁴² Sydney Olivier, *White Capital and Coloured Labour* (Independent Labour Party, 23 Bride Lane, London 1906) pp. 66-67

⁴³ Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, *Anti-Semitism and the Left: The Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007), ch. 3.

the civilising mission of the Anglo-Saxons'.⁴⁴ These were attitudes which were often expressed in an age of empire, though the official policy of the ILP firmly rejected overt notions of imperialism and racism, it still lived in an age where such notions persisted, even amongst its own socialist members.

The ILP and International Affairs

The year 1914 marked an important moment for the ILP as a movement of the British left. Ramsay MacDonald was to resign as parliamentary leader of the Labour Party in opposition to his party's support for the war, and along with Keir Hardie, Philip Snowden and W. C. Anderson, launched a campaign against the Labour Party's endorsement of the conflict from within the ranks of the ILP.

The ILP now became the main party of dissent against a large section of the labour movement which had backed the patriotic cause of the war. The ILP became a central focus for socialist opposition to the growing imperial conflict. This was an opposition which had its roots firmly embedded in an older tradition of English political dissent. It was an eclectic movement of protest that combined the elements of liberalism, radicalism and libertarian socialism; the three key strands of political thought which remained constant throughout the turbulent history of the ILP as a political movement. They re-aligned at a time when the Great War had broken with a long socialist tradition which had always rejected foreign wars in the name of empire. As the labour historian G. D. H. Cole noted, the early years of the socialist movement were marked by a strong

⁴⁴ Reid, Keir Hardie, p. 124.

anti-war and anti-imperialist stand. International socialist solidarity had overridden the pull of national rivalries for land and empire:

In 1907 the International Socialist Congress, to which the British Labour Party as well as the ILP, and other Socialist societies belonged, had laid this duty down in unanimous resolution. Before war broke out, every effort must be made to prevent it, and every Socialist or Labour Party must put out all its powers in order to dissuade its own country from taking part. If this failed, and war broke out, the Socialists were to do two things. They were to “intervene to bring it promptly to an end”, and they were to “use the political and economic crisis created by the war to rouse the populace from its slumbers, and to hasten the fall of capitalist society”.⁴⁵

Cole notes the greater pull of nationalism over the working class of Europe, once hostilities began in 1914. The war soon fractured the Socialist International, as each national working-class movement became sucked into the growing conflict. Any of the latent Tory-radicalism within the Labour Party and the trade union movement was ignited by the war, leaving the ILP in the unique position of being a last bastion of radical dissent as earlier socialist resolutions against the impending imperial conflict soon crumbled. In August 1914, the Socialist and Labour Parties did demonstrate everywhere against war, and against their own states becoming involved in war, up to

⁴⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement*, Volume 3, p. 117

the point at which they actually became involved. But at that point the Labour and Socialist opposition everywhere collapsed. As Cole observes:

In Germany, France and Great Britain alike, the majority of working-class leaders gave support to their own Governments. In Great Britain, the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress, after taking part in peace demonstrations up to August 4th 1914 speedily rallied to the national cause, leaving the ILP and a section of the British Socialist Party to form a small minority in opposition.⁴⁶

The historian Martin Pugh has noted that the anti-war position of the ILP revealed its important links to an earlier radical tradition of dissent over British foreign policy, a view echoed by the historian A. J. P. Taylor in his book, *The Trouble Makers*, which was published in 1957. In a recent work, *Speak for Britain: A New History of the Labour Party*, Martin Pugh observes that the ILP had united both radical-liberals and socialists within its ranks against the war:

Like the Boer War, the First World War united Radical liberals and socialists against the Establishment.⁴⁷

Mainstream organised labour was willingly co-opted to the patriotic cause, which Pugh sees as illustrating the underlying influence of Tory-radicalism on the wider

⁴⁶ *ibid* p. 118

⁴⁷ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!* p. 104

labour movement. This, together with mass-enlistment, broke the back of any potential working-class resistance to the imperial conflict:

Although the British Establishment feared the pressure exerted by organised labour, it was immensely relieved at the determination of patriotic union leaders to rally to the national cause. After reaching a peak around 1911-13 strikes suddenly dwindled, partly because of patriotism but also because thousands of manual workers had joined the armed forces.⁴⁸

Socialist internationalism had succumbed to the greater forces of nationalism, leaving an older tradition of radical dissent, represented by the ILP, to oppose the growing forces of war and the clamour to arm. The conflict had some notable supporters amongst the left. The two leading figures of the SDF, H. M. Hyndman and Robert Blatchford, were prominent Marxists who supported the war with Germany. These were the same two political figures who had been castigated by Keir Hardie for their unwavering support of the Boer War. One interesting, and surprising champion of the conflict was the exiled Russian anarchist, Peter Kropotkin. As the historian Peter Marshall notes:

⁴⁸ *ibid* p. 106

When the war broke out in 1914, he gave immediate support for the allies. He wrote to Jean Grave, editor of *Les Temps Nouveaux*: 'Arm yourself! Make a superhuman effort- this is the only way France will reconquer the right and strength to inspire the people of Europe with her civilization and her ideas of liberty, communism and fraternity.' As a result, he isolated himself from the mainstream of the anarchist movement which wanted nothing to do with this 'ruling class' conflict.⁴⁹

With many of the leading Marxists, and even the leading light of anarchism, giving support to the conflict, it was now the task of traditional liberals and radicals to head the main forces of political opposition to the war. Ramsay MacDonald and the ILP now became the leading lights in this campaign. As Martin Pugh notes:

MacDonald effectively articulated what Liberals regarded as the Liberal tradition in foreign affairs - MacDonald's personal stand gave him immense prestige as an idealist who had suffered for his principles. Hence the appreciation for him among liberal writers and intellectuals including Bertrand Russell, Arnold Rowntree, Leonard Courtney, G Lowes Dickinson, J. A. Hobson, Charles Buxton, C. P. Scott, Philip Morrell and Graham Wallas.⁵⁰

The ILP was now the effective party of liberal dissent against the war. This continued to be the case until the formation of the Union of Democratic Control, a political

⁴⁹ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Harper Perennial, London 2008) p. 332

⁵⁰ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, p. 104

organisation which was set up specifically to oppose the conflict. The radical journalist, H. N. Brailsford became a key leading figure within both these movements and became one of the leading intellectuals of the left to oppose the war.⁵¹ A socialist, strong Nonconformist and proponent of liberal non-interventionism who also reflected an earlier liberal tradition of political opposition to foreign imperial adventurism, Brailsford in an ILP pamphlet entitled, *Belgium and the Scrap of Paper*, which was published in 1915, argued that the country had been sucked into the conflagration through its abandonment of a liberal foreign policy, a policy which had successfully maintained the balance of power within Europe, but which had carefully avoided any foreign treaty that would draw Britain into a continental conflict. Brailsford saw this traditional policy recklessly abandoned in favour of a new imperialism which was based on secret treaty obligations. This new imperialist foreign policy had recklessly drawn the nation into war with Germany. These were treaty obligations, conducted through secret diplomacy, and had caused Britain to defend Belgium's neutrality at any cost. For the radical Brailsford, the chief villain of the piece was the Machiavellian aristocrat, Sir Edward Grey:

He said that public opinion in England would be with difficulty restrained if Belgium were violated. He never said, or came near saying, that we had a treaty obligation which would force us to go to war for Belgium.⁵²

⁵¹ F. M. Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter: H.N. Brailsford and his World* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985), ch. 1.

⁵² H. N. Brailsford, *Belgium and 'The Scrap of Paper'* (Independent Labour Party, St Brides House, London 1915) pp. 12-13

This ILP pamphlet is a Cobdenite attack on the tangled foreign policy of an unaccountable aristocratic elite. Though penned in 1915, Brailsford uses the powerful language and sentiments of an earlier radical era. This was the old radical-liberal crusade against an untrammelled aristocratic power, which continued to hold sway over the nations of Europe. Peace could only be achieved once these nations had freed themselves from their ancient imperial dynasties, and their secret diplomacy. Europe could then enter a new modern age of democratic decision making:

A world in which each nation strives only for national advantage, will always be a world in which treaties are disregarded, and the weakest is pushed to the wall. Treaties will be sacred and little peoples secure, when we have democratised diplomacy, when each people has crushed its own Militarism and its own Imperialism, when the nations, free themselves, can unite in a Federation of Europe.⁵³

These were themes to which Brailsford continued to return to in his journalistic writings. Brailsford had embarked on a socialist crusade but had sharpened his sword on the whetstone of Victorian liberal-radicalism. Though a Liberal foreign secretary, Grey had strayed from the traditional principles of his Liberal Party and had brought the country to the edge of an abyss. Brailsford's greatest polemic against the war was reserved for his book, *The War of Steel and Gold*, which was published in 1918 at the end of the conflict. In this work Brailsford carefully built upon the arguments of his earlier pamphlet. British foreign policy had changed dramatically in the years leading up to the

⁵³ Ibid, p. 16

conflict, moving from the 'Manchesterism' of the previous century to the 'Imperialism' of the present. This new foreign policy had protected the interests of bankers and financiers and had failed to serve the needs of 'honest trade'. Brailsford employs the ideology of classic Victorian radicalism to bolster a socialist polemic against the financiers and armament manufacturers of the modern age. This was a technique also employed to great effect by the economist J. A. Hobson, an anti-imperialist and fellow member of the ILP and the Union of Democratic Control:

In order to support and promote its safe and profitable investment abroad, the whole nation is taxed and its policy encumbered, to maintain the armaments which are increasingly an insurance for the foreign investments of the few. The direct profits of the trade in capital so vastly exceed the direct profits of the trade in goods dawn by the moneyed class, that our national policy has evolved from what the Germans call 'Manchesterism' to Imperialism.⁵⁴

Brailsford follows on from the earlier arguments put forward by the economist J. A. Hobson, a former Liberal who joined the Labour party, that capitalism's increasing need for new foreign investment was the driving force of imperialism and the ultimate cause of modern war. This was the radical-liberal explanation for the cause of modern imperialism, which profoundly influenced both Lenin and Trotsky during the Bolshevik revolution. This was an argument which had its roots, not within Marxism, but within

⁵⁴ H. N. Brailsford, *The War of Steel and Gold* (Bell & Sons Ltd, London, 1918) p. 233

19th century English radicalism.⁵⁵ He believed that the international financial system had shifted from its original Cobdenite principles of honest free trade, to one of global financial markets where armament manufacturers and bankers now ruled supreme, distorting foreign policy to serve their own greedy interests. These were the modern-day 'robber barons' who had forged an unholy alliance with the aristocratic elites that ran the country, controlling its foreign policy with little regard for democracy or the interests of ordinary working people. Brailsford launches his polemic against a foreign policy controlled and manipulated by this self-serving elite:

The anti-democratic attitude in foreign affairs involves a naked claim that certain interests shall rule- At their head are the great bankers and contractors. Their rank and file is composed of the comfortable class which invests abroad, and of those families which see in the services of Empire a career for their sons.⁵⁶

For Brailsford, parliament had been usurped by a professional aristocratic elite which controlled foreign policy and the mechanisms of power, stifling any opportunity for scrutiny and debate:

⁵⁵ P.J. Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism: Radicalism, New Liberalism and Finance, 1887-1938* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), chs, 1 and 5 and Jules Townshend, *J. A. Hobson* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990), chs, 4 and 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 199-200

One sometimes suspects that the House and the governing class generally regard it as an impertinence in any one outside the inner circle to meddle with foreign affairs at all.⁵⁷

In his book, *Debts of Honour*, which sought to capture the outlines of an English radical tradition, Michael Foot pays a glowing tribute to H. N. Brailsford, along with his other radical heroes of the past. Foot saw Brailsford as the 'Knight errant of socialism', a crucial campaigner in the English radical tradition. Foot believed Brailsford had played a central role in resurrecting England's neglected radical democratic history, bringing to light the previously ignored Leveller and Digger movements of the English Civil War. Brailsford's own politics were also alive to this living democratic tradition, as Foot noted of his hero:

He could write about Shelley or Thomas Paine or the Levellers as if they were his own living comrades. He could turn the pages of history into modern battlecries. Within him the past and the present were fused into a single revolutionary force.⁵⁸

Foot pays tribute to his early championing of women's suffrage, which first brought Brailsford into the socialist movement at the beginning of the century. Informed as he was by a socialist conviction and a radical romantic faith: 'He had a Nonconformist conscience and a Marxist imagination and a romantic Shelleyan faith in the perfectibility of man and, more especially, woman.'⁵⁹ Foot defends Brailsford's libertarian socialism, a

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 140

⁵⁸ Michael Foot, *Debts of Honour* (Faber & Faber, London, 2010) pp. 137-138.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 138

belief ingrained within the philosophy and culture of the ILP. Brailsford was one of the first leading figures of the left to attack the creeping totalitarianism of Soviet communism, which began under Lenin and culminated under the leadership and dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. Brailsford did so at a time when it was still unfashionable to criticise the Bolshevik experiment within the ranks of the left:

Week by week in his articles in *Reynolds's News*, he struggled against the flood, and the Socialist defence of freedom which he asserted more bravely than anyone else had a significance for the whole future of Socialism. A Socialism which did not embrace freedom as its most precious strand was for him no Socialism at all.⁶⁰

Brailsford claimed to be the first writer to resurrect the Levellers from the dust of English history, bringing their unique story and a proud democratic history into the modern world: What Clarendon did for the Cavaliers, and what Carlyle did for Cromwell, Brailsford did for the Levellers and their associates' wrote Michael Foot.⁶¹ Foot believed Brailsford had uncovered an important democratic tradition from the past, which had value and significance in a growing age of totalitarianism and intolerance. This was a democratic socialist history which the ILP and the broad British left could claim as their own. These were important libertarian values which Brailsford and his contemporaries viewed as their rightful inheritance and solemn duty to defend. Of Brailsford's Levellers, Foot notes:

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 139

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 148

If he exaggerated the all-embracing nature of their democratic faith, it is still true that they were the first organisers of a democratic party and a citizen army, the first advocates of a secular democratic Republic, the first consistent champions of a genuine tolerance for everyone.⁶²

In Brailsford's reading, the Levellers were the first to practice religious tolerance in an age of intolerance and the first to raise the banner against imperialism, refusing to join Cromwell in his raid on Ireland: 'In the end they were crushed. But their sea green ribbons were never trailed through the mud. When Cromwell set out on his terrible mission to Ireland, they would have no part of it.'⁶³ Brailsford had restored these brave democrats to their rightful place in English history. He had brought these radical men and women of the English Civil War back to life within the pages of political discourse. As a concluding tribute to his hero, Foot notes: 'Henry Noel Brailsford was their truest descendant, a Knight errant fit to take his place in their company.'⁶⁴ Michael Foot's own family background was steeped in this very same radical tradition. His father was the Liberal MP for Bodwin in 1922 and had introduced his son to the radical figures of England's democratic past. A dissenting Liberal politician from the west country, his father's heroes included Cromwell, Milton, Wordsworth, Paine, Charles James Fox and William Hazlitt. These were radical figures whose legacy became impressed on his socialist son. This radical-liberal heritage was a common feature within the background of most leading figures in the ILP, and indeed the broad libertarian left. As Foot notes of his father's literary interests and political faith, both of which were inseparable: 'He

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 149

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 149

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 150

preached of Marston Moor, and retreated with Montaigne to his tower.’⁶⁵ Brailsford published his history of the Levellers, entitled *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, towards the end of his life. It was edited by the Marxist historian Christopher Hill who became a central figure in the Communist interest in 17th century radicalism, and ironically the ideological rival of Brailsford in the appropriation of this tradition.

Brailsford’s history is echoed in the work of a fellow ILPer, Fenner Brockway, who produced his own book on civil war radicalism, entitled *Britain’s first Socialists: The Levellers, Agitators and Diggers of the English Revolution*.⁶⁶ Both books look back to these radical groups as the founders of English popular democracy and an English democratic socialism. Brailsford viewed himself as the founding figure of a new generation of English socialists who had rediscovered this radical democratic past. Brailsford lamented the lack of interest in this radical tradition by a previous generation of liberal and progressive historians from the Victorian and Edwardian era. In so doing he had reclaimed this rich historical tradition in the cause of a modern democratic socialism:

⁶⁵ *ibid* p. 22

⁶⁶ Fenner Brockway, *Britain’s first Socialists: The Levellers, Agitators and Diggers of the English Revolution* (Quartet Books, London 1981), ch. 1.

To our generation fell the good fortune of re-discovering the Levellers. To the classical liberal historians they meant rather less than nothing. J. R. Green's *Short History* is still the most readable and sympathetic biography of the English people: it dismissed John Lilburne in half a line and assigned to the Levellers six lines in its crowded volume of 820 pages. In style and vitality few books of its kind equal G. M. Trevelyan's 'England under the Stuarts'; it dismisses the Levellers in a patronising footnote. This neglect is puzzling.⁶⁷

In reviving the revolutionary Levellers, Brailsford had broken with a powerful liberal tradition in the ILP and with much of the liberal history from which the ILP had drawn inspiration. As leading intellectual figures of the ILP and the broad left, Brailsford and Brockway sought to reclaim this revolutionary tradition as the rightful inheritance of democratic socialists. The Leveller movement was now reclaimed as the true political heritage of the ILP and the broad left. The essential source of its unique blend of radical-liberalism and libertarian-socialism in the ILP platform, Brailsford saw the Levellers as the first proponents of a true popular democracy, and the beginning of a movement which led to the Owenites and Chartists of the 19th century:

⁶⁷ H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Cresset Press, London, 1961) xi

The Levellers were the first democratic party which thought of calling an elected national conference to formulate its demands. In 1794, the London Corresponding Society alarmed William Pitt by calling just such a convention to claim manhood suffrage, and in the next century first the Owenites and then the Chartists followed where the Levellers had led the way.⁶⁸

The Levellers were now resurrected from the pages of English history as the first movement to truly challenge the source of power within society, planting the seeds of a libertarian tradition of individual freedom and of government by consent. This was a revolutionary tradition, but one in which individuals and their rights had central importance. It was a political legacy which retained its potency in both Britain and America:

In that century and the next, on both shores of the Atlantic, men were trying out all they could derive from the bold and simple viewpoint of individualism. It led them through the slogans of two English revolutions- the Levellers 'government by consent' and the Whigs' 'right to choose our governors'- to the ultimate question of the one and the many in its social aspect. Who consents to a given form of government?⁶⁹

The Levellers were viewed as more than mere libertarians from a distant past, but as icons that had inspired the radicals and socialists of later centuries. They were also the

⁶⁸ *ibid* p. 562

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 265

first proponents of a truly revolutionary tradition in English history, with all the consequences this implied for any society with an unequal division of wealth and power. The Putney Debates within Cromwell's Army were the central stage where these new ideas became articulated for the first time:

When Ireton argued that manhood suffrage would be the end of all things, Rainsborough allayed his terrors by reminding him that the law of God recognised property in the prohibition 'Thou shalt not steal'. This, however, was cold comfort; for some, at least, of the Levellers saw the revolutionary implications of that commandment, and were prepared to use it to defend the small man against the acquisitive rich. They had begun to suspect that 'property is theft'.⁷⁰

It is interesting to see in Brailsford's words a clear hint of the socialist anarchism of William Morris, another radical legacy preserved within the eclectic mix of the ILP. He also echoes William Morris when he writes of Leveller ideas that: 'The process of sapping the sanctity of property was well under way among the Levellers. They started with the Norman Conquest, and went on to the evictions involved in the enclosures of common land.⁷¹ It is to Winstanley's Diggers, and their radical struggle for land against the system of enclosure, that Brailsford now turns his attention. It is amongst the Diggers of St. George's Hill, he argued, that we witness the first true socialist ideas ever expressed in history. The Diggers are the culmination of a long history of struggle

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 282

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 282

against injustice and oppression, a struggle which began with the Peasants' Revolt in the middle-ages and which inspired similar uprisings throughout Europe:

Once more, this time in England, the broken bodies of peasants manured the fields that others owned. The Diggers, with a faith no disillusionment could quench, would attempt a new way to establish 'community'. They were the pioneers: presently, as they believed, five thousand of their proletarian comrades would join them in digging the waste lands. But their movement was also the culmination of the long guerrilla struggle against enclosure.⁷²

Brailsford portrays these hero revolutionaries in the tradition of William Morris and his *Dream of John Ball*, as a socialist revolution from below against an unjust order imposed from above. This was the radical overthrow of the ancient Norman Yoke of oppression. It expressed the dream of a simple agrarian communist community, founded upon the principles of equity, peace and justice. A seventeenth century *News from Nowhere.*, the Digger project had a simple plan and a clear tactic to achieve their utopian objective:

⁷² Ibid, p. 657

These rebels were inspired by a simple but clear-cut communist theory and had worked out a tactic by which they believed they could end the usurpations of property and establish a classless society. For the first time, they made articulate the instinctive belief of every peasantry that God gave the earth to his children as their 'common treasury'.⁷³

Brailsford never completely abandoned his liberal roots in this Marxist polemic for past revolutionaries. These radicals of the past had established the important principles of tolerance in an age of ruthless political oppression and brutal religious intolerance. In his view, they were the forefathers of an enlightened liberalism which came to prominence in a later age. He saw the Levellers and the Diggers as the first to establish the proposition of the sanctity of individual rights and ideas, as well as the socialist principle of collective common ownership:

Steadily, from their first emergence as a party in the Remonstrance of Many Thousands down to the September Petition, the Levellers went on claiming what their pioneers had preached. Outside the Netherlands, theirs was the first organised party in the civilised world which stood without qualifications for toleration.⁷⁴

The ILP and the Russian Revolution

The ILP had inherited a heterodox mix of political traditions, much of which came by way of the radical wing of the Liberal party. The movement nevertheless gave its full

⁷³ Ibid, p. 657

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 380

support to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The nascent government of Russia was under siege from its very inception, and socialist parties throughout Europe felt it their solemn duty to defend this fledgling Communist state. The western powers were less enthralled by the Russian experiment in socialism and sought to bring Bolshevism to an abrupt end before its poison spread to the disillusioned armies of the western front. Between 1918 and 1920 the allied powers sent a series of military expeditions into Russia to support the White army against the Bolsheviks. Initially the attempt was to bring Russia back into the war, reopening a second front against Germany, though with the end of the conflict the aim of intervention was to crush the Communist experiment of Lenin for good. In this, Winston Churchill wanted to 'throttle the Bolshevik baby in its cradle' as he was to quote throughout his political career. As a prominent socialist party in Britain the ILP gave full backing and support to the new Bolshevik government in Russia, furthermore condemning the government of Lloyd George for its unconstitutional interference in the affairs of a sovereign country. This was viewed with outrage as outright Liberal imperialism.

The ILP produced its own pamphlet in support of Bolshevik Russia and against the western intervention, entitled *Direct Action and the Constitution*. This was a radical-liberal defence of a Communist revolution against the interference of a Liberal government. The ILP saw itself as a staunch defender of British democracy and of the traditions of the English constitution. It attacked the reckless interventionism of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill and the Liberal coalition government. The 'Direct Action' which the ILP sought was the weapon of the general strike, not of armed revolution in support of the Bolsheviks. Indeed, the pamphlet invokes the ancient British traditions of liberty and democracy and contains a powerful polemic of traditional English

radicalism, rather than a call to arms in defence of socialist revolution. The British government had acted against the constitution in its imperial intervention in Russia:

The people of Britain never gave this Government or this Parliament a mandate to make war on Russia or on any country. On the contrary, the electors were persuaded to give a new lease of power to the Lloyd George party precisely because they were men to be relied upon to ensure the peace of the world. The action of the Government has been entirely unconstitutional and undemocratic- a gross betrayal of the electors.⁷⁵

Tellingly, the pamphlet invokes rights and liberties embodied in the English constitution. These were invoked together with a democratic history of past struggles to defend these same rights and freedoms:

Our constitution has developed in days gone by at the point of the sword. Liberty in increasing instalments has been wrested from the ruling powers of the time by men in arms. Farmers have left the fields and traders their commerce to buckle on the sword and mount the war horse expressly to defend the essential parts of the constitution which, in their minds, spelled the difference between freedom and slavery.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Clement J Bundock, *Direct Action and the Constitution* (Independent Labour Party, 8/9 Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, London 1920) pp. 4-5

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 5-6

The pamphlet compares the direct-action of England's radical past, that gave rise to Magna Carta, with the direct-action needed in the present to defend Russia from the unconstitutional war which was waged against it:

At Runnymede the barons, sick of the tyrannies and extortions of king John, cornered John at the point of the sword and drew from him a confirmation of the great Charter which laid the foundations of English Liberty.⁷⁷

Magna Carta had been defended and reinforced through a series of direct-actions against the unbridled authority of the crown. The pamphlet invokes the talisman of Magna Carta, and figures such as Simon de Montfort, who defended this sacred constitution of rights and liberties:

The Earl fought the battle of Liberty over again, with a strong army at his back, and made a great contribution to the growth of our constitution. It was his action in calling two citizens from every borough to sit beside the knights- that established the representation of the Commons in Parliament.⁷⁸

The pamphlet then moves its narrative on to the Peasants' Revolt, which is described as the Bolshevik revolution of the fourteenth century:

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 7-8

This was the period of the inspired John Ball - 'the mad Priest of Kent' as he was called then, the 'Bolshevik agent' as he would be called now.⁷⁹

The pamphlet takes the narrative on through the pages of English democratic history to the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The emphasis on the latter event reflected the powerful influence of 19th century Whig history, which placed its focus on 1688 as the date which set-in place the unwritten constitution of England:

The Declaration of Rights presented to William and Mary declared the 'resolve of the Lords and Commons to assert the ancient rights and liberties of English subjects'. That was direct action in 1688.⁸⁰

The pamphlet then moves on with its shortened history of English liberty to the Reform Bill of 1832 and the direct-action of 1848, before moving to the present age of democratic struggle. The Chartists, and the contemporary Women's Suffrage Movement are invoked as the radical democratic tradition the ILP seeks to defend, as it now challenges a government which has launched a contested and apparently barbaric war:

We are to-day enjoying most of the reforms demanded by the Chartists, and we must not forget that the admission of women to political power has been secured only in our own day.⁸¹

The ILP pamphlet is a defence of radical action in the name of an ancient constitution and its liberal values of freedom, liberty and democracy. It was a revolution which

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 9

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 12

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 15

sought to defend, not sweep away, the professed constitution of England and its rich democratic history. This was not an attempt to overthrow the capitalist state and its instruments of power, but a rally to defend the democratic structures of Parliament. The point is made again in the example of women's suffrage and the need for radical action to push democratic change:

Even the supporters of what was known as the constitutional movement for woman suffrage, which was the larger movement, will not deny that the militant movement, the direct action movement, at least succeeded in compelling public attention to, and concentrating it upon, the grave injustice suffered by our women.⁸²

There is a conscious attempt here to rebadge the radicalism of the past to confront the political issues of the present. As the ILP began to drift further to the left it sought to bring this radical-liberal heritage along with it. The pamphlet represents a complex mix and clash of ideas in which radical, Whig and socialist ingredients are thrown into the ILP historical narrative as it sought to position itself in a world shaken up by the Russian revolution. The sentiments and beliefs hark back to the age of John Locke and his constitutional arguments, which became the bedrock of modern liberalism. Locke stressed that any sovereignty and power that was vested in governments ultimately resided with the people. It was the people who had the final right to remove those in power who worked against their interests:

⁸² Ibid, p. 15

A government truly representative of public opinion and responsive to public opinion need have no fear of direct action, because the justification of direct action, and, indeed, the very possibility of it, resides in bad government and the abuse of power.⁸³

The pamphlet ends with a final warning to the Liberal coalition government of Lloyd George and its foreign policy:

If Ministers continue to threaten the world with wars without the sanction of the electorate, Labour must be pardoned for thinking that unconstitutional and preparing itself for direct action. If Labour were forced to take direct action in defence of the constitution, it would be in line with history.⁸⁴

In defending the Russian revolution, the ILP was also upholding the traditions of Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This was a radical-liberal defence of a Communist revolution which had overthrown its own radical-liberals, who were contemptuously labelled Mensheviks. The ILP was now the socialist conscience of the Labour Party and the labour movement in Britain. Using the weapon of disaffiliation when the Labour Party moved too far to the right in its policies and objectives, or abandoned its original socialist principles, its activists were shrill exponents of an undiluted stream of British liberties anchored in the past. Despite its radical socialist credentials, the ILP remained solidly wedded to the principles of parliamentary

⁸³ Ibid, p. 15

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 16

democracy and the history of political struggle to defend these. Like its cherished hero William Cobbett, the ILP remained committed to the institution of Parliament which it sought to defend from external political forces.

The Russian revolution was to provide a serious challenge for the ILP as it sought to articulate its own unique brand of socialism within the new political reality, post 1917. It was at this crucial time that Ramsay MacDonald produced, *Parliament and Revolution*, which was published by the ILP and became the defining text for a new social democratic vision of the future. As a socialist who was still in the left-wing of the movement, MacDonald condemned the allied action against the Bolsheviks, the military intervention having a negative effect on the course of the revolution:

Had it not been for the attacks of the Allied Governments the earthquake stage of the Russian revolution would have been over by now, and the world would have had the advantage of witnessing the assimilation by Russia of the ideas of a Socialist Republic. The only effect so far of this Allied attack upon Russian Socialism has been to prolong the chaotic 'dictatorship' stages of the revolution. It created the Red Terror, it has maintained the revolutionary tribunals; it has been responsible for the execution of political.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Ramsay MacDonald, *Parliament and Revolution* (The National Labour Press Ltd, 30 Blackfriars Street, London 1919) p. 30

MacDonald clearly expressed deep concerns over the direction of the Bolshevik revolution. His firm hope was that bloody revolution would soon turn into peaceful political democracy:

Just as the Independent Labour Party made its great contribution in 1914 to the politics of war, so should it now make a distinctive a contribution to the politics of revolution. And the first sentence of that contribution must be a declaration that whilst a revolutionary 'dictatorship' is needed to guide a revolution into democracy, the only policy which will do that safely and swiftly is one of political freedom.⁸⁶

MacDonald uses *Parliament and Revolution* as a clear manifesto in defence of the imperfect institutions of parliamentary democracy and against all those who would impatiently sweep these democratic institutions away. In the spirit of the old radical tradition, MacDonald believed Parliament was a powerful tool at the disposal of the working class, provided it could be used effectively. Democracy was the best weapon that the people had in their struggle with the forces of capital. This was the same radical argument which was later articulated by Aneurin Bevan when he talked of three mighty forces at work within society: Poverty, Property and Democracy. The latter force of Democracy was the ultimate weapon to defeat and tame Property and deliver a socialist society. This was the old radical analysis of power which predated a Marxist approach to political struggle. The faults of modern society lay not in its institutions of democracy, but in the people's inability to use these institutions effectively:

⁸⁶ *ibid* pp. 30-31

In expressing disappointment with the results of Parliamentary government, we must begin by admitting that the first point to be made against it belongs not to itself, but to the masses. They have not been intelligent enough to use it.⁸⁷

In MacDonald's view the institution of Parliament was in need of serious reform but not revolution. MacDonald believed all this would change once the Labour Party had reached a majority in Parliament, and was then able to control the levers of power:

Parliament itself is a machine of government, and it has been worked hitherto by one section of the community. Labour has voted, but has not run the machine.⁸⁸

Though there were great differences between Russia and Great Britain, MacDonald still hoped that socialism could be achieved in Russia through the democratic use of political power, and without a permanent dictatorship of the proletariat:

⁸⁷ *ibid* p. 58

⁸⁸ *ibid* p. 57

Therefore, in order to understand revolutionary events, we have to discriminate between Russian political conditions and our own- The real revolution was the seizure of political power; the superficial revolution was the attempt to establish Socialism by force. The first is the permanent gain; the second will fail by modification and defeat. Nothing will remain of it except what could have been accomplished by the democratic use of political power.⁸⁹

MacDonald began to articulate a political position which would crucially separate the ILP from the Communist project of Soviet Russia. These differences came to a head when Lenin called for the creation of a Third 'Communist' International in 1919. The new Comintern, based in Moscow, now expected all the socialist movements to join the new International under the leadership of Lenin and the guidance of the Russian Communist Party. Those invited were to end the ideological beliefs which had seen the breakup of the old International in 1914 and were to dedicate themselves to the task of socialist revolution and the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat. This became the new line in the sand which would divide the socialist movement for the rest of the twentieth century. It would place an eclectic mix of liberals, radicals, libertarian-socialists and anarchists on one side of the political divide, with the Communist Party and its Soviet model on the other. These rival factions would recruit English radical history as an ideological weapon in their contest for hearts and minds. Each claimed a legitimacy which was offered through the revolutionary democrats of the past. In the

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 23

second half of the twentieth century this political divide would evolve into the social-democracy of the West and the Soviet state-communism of the East.

The influence of the Russian revolution as a political event was immense and should not be underestimated in the historiography and popular memory of the period. Even the labour historian and guild socialist, G. D. H. Cole, noted:

In 1914, Socialism still seemed a distant ideal; after 1917, it presented itself to men's minds as a real and immediate possibility. The Capitalist system lost its inevitability; the sense of a possible alternative sank deeply into the minds of the active workers in the Labour Movement.⁹⁰

In May 1920, the executive committee of the ILP sent out a series of questions to the Comintern in Moscow. They asked for clarification on the nature of the new International proposed by Lenin, and wanted certain issues addressed which were of deep concern to the labour movement in Britain. The Comintern sent a lengthy and uncompromising reply in July 1920, and both were published together in a widely distributed pamphlet which was sent out to all ILP members. Entitled, *The ILP and the Third International*, the pamphlet contains the essential views of the ILP on affiliation to the new ideology of the Communist International. The leadership strongly opposed this, particularly Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and the chairman Richard Wallhead. Though a small faction within the ILP were keen (known as the Left Wing Group) they wanted the movement to join and place itself under the direction of Lenin and the

⁹⁰ G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement*, Volume 3 p. 159

Communist Party. The pamphlet set out the main issues of concern for the ILP and its leadership. These included three important questions:

Will the Executive of the Third International state how they conceive the theory of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' as applied to Great Britain?

To what extent does the Third International agree to the use of Parliamentary methods?

Must societies affiliated to the Third International maintain that communism and the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be introduced by the use of armed force?⁹¹

These issues were central to a British labour movement which was pursuing a policy of parliamentary social democracy: a policy roundly rejected by Lenin and the new Russian Communist Party. An equally important issue for the ILP was the centralisation of power and authority in the new International, and the freedom of the socialist groups who decided to join: 'To what extent does the Third International demand a rigid adherence in each country to the methods outlined in its programme?'⁹² In reply the Comintern brushed aside all the ILP's questions of concern, claiming that these were the old bourgeois politics of the past, which had marked the failure of the Second International in 1914. Though the ILP was one of the few political parties to oppose allied intervention in Russia, and give its full support to the Bolsheviks, there were specific objections to the socialist policies that were pursued by MacDonald and the ILP. To the Communist Party these policies represented a false constitutionalism, and a

⁹¹ ILP, *The ILP and the Third International* (National Labour Press, London, 1920) pp. 10-11

⁹² *ibid* p10

major obstacle to the overthrow of the capitalist system. The Comintern was even less conciliatory in its opinion of the ILP's leadership:

In England, the Centre, in the persons of MacDonald, Snowden, and the majority of the ILP, aids the Right Wing by persuading the workers that Socialism can only be obtained by constitutional means; that is to say, by making use only of those rights which the bourgeoisie concedes to the working class, while retaining the real power in its own hands.⁹³

The reply was uncompromising in its condemnation of the ILP and its independent socialist policy, and this opened a clear ideological rift between the two movements:

To the question of the British ILP, 'In what respect does Communism differ from other forms of Socialism?' we reply: There are no other forms; there is only Communism.⁹⁴

The Comintern now appropriated English radical history to bolster its own ideological position against the constitutional politics of the ILP. Turning radical history on its head, it was now deployed against the reformers in the British labour movement, and against the parliamentary institutions which the ILP believed an English radical tradition so staunchly defended. Cromwell's dissolution of Parliament in the English Civil War was a supreme revolutionary act and was done in the interests of the people. This removed the power of the rich capitalist landlords who had used Parliament to

⁹³ *ibid* p. 27

⁹⁴ *ibid* p. 33

block the revolution's progress. The Bolsheviks were the 'new Ironsides' of a modern revolution, following in the footsteps of the earlier example set by Cromwell:

Our English comrades have put the question to us whether acceptance of the Soviet system is obligatory for members of the Third International. To this we shall reply by a slight excursion into the history of the English bourgeois revolution. When, at the time of the English revolution, the Independents, who represented the richest bourgeoisie and capitalist landlords, became a conservative power, resisting further reforms demanded by the national army, Cromwell, in 1653, under pressure of the army, declared: 'The time has come, I must act' - And in were led the revolutionary soldiers, and the Parliament of Independents was dispersed.⁹⁵

In this view, the new Parliament formed by Cromwell and his army was an early Soviet council, composed of ordinary citizens, which became the principal power behind the English revolution:

⁹⁵ *ibid* p. 38-39.

He formed the small Parliament of craftsmen, farmers and tradesmen. This small Parliament, which was the representative of the principal power of the revolution, of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie, and a weapon in the hands of the masses, was nothing but a Soviet or Council of the representatives of the integral parts of the English Revolutionary Army.⁹⁶

The ILP had sought to recruit English radical history to defend the institutions of Parliament; in contrast, the Comintern now recruited this historical tradition to expose Parliament as the impediment to revolution. The Chartists were now an important symbol of England's revolutionary past: a past which had been sabotaged by liberals within the British labour movement. The Comintern urged the movement to return to its revolutionary origins and abandon its bourgeois liberalism:

The outcome of this struggle will finally depend on the British workers. The final honour of settling with their own oppressors belongs to them; it will depend on this most advanced section of the working class, which once before in English history has pointed out the way to the workers of the world in the glorious Chartist movement. The result of such a movement will be self-liberation from oppression and exploitation and will also be the pioneer of world revolution.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid p. 40

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 62

The Communist reply was intended to turn the ILP's own radical history against it. This was now a contested past, which both sides sought to appropriate in their struggle for ideological legitimacy. The ILP's response was to defend its socialist integrity, witnessed through its own record of support for the Bolshevik cause:

The ILP has never been lukewarm in its support of the Russian Revolution. It has opposed the Allied policy towards Russia since the Second International. Without committing itself to approval or acceptance of all the deeds and theories of the Bolsheviks, it has regarded the Allied war upon Russia, the imposition of the blockade and support to the counter-revolutionary movement as an unjustifiable interference in the internal affairs of a free state, and as a capitalist and imperialist attack upon the greatest experiment in the history of the world to establish a new economic and social order.⁹⁸

This response to the Comintern was followed by a point by point attack on the founding principles of the new Communist International. These were distilled into five crucial propositions which the ILP could not accept:

The Dictatorship of one section of the International Socialist movement over the rest.

The insistence by one section upon its policy and methods for the establishment of Socialism being followed in all countries.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 4

The morality and permanent value of suppressing the voice and influence of a minority, even during a revolutionary period.

The destruction of Parliamentary institutions and the forcible imposition by a minority of new forms of government and administration.

Whether the free use of denunciation and misrepresentation of Socialists who differ from the Communist leaders is to be the accepted method of Socialist fellowship.⁹⁹

The ILP went on to accuse the Bolsheviks of provoking civil war, and of using methods of sabotage against opposing labour organisations. The ILP reply, and MacDonald's *Parliament and Revolution*, stand out as a clear and early defence of democratic socialism. Above all they represent a strong belief in the use of parliamentary and constitutional means to achieve socialist objectives. These were the ideas that were the driving force behind the post-war Attlee government of 1945. They are also ideas which have been re-explored and re-examined in John Bew's recent biography of Clement Attlee, wryly entitled, *Citizen Clem*.¹⁰⁰ Within the diverse traditions of the ILP there lurked a strong libertarianism. This was an important radical tradition which was deeply suspicious of the authority of the state. It had its roots in an English tradition of dissent and resisted any centralising power imposed from above. This was the radical tradition which confronted the authoritarian impulse of the Soviet experiment, and to which it would not conform. It was the same radical tradition expressed in the literature and ideas of the Socialist League of William Morris. Many members of this latter organisation would end up in the ranks of the ILP, including the

⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 5-6

¹⁰⁰ John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee* (London: Riverrun, 2017), chs, 15-16

libertarian socialist Edward Carpenter and John Bruce Glasier. This was an older socialist tradition, and viewed itself as independent of Soviet Communism, and in many ways incompatible to it. This libertarian-socialist tradition had inspired William Morris to break with the SDF in the 1880s, and it was strongly expressed in the rift between the Comintern and the ILP. The imposition of ideas, or authority, was totally incompatible to the world of the libertarian radical, who began his historical journey fighting the imposed authority of an established church. There was an intriguing convergence between these ideas and traditions, and those of anarchists such as Rudolf Rocker, who also claimed the libertarian radicalism championed by Winstanley, Godwin and Owen.

The founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 effectively drew a line under the issue of a Third International. The British labour movement had firmly rejected the ideas and overtures of the Communists in favour of its own path toward Jerusalem. As Martin Pugh notes:

The emergence of the Communist Party proved useful to labour's leaders because it helped them draw a line between constitutionalism and direct action.¹⁰¹

A libertarian tradition exercised a powerful influence within the intellectual milieu of the ILP. In part this was due to the radical-liberal inheritance of the movement, but this was also an important tradition on its own. This libertarianism could not be reconciled with the new Marxist direction of the Soviet government in Russia. In his early work,

¹⁰¹ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!* P. 133

Shelley, Godwin and their Circle, H. N. Brailsford had strongly defended this English tradition of libertarian thought, which he saw as distinct from the political ideas of continental Europe. The libertarian philosopher William Godwin, and the founding campaigner for women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, are joined by the romantic poet Shelley and the political radical Thomas Paine in this canon. Brailsford believed these figures reflected the unique English response to the events of the French revolution. This response witnessed a revival of the old radical cause, which was first nurtured in the turmoil of the English revolution:

The impetus of its own aspiration carried it swiftly beyond the prosaic demand for Parliamentary Reform. It evolved its programme for the reconstruction of all human institutions and projected the amendment of human nature itself. America had made an end of Kings and France was in the full tide of revolution. Nothing was too mighty for this new-begotten hope, and the path to human perfectibility stretched as plain as the narrow road to Bunyan's Heavenly City.¹⁰²

This new libertarian radicalism was exemplified in the work's two authors, Godwin and Shelley:

¹⁰² H. N. Brailsford, *Shelley, Godwin and their Circle* (Williams & Norgate, London, 1913) pp. 8-9

Godwin found his own alluring by-way and turning away at once from political repression and political agitation, became the pioneer of philosophical anarchism. To Shelley at the end of this marvellous thirty years of ardour, speculation, and despair, the hope became winged.¹⁰³

Brailsford contrasts the radical views of William Godwin and Thomas Paine with those of Edmund Burke, a fervent Whig critic of the French revolution. Contrasting views which exposed the fundamental divide in English history, he declared that this was a political division which could still be felt within English society today:

But it makes some difference whether a man sees history from above of from below. Burke saw it from the comfortable altitude of the Whig aristocracy to which he had allied himself. The revolutionary school saw its inverse, from the standpoint of the 'swinish multitude' for whom it had worked to less advantage. Paine was a man of the people, and Godwin belonged by birth to the dissenting community for whom history had been chiefly a record of persecution, illuminated by rebellion.¹⁰⁴

Godwin's radical views had their roots in the political repression which he himself had experienced. This fostered a deep suspicion of the coercive power of the state and of its political machinery, together with a fierce individualism which was rooted in a dissenting past:

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 9

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 22-23

It was revolt not merely against all coercive action by the State, but also against collective action by the citizens. The root of it was probably the extreme individualism which felt that a man surrendered too much of himself, too much of truth and manhood in any political association.¹⁰⁵

The radical views of Godwin would later resonate through the ILP, as it became increasingly marginalised by the growing influence of a Communist International imposing the party line from above. The ILP could not surrender its radical individualism, or its unique vision of socialism, to the growing collective muscle of Soviet communism. Godwin had railed against the oppressive political power and social injustice of his own time. He represented it as part of a corrupt system of monarchy and aristocracy:

What is most characteristic in his line of argument is his insistence on the moral corruption that monarchy and aristocracy involve. The whole standard of moral values is subverted. To achieve ostentation becomes the first object of desire. Disinterested virtue is first suspected and then viewed with incredulity. Luxury meanwhile distorts our whole attitude to our fellows, and in every effort to excel and shine we wrong the labouring millions. Aristocracy involves general degradation, and can survive only amid general ignorance.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 87

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 118

This view had a strong resonance in the era of the Great War and its immediate aftermath. Brailsford had re-animated the old radical ideas of Godwin and showed they still had relevance to a world in which many believed it was the royal and aristocratic elites who carried the responsibility for igniting the conflict. Particularly in the secret diplomatic manoeuvrings which had driven Europe to the abyss there was a strong feeling that the true interests of the people had been betrayed. Like Brailsford, Godwin believed an end to the old aristocratic order would also bring an end to war and imperialism:

From the abolition of monarchy and aristocracy Godwin, and indeed the whole revolutionary school, expected the cessation of war. War and conquest elevate the few at the expense of the rest and cannot benefit the whole community. Democracies have no business with war save to repel an invasion of their territory.¹⁰⁷

Brailsford believed this message still carried relevance for the years leading up to the war and for its aftermath. He believed that it would play an important part when a new democratic world order was to be constructed from the ashes of the old imperial dynasties. Brailsford also focused on Godwin's views towards violent revolution as a means for political change. Particularly he emphasised its intrinsic threat to the liberal values of tolerance and liberty. He quotes from Godwin: 'It is a disaster when the unilluminated masses are instigated to violent revolution. Revolutions are always crude, bloody, uncertain and inimical to tolerance, independence, and intellectual inquiry.'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 118

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 124

Godwin was the first political thinker to warn of the dangers of totalitarianism. A strong libertarian theme echoed in the later works of the ILP and manifested itself particularly in the writings of George Orwell. Godwin suggested that when large mass movements cease to be temporary, they endanger the rights and liberties of the citizen within the social order. The loss of individual rights only produces chaos he believed. This was a libertarian message much used by the ILP in its later battle with Soviet Communism.

Brailsford, quoting Godwin again, argues:

Temporary combinations may be necessary in a time of turmoil, or to secure some single limited end, such as the redress of a wrong done to an individual. Where their scope is general and their duration long continued, they foster declamation, cabal, party spirit and tumult.¹⁰⁹

Brailsford agreed with Godwin that revolutions can redress injustice, but can equally produce tyranny through an imposition of the party will upon the individual:

They foster a fallacious uniformity of opinion and render the mind quiescent and stationary. Truth disclaims the alliance of marshalled numbers.¹¹⁰

Godwin's utopian vision of a democratic anarchism was a powerful antidote to the Marxist determinism of the modern age - a modern age in which the individual was sublimated to the social whole. Godwin championed the devolution of political power and was deeply suspicious of the centralisation of authority in the hands of a minority

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 125

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 125

or majority, but particularly the state. For Brailsford these ideas were a powerful counterview to the prevailing ideology of the modern age with its regimentation, conformity and drift away from the radical individualism of the past:

There is in Godwin's democratic anarchism a stimulus peculiarly tonic to the modern mind. No man has developed more firmly the ideal of universal enlightenment, which has escaped feudalism, only to be threatened by the sociological expert. No writer is better fitted to remind us that society and government are not the same thing, and that the State must not be confounded with the social organism. No moralist has written a more eloquent page on the evil of coercion and the unreason of force.¹¹¹

Within their works, Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft had also seen the inherent dangers to liberty in the turmoil of the French revolution. Despite its heroic vision the revolution had imprisoned arguably one of its greatest advocates, Thomas Paine. In the fate of Paine, sent to a Paris dungeon by the orders of the revolutionary government:

¹¹¹ *ibid*, p. 166

The history of revolutions teaches its limitations and its power as instructively as the history of religion. It breaks down not because men are incapable of the sudden effort that can 'arise and will', but rather because to render its effects permanent, it must proceed to regiment the converts in organised associations, which speedily develop all the evils that have ruined the despotism it set out to overthrow.¹¹²

Shelley, Godwin and their Circle, is a celebration of the radical libertarian figures that had also inspired the anarchist Rudolf Rocker. It is the political ideas of Godwin which particularly stand out from Brailsford's work. Both for their rejection of the centralised authority of the state, and for their belief in the devolution of power back to local communities. These libertarian ideas were at variance with the central tenets of democratic socialism, which sought to collectivise much of the economy through the central authority of the state. These ideas did chime with the earlier socialism of Robert Owen and the co-operative movement which had successfully blended individualist values to a collectivist ethos, believing a better society would arise from the level of the local community.¹¹³ These older libertarian-socialist ideas lay at the heart of the ILP's rejection of Soviet Communism, with its dictatorship of the proletariat administered through an all-powerful centralised state. The pamphlets and booklets produced through the ILP were specifically aimed at a politicised working-class audience, particularly one enticed by the promise of Lenin's workers' state. These publications

¹¹² Ibid, pp. 237-238

¹¹³ Peter J. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930* (University of Manchester Press, Manchester 1996), ch. 2.

also tap into older radical ideas which still had an appeal to the same working-class audience.

The historian Paul Salveson has pointed to the influence of Leo Tolstoy's anarchist ideas on the co-operative movement set in motion by the Owenites and Chartists. As part of the overlooked inheritance of the ILP he points out:

The community building experiments of the Owenite and Chartist period had fizzled out during the 1840s. However, the movement to create co-operative or 'communist' colonies revived in the 1890s, partly as a result of the influence of Tolstoy and his brand of non-violent 'Christian Anarchism'. The influence of Tolstoy on English socialism is virtually ignored by socialist historians, but for a few years before the First World War his influence was considerable.¹¹⁴

The growing ideological rift between the ILP and the Communist Party was illustrated in their differing attitudes towards trade unions and the trade union movement. After October 1917, many Russian trade unionists believed they would have direct input and control in the running of Russian industry. Instead the trade union movement became steadily subsumed under the authority of the Communist Party. This went against the hopes of many Bolshevik and anarchist members, who wanted a socialist republic under the devolved power of the soviets, or workers' councils. The centralisation of power in the hands of the Communist Party sparked concern amongst

¹¹⁴ Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent* p. 124

many socialists, and trade union members outside these events in Russia. In its own attempt to explain these events the ILP produced a pamphlet entitled, *Trade Unions in Soviet Russia*, which was published in November 1920. The pamphlet was a compiled collection of documents, all taken from Russian sources, which the ILP noted: 'should be of exceptional interest to the British Trade Union Movement.'¹¹⁵ They illustrated the ideas, policies and future of trade unionism under the new Soviet government. The ILP did not directly comment on events in Russia, letting the sources themselves present the direction of the new Soviet regime. Though there was sympathy here for the Bolshevik cause and the struggle within Russia, there is also a clear attempt to highlight the threat to trade union independence posed by Bolshevik policies under the Third International. The pamphlet attempts to shed light on the Bolshevik struggle, but also to warn trade unions of the impending threat posed under a Communist system of control.

One of the main contributors was A Lozovsky, who was on the executive committee of the Russian Central Council of Trade Unions. He begins by describing the appalling conditions under which trade unionism had to operate in Tsarist Russia, but the gains it nevertheless made:

¹¹⁵ ILP Information Committee, *Trade Unions in Soviet Russia* (The ILP, 5 York Buildings, Adelphi, London, 1920) p. 2

In spite of imprisonment, exile and savage persecution of strikers the strikes broke out in one centre after another. In 1896 a strike of 35 thousand textile workers broke out in Petrograd, which made a tremendous impression not only upon the Government but upon the working class themselves. The Government, after a series of repressions, issued a law of 1897 which, for the first time in Russia, limited the working day for adult factory workers to 11 and a half hours for a day's work and 10 hours for night work.¹¹⁶

Lozovsky goes on to describe the brutal repression of trade unionism prior to the October revolution of 1917, which was guaranteed to elicit the sympathy of the British trade union movement:

From the defeat of the first revolution to the revolution of 1917 the trade union movement, as a mass labour movement, did not exist in Russia. The Tsarist government conducted a policy of ruthless extermination of the trade unions. The unions were prohibited from assisting strikers; they were closed down for attempting to intervene in the great strike movement, members of the executives were arrested and exiled to Siberia, funds were confiscated and books taken to the police stations; police were present at all meetings which were closed down on the slightest pretext, and, very often without any reason at all.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 6

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 10

Speaking of the October revolution of 1917, Lozovsky notes:

The overwhelming majority of trade unions were for the October revolution, only an insignificant section being against it. All the unions uniting factory workers like the metal workers, textile workers and leather workers were for the October revolution, while the commercial and bank employee's unions were against it.¹¹⁸

Lozovsky then goes on to describe the aspirations of the Russian trade union movement and its goal of an industry under workers' control, with a final aim of controlling the whole economy. Aims that chimed with syndicalists in the British labour movement:

The idea of workers' control arose in the first days of the February revolution. It aimed at subjecting the whole private, commercial, industrial and financial apparatus to the control and influence of labour organisations.¹¹⁹

Though its original aims were syndicalist, it had now pledged allegiance to the new Soviet government, and to the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat under the leadership of the Communist Party:

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 18

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 19

The Congress, in the name of two and a half million workers, firmly and undeviating stood for the soviet system, for labour democracy as against bourgeois democracy, and thus, linked the fate of the trade union movement in Russia with the fate of the soviet government and the socialist revolution.¹²⁰

Lozovsky then moves on to describe the new role assigned to trade unionism in the wake of the October revolution, together with its new part in the workers' control of industry:

The part to be played by the trade unions in this great work of the reconstruction of society consists not only in the defence of the interests of the working class but in preparing it for the role of industrial organisers during the transition from private monopoly to State monopoly, from the latter to nationalisation and from the last to socialism.¹²¹

These new factory committees would re-organise industry and the economy, as it moved from capitalism to Communism. This was music to the ears of many trade unionists - however, under the final question, 'what will be the fate of the trade union?', Lozovsky describes the eventual fate of the Russian trade union movement, which was nationalised and merging under the new Soviet regime. This would not have been well received by a British labour movement wedded to a fiercely won radical tradition of

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 22

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 23

independence, something which was not overlooked by the producers of the pamphlet.

This was the message the ILP leadership wanted conveyed to the broader labour movement. As Lozovsky states:

The trade unions and the Soviet economic organs merge into one another; a single economic machinery grows out of it swallowing both unions and soviets, thus being the synthesis of all the organisations created by the proletariat- This perspective of the development and rebirth of existing proletarian organisations gives rise to the idea of 'nationalising' the trade unions.¹²²

The ILP shrewdly added the footnote, 'Rendering Trade Unions as organs of the State.'¹²³ This was the section which the ILP calculated would ignite most concern amongst British trade union leaders. It was also a subtle use of the Communist's own propaganda and was aimed at members sympathetic towards Bolshevism and who wanted to affiliate to the new Third International. The subtlety of the pamphlet was its lack of direct comment on behalf of the ILP's own political position and its use of Russian sources to tell their own story. There is little doubt that the ILP intended the pamphlet to act as a warning to the trade union movement in Britain, and particularly to those who wanted to follow the Soviet model. The idea of rendering trade unions mere organs of the state did not fit well within the heterodox traditions which were central to the inheritance of British Labour.

¹²² Ibid, p. 26

¹²³ Ibid, p. 26

Going it Alone: The ILP outside the Labour Party

Throughout its long history the ILP remained the broad-left conscience of the British labour movement, steering its own unique path between the newly formed Communist Party of Great Britain and the Parliamentary Labour Party. This often brought the ILP into conflict with its bigger political brother in Parliament, as it tried to retain and reinforce the original ideals of the British labour movement. Throughout the turbulent period of the General Strike in 1926, the ILP remained wedded to the Labour Party. This was the period in which the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the main party in opposition to the Conservatives. The 1920s witnessed the election of two minority Labour governments under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald, with the ILP providing many of Labour's new MPs. These included such figures as Manny Shinwell, and the future leader of the ILP, James Maxton. The ILP also developed its agenda, *Socialism in Our Time*, a left-wing platform which called for the nationalisation of key areas of the economy, including banking, power, transport and land, together with support for a progressive and redistributive tax system. In part this was a reaction to the severe economic depression facing Britain in the interwar period.

The minority Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald was unable to respond effectively to the economic depression. Events finally came to a head in 1931, when MacDonald formed a National Government with his political rivals the Conservatives and Liberals. This seismic event forced the ILP to break away from the Labour Party after many years of affiliation and close collaboration. The breakaway movement became a socialist pressure group outside the official Labour Party. The ILP now found itself in the socialist middle, between the Communist Party to the left, and the Labour Party to the right. This was a position where it remained for the rest of its history. The

ILP, however, retained its credentials as the main source of socialist ideas for a broader labour movement. The ILP also began to attract to new figures into its ranks, including the writer and intellectual George Orwell. James Maxton was a central figure within the movement in this crucial period, holding chairmanship of the ILP from 1926 to 1931, and from 1934 to 1941, when he accepted an invitation from Clement Attlee to re-join the Labour Party. Like Hardie and MacDonald, Maxton came from a Scottish background; his family had been firmly Tory and Unionist in their politics, but Maxton chose socialism and the ILP.¹²⁴ Though the Independent Labour Party had its roots in Scotland, it remained wedded to a strong tradition of English radicalism. As John McNair, the biographer of Maxton noted:

They were imbued with the philosophical radicalism of John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. The names of Charles Bradlaugh, Henry Labouchere, and Sir Charles Dilke, stalwart supporters of nineteenth century republicanism, meant something more to them than the toryism of the Scottish landowners. Radicalism was their political hope.¹²⁵

This also reflected the Victorian legacy of a British identity rooted in empire, which overwhelmed any sense of regional intellectual identity. Within this atmosphere, English figures of radical dissent became adopted throughout the nations of Britain. Though the Scots gave an occasional nod to William Wallace and Robert Burns, a regional nationalism remained undeveloped. The ILP began its infant life as a Scottish,

¹²⁴ Maxton's amorphous background made him an unlikely icon for New Labour, see Gordon Brown, *Maxton* (Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 79-112.

¹²⁵ John McNair, *James Maxton the Beloved Rebel* (Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1955) p. 26

then Northern labour movement, but was now a socialist party for the whole of Britain; and one wedded to a tradition of English radicalism. Under Maxton's leadership the ILP rejected the revolutionary socialism of the Communist Party but also became disenchanted with the Fabian gradualism of the Labour Party. Throughout this period the ILP practised a unique, and often contradictory, brand of independent radical socialism. It remained proudly non-aligned to any political party, bureaucracy or authority. This however came at a cost, as McNair noted of the traumatic break with the Labour Party:

The choice before the ILP was to retain its identity and carry on in its own strength in the struggle for Socialism or to merge itself completely in a mighty machine under bureaucratic control which, although pledged in its constitution to work for Socialism, in its acts and practises had simply carried on the system of Capitalism with slight and ineffectual reforms.¹²⁶

This was the perennial debate within the labour movement, and one which still resonates with some labour supporters today. The 1930s did see closer collaboration with the Communist Party, particularly during the Popular Front years when the ILP moved further to the left of the Labour Party, though the ILP continued to pursue its own unique vision and version of socialism, often expressed in the powerful oratory of its leader, James Maxton. At the ILP's annual conference of 1935, he stated:

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 213

The purpose of the Independent Labour Party is to secure the establishment of a World Socialist Commonwealth - that, nothing more and nothing less. That purpose includes the conception of the achievement of a world freed from poverty, war and the menace of war, and freed from the tyranny of men over their fellows.¹²⁷

Though the ILP was a unique product of English radicalism it remained strongly internationalist in outlook. In this there were strong echoes of the earlier Chartist movement, which had reached out to the radicals of Europe as they struggled for democracy in the 1840s. The ILP would take a similar position in the struggle for democracy in Spain and revisit an older internationalist tradition. The rise of fascism in Europe began to galvanise the British left in the 1930s. Fenner Brockway was a central figure within the ILP and the anti-fascist movement during this turbulent period. The son of missionaries, Brockway embodied many of the Christian socialist origins and much of the heritage of the movement. A staunch pacifist, and a keen and active vegetarian, and campaigner for the independence of India, he became chair of the party from 1931 to 1934. Brockway had joined the ILP in 1907, and with Maxton, had been a conscientious objector and opponent of the First World War. Indeed, both men had spent time in prison for their beliefs. Brockway also followed Brailsford in having a fascination for 17th century radicalism, publishing his own book on the Levellers and Diggers, entitled *Britain's first Socialists*. Brockway came to epitomise the broad-left idealism of the ILP in the 1930s, rejecting his previous pacifism with the rise of fascism and at the time of the Spanish Civil War. He came to personify the broad-left

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 247

intellectuals who contributed their efforts and ideals in the struggle against fascism. The effort was illustrated in the pages of publications such as the Left Book Club of Victor Gollancz, though Brockway was an initial critic of its Communist Party influence. In 1942, Brockway published an autobiography of his many years of political activity within the ILP and the labour movement. Entitled, *Inside the Left*, the book gives an interesting insight into the key events which shaped the period. On the infamous split between MacDonald and the Labour Party, Brockway writes:

MacDonald was by philosophy an evolutionary socialist. In his work 'Socialism and Society' his thesis had been that the transition from capitalism to socialism must be biological, by slow growth, by the gradual change of one form of life into another. He had always opposed catastrophic change; he never believed that the collapse of capitalism would provide the opportunity for socialism.¹²⁸

For Brockway, MacDonald represented an old debased liberalism of slow constitutional change. The ILP now rejected the old Fabian socialism of the Labour Party which had been an important cornerstone of the movement. The economic depression and the rise of fascism had moved the ILP towards a more radical direction in politics, and towards the veneration of more radical movements from the English past. Maxton's leadership came to symbolise the new radicalism within the ILP. As Brockway noted of his chairmanship of the ILP:

¹²⁸ Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* (Spokesman, Russell House, Nottingham, 2010) p. 218

Under Maxton's chairmanship the ILP became aggressively socialist and proletarian. The middle-class experts and careerists disappeared from Head Office overnight and those who were satisfied with Labour Party policy either resigned or retained a nominal membership only.¹²⁹

It was now believed that the movement needed to move in a more revolutionary direction in response to growing reactionary forces, which threatened both democracy and any working-class movement attempting to oppose it. The Levellers and Diggers of an English radical past now fitted the bill as an inspiration for these more turbulent times. The Fabianism of the past was firmly rejected along with the liberal notion that parliamentary representation was enough in itself to secure working-class goals. As Brockway noted of Maxton's new message to the movement:

Socialists were living in a fool's paradise if they thought that a majority in Parliament was enough. Socialist legislation would meet with resistance from the 'aristocratic, plutocratic, financial and capitalist classes generally'. The duty of the ILP was to prepare the workers for the struggle for power and for the maintenance of that power during the introduction of socialism- Compared with it the issue of disaffiliation was a small matter of strategy.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 185

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 240

G.D.H. Cole

This move to the left clearly explains the change of emphasis within English democratic history, as key figures in the movement looked for inspiration from the more radical and revolutionary groups of the past. The radical-liberal figures Robert Owen and Richard Cobden, which were such an inspiration to the early years of the ILP, were now ousted and replaced by the revolutionary firebrands John Lilburne and Gerrard Winstanley, and the insurrectionary movements of the English Civil War. The labour historian, G. D. H. Cole was a crucial intellectual figure in this period who was closely associated with the broad-left movement and the ILP. Through his promotion of radical and labour history he became a forerunner for later historians of the left, particularly Christopher Hill and especially E. P. Thompson. Along with Brockway, Cole shared a strong libertarian socialism and support for a Popular Front against fascism. He provided numerous articles and books for the cause and for the Left Book Club of Victor Gollancz. Cole's ideas were unique within British socialism. As an advocate of Guild socialism and co-operative economics he championed a locally based strategy of collective common ownership which was based upon mutual co-operatives and workers' guilds. His initial interest in socialism had been sparked through a reading of William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, which brought him into contact with the radical political ideas of the Socialist League. Cole came to share many of Morris' ideas of a decentralised socialist democracy, which would remove both capitalism and the need for a powerful authoritarian state.¹³¹ G. D. H. Cole came to embody some of the key contradictions within the socialism of the ILP. His libertarian Guild socialism exposed

¹³¹ See David Goodway, 'G.D.H. Cole: A Socialist and Pluralist' in Peter Ackers and Alastair J. Reid (eds), *Alternatives to State Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth-Century* (Palgrave, London, 2016), pp. 245-271.

deep conflicts within a movement which promoted state ownership through nationalisation as the main platform of its Marxist policy, while equally maintaining a strong tradition of libertarian socialism, which promoted grassroots co-operative ownership and was deeply suspicious of a powerful and controlling centralised state.

This libertarian socialism owed much to an earlier tradition of radical liberalism within the British left. This was a tradition which Cole would champion in his many works on English radical history. He produced a biography of Robert Owen and a life of William Cobbett, together with a history of Fabian socialism, and *A Century of Co-operation*, on the co-operative movement at a time when most socialists began to focus on the revolutionary radicalism of the English Civil War. Amongst his other works Cole produced, *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement*, and a history of the main figures of Chartism entitled, *Chartist Portraits*.¹³² Cole's own biography followed the well-trodden path of the radical-liberal, being a conscientious objector in the First World War and writer for the *Manchester Guardian*, he remained a life-long member of the Fabian Society before his final entry into the world of academia. In his description of Guild socialism, however, Cole echoed the earlier anarchism of Rudolf Rocker:

¹³² G.D.H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (Macmillan, London, 1965 edn), viii-x. Asa Briggs's introduction to this volume stressed the diverse backgrounds and decentralised origins of the leaders of the Chartist movement which might be seen as deriving from Cole's own guild socialist interests.

A new idea sprang up, and won wide acceptance, of using Trade Unionism not merely as a means of defending wages and conditions, but as an offensive weapon in a war upon capitalist society. Names and ideas were imported from abroad to convey the new meanings which were struggling for coherent expression. Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism, and later Guild Socialism, became the gospels of the day among the younger Trade Unionists and Socialists. While the Labour Party in Parliament was shaping its course in close alliance with the liberalism of Lloyd George, Labour in the country appeared to be worshipping new gods and bent on the creation of a new Society by ‘direct action’.¹³³

Despite his enthusiasm for syndicalism, Cole remained a champion of the radical-liberal movements of the past, describing the National Guilds League of 1915 as a worthy model of trade unionism in the old Owenite mould:

It influenced the shop stewards, profoundly modified the old State Socialist attitude of the Independent Labour Party, and largely helped to form the new constructive demands of the Miners’ Federation for public ownership and workers’ control. Always small, it had in its ranks able writers and speakers who were able to exert influence quite disproportionate to their numbers.¹³⁴

¹³³ G D H Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement*, Volume 3, p. 70

¹³⁴ *ibid* p. 188

Like anarchism, radical liberalism was profoundly antagonistic towards state ownership and control. Anarchism's antagonism was based upon its hatred of the state, radical liberalism upon its concern for individual liberty. Together with the anarchists Cole believed in a grassroots socialist solution, based on worker co-operatives taking control of industry for themselves in a viewpoint that showed an appreciation of the deep roots of movements like co-operation within working-class culture and prefigured notions of a broader 'Labour movement'.¹³⁵ These libertarian ideas were at odds with mainstream socialism, which advocated public ownership and control through state directed nationalisation. Cole personified this tension of ideas, finding himself in a no man's land between the socialism of Robert Owen and that of Karl Marx. This tension was not unique to Cole but reflected a larger conflict of ideas within the ILP, as it sought to come to terms with its heterodox traditions and radical past. Within his work Cole returned many times to the theme of England's pre-Marxist radical past: a past which included the seminal figures of Robert Owen and Richard Cobden. One of Cole's first historical biographies was, *The Life of William Cobbett*, which was published in 1927. This was a return to the radical figures which had inspired the early years of the ILP and the labour movement. Cobbett's life symbolised a now outdated form of English radicalism, which Cole still passionately championed in his biography.¹³⁶ His narrative begins with the events of the French revolution, which had exposed new forces of reaction within British society. The aristocracy had joined forces with the financial

¹³⁵ Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Labour Party and Social Democracy' in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds), *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982), pp. 320-329.

¹³⁶ For the scholarship on Cobbett see Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012), ch. 3.

elites of the City in an effort to defeat the revolution in France. These were forces of reaction which were still in evidence today:

Capitalism joined with feudalism to fight Napoleon and was an essential instrument of his destruction. England bought victory, as she bought her European allies, with the subsidies furnished by her money-lords. The English aristocracy won the war only by getting into debt to the English capitalists. And this unholy alliance defeated, not so much France, as the common people of England.¹³⁷

Cobbett was the fierce critic of this new financial power which ruled the City of London with its bankers, financiers, stock jobbers and corrupt political elite. Cobbett championed an older pre-industrial England, free from the evils of modern capitalism and the factory system. At its heart this was a Tory-radical vision of an uncorrupted past:

Cobbett, in fact, was standing up for the old agricultural England, against the new England of commerce and manufacturers. Britain, he urged, could feed herself with every necessity, without the need for importing anything. Exports made the few richer; but their tendency was to impoverish and pauperise the many.¹³⁸

Crucially, Cole saw William Cobbett as the first true critic of modern capitalism. He was perceived as the first in a long line of radicals which would culminate with the

¹³⁷ G D H Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett* (Collins Sons & Co Ltd, London, 1927) p. 2

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 143

socialist ideas of William Morris. Cole believed there was a clear historical link between these two radical thinkers, both in their rejection of industrial capitalism, and in their belief in a return to an egalitarian rural past:

Cobbett's backward look may have been in one sense a vain hankering after an irrecoverable and partly mythical past. But it also kept alive a keen criticism of the human values of the new industrial order- to be recaptured in the writings of Ruskin and William Morris.¹³⁹

It was this link to the later ideas of Morris and the Socialist League which particularly interested Cole. It was a tradition of socialism still relevant to both Cole and the ILP. Cobbett, and Morris were the product of a unique English form of radicalism and dissent, which for Cole was of immense importance to the history of socialist ideas. Cobbett was a man of many contradictions, but his contribution to working-class history could not be ignored:

Cobbett fought for the Old England: he helped in fact to consolidate the new. His reward was that, though he could not affect the general movement of economic forces, he could and did contribute greatly to the building up, within capitalism, of a working-class confidence and consciousness which he himself understood but in part. This last great tribune of the agrarians was, by force of circumstances, also the first great tribune of the industrial proletariat.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 268

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 434

This stubborn English radicalism was the true bedrock of a British socialism, and indeed a British labour movement. Cole was to mine a similar vein of pre-Marxist radical history in his *Chartist Portraits*, which was published much later in 1941. The work is a colourful set of pen-picture biographies of some of the leading figures in the Chartist movement. It also attempts to explain the ultimate failure of Chartism in the effort to achieve its political objectives. As Cole notes in his introduction, Chartism was a product of the dire economic consequences of early industrialisation:

Hunger and hatred - these were the forces that made Chartism a mass movement of the British working class. Hunger gnawed at the hearts of the people, and seemed to gnaw the more fiercely as, under the spur of the new industrialisation, the means of producing wealth increased.¹⁴¹

Chartism was perceived as a true movement of the working-class, which was betrayed by a Whig reformism that had broken faith with the radical movement:

¹⁴¹ G. D. H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (Macmillan, London, 1941) p. 1

To them, the demand for the Charter was a continuation of the Radical movement which had been born in the days of John Wilkes and based firmly on the Rights of Man, during the years which followed the great French Revolution. They inherited the traditions and the programme of Tom Paine and Major Cartwright, of William Cobbett and Henry Hunt. They were picking up again the tradition which had been broken by the Whig Reform Act, in which their middle-class allies had banged the door of Parliament in the faces of the workers, after using them to intimidate the upholders of the old aristocratic order.¹⁴²

Cole had a clear eye on the Whigs in the Labour Party when he penned this passage particularly MacDonald's great betrayal in the alliance with the Tories ten years earlier. The socialist inheritors of the radical cause had been shut out of power when MacDonald and his Labour Party made themselves the new Whigs in a National Tory-led Government. The leading figures of Chartism, however, were far from reckless revolutionaries. These were rational men who wanted to create a fairer and more democratic society in the spirit of Thomas Paine and Henry Hunt. These were men of the Enlightenment, whose radical-liberal ideas felt ill at ease with the rioting mob:

They were idealists, thinking men who were well assured of the ultimate rightness of their political creed –and- ill at ease in the presence of hungry mobs which set more store by bread than by the laws of reason.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 33

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 33

Like Cole himself, these were the rational intellectuals of their day, seeking to change society through reason and not by violent revolution. Cole chose to focus on the reformers rather than the revolutionaries, those radicals striving to improve working conditions as well as fighting for democratic rights. One such figure was Richard Oastler, who campaigned to end the exploitation of young children in the factories, mills and mines of the industrial revolution. Oastler, like Cobbett, was a product of Tory-radicalism, which seemed to find some favour with Cole. Here the intersections between Tory-radicalism and the reform tradition were very apparent, and the inclusion of Oastler in *Chartist Portraits* further compounded the confusions between these two strands in politics with long standing implications for the ways in which Chartism was viewed by a later generation of historians. As Cole notes, Oastler never joined in the Chartist agitation that marked the period:

Yet he belongs with the Chartists, and finds his place in this gallery of Chartist portraits, because his work as an agitator for factory legislation and against the enforcement of the New Poor Law in the North of England was among the principal forces that went to the making of Northern Chartism.¹⁴⁴

When Cole looked at the influence of Tory-radicalism in the period, he noted a political divide within Northern England between two sides of the Pennine hills. This was Cole the pre-eminent social and political historian:

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 81

In Lancashire, there were quite a number of important Whig, Liberal, and Radical manufacturers who took the workers' side in the factory struggle: John Fielden, Joseph Brotherton, and Charles Hindley are outstanding names. In Yorkshire, there were hardly any. In Yorkshire the Whigs, much more than the Tories, counted as the enemies of the common people.¹⁴⁵

In *Chartist Portraits*, Cole chose to dismiss the Newport Rising of 1839, viewing it as an insignificant event in the overall picture of political struggle at the time. Despite the fact that Newport was the last attempted armed insurrection on mainland British soil:

That so small an affair should have become as celebrated as the Newport Rising calls for some explanation; but the explanation is easy to find. In 1839 a great many people in England- and especially in the upper classes- were expecting a Chartist attempt at armed revolution. When only the little 'Newport Rising' actually occurred, it was natural to interpret it in the light of these fears; and thus the largeness of expectation, rather than the smallness of the event, has determined its place in history.¹⁴⁶

This harsh judgement is hardly a surprise when we are reminded that Cole remained a Fabian socialist throughout his life. For Fabians, social change was a process of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 82

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 149

evolution rather than revolution. Cole is equally harsh in his dismissive description of the Newport leader, John Frost:

If Frost had not been the leading figure in the 'Rising', there would have been little to make him more memorable than many other local protagonists of Chartism whose names are now forgotten. He was neither original in his ideas, nor possessed of any remarkable qualities of leadership, nor particularly interesting as a person.¹⁴⁷

Cole laments the lack of interest in the radical figures of the Chartist past, particularly from mainstream historians. This did not exist outside a small circle of socialist intellectuals. As he notes on the life of the Chartist, Ernest Jones:

It is a remarkable fact that no Life of Ernest Jones has ever been published, beyond a brief pamphlet, though of course his name figures prominently in books about the Chartist Movement. There is no want of material. Jones left a diary, now preserved in Manchester; he wrote much journalism, which largely chronicles his efforts for the Charter, and his stories and poems are full of material for the biographer. His life ought to be written; but for the time being this brief essay must serve to remind the present generation of a Socialist pioneer who has not often been given his due.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 159

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 339

This is an impassioned plea for the new discipline of labour history, of which Cole was the leading pioneer of his day. Chartism was a pioneering movement too, but had simply run its course, reaching a political dead end by 1842, though its banner would be picked up by a new trade unionism, and a future socialist movement. From the 1840s it had nowhere to go, either as a movement of reform or of revolution:

After 1842 it had become plain to a great many workmen, as well as to the majority of middle-class Radicals, that there was no chance for a long time to come of making the Charter 'the law of the land' by peaceful means, and also, that the forces of law and order were too powerful to be overcome by violence.¹⁴⁹

The ILP, George Orwell and Spain

The collapse of Chartism a century before was nothing when weighed against contemporary events including the collapse of democracy in Republican Spain to the dark forces of fascism, and the prospect of another world war. Cole was one of the key figures of the British left who gave support to the Republican cause and a Popular Front in 1936. The ILP was also active in the defence of Spanish democracy, sending out an ILP contingent of volunteers to fight alongside the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, widely known as the POUM, a Spanish Trotskyist group which was formed in opposition to the Stalinist Communist Party. Fighting with the POUM alongside Republican forces, the ILP volunteers included an Eric Blair who would later become known as George

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.19

Orwell, and John McNair the future biographer of James Maxton. As Fenner Brockway noted of McNair's involvement in 1936:

Early in August McNair left for Barcelona with an instalment of our Spanish Fund; he was the first worker's representative to go with aid from British workers. Once in Spain, the POUM found him so useful that it asked that he should stay.¹⁵⁰

During this period, the ILP even came under the scrutiny of Scotland Yard for its radical activities in support of the Spanish revolutionaries, a far cry from its respectable liberal origins. As Brockway wryly noted of the close attention given by the authorities:

Our contingent left a few hours before the law making the sending of men illegal came into operation, and we had an exciting rush to get them away, acting all the time under the close surveillance of the police. The Yard even took up quarters on the opposite side of the road to keep us under observation. I rang up the firm to speak to the Inspector. 'Our staff is flattered by the attention you're paying us' I said.¹⁵¹

The Spanish Civil War marked a distinct move to the left for the ILP, and reignited old hopes of creating a new Socialist International. It incubated a new movement comprising all the left-wing parties, with or without the approval of the Comintern in Moscow. As Brockway noted of this new mood within the ILP:

¹⁵⁰ Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* p. 294

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 298

The mood of confidence among our Spanish comrades was so great that we decided to hold a Congress at Barcelona in the following January, and many of the delegates hoped that the Spanish Revolution would provide the inspiration for a new Revolutionary International just as the Russian Revolution had been the background for the formation of the Communist International.¹⁵²

The ILP was soon enmeshed in the radical politics of civil war Spain, taking its side with the Trotskyist POUM, and the anarchist CNT, against a Spanish Communist Party under the spell of Stalin. Indeed, the movement was equally suspicious of the intentions of Stalin, as it was of General Franco. The Popular Front in Britain had initially brought the ILP and the Communist Party together, but events in Spain soon stirred up old rivalries and differences between the two movements. The libertarian socialism of the ILP provided an ideological link with both the POUM and the CNT, in the factional struggles within Spain. As an active participant in these events, John McNair noted:

There were fundamental differences which had not been solved. Between the ILP and the Communist Party there was the different conception of a United Front. The Communist Party stood for the Popular Front which was then Moscow's line. The ILP for the Workers' Front.¹⁵³

As a key leader within the POUM Johan Matteo was invited to Britain to address the annual conference of the ILP, which was held at Glasgow in 1937. The event highlighted

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 297

¹⁵³ John McNair, *James Maxton the Beloved Rebel*, p. 263

the close bonds which had developed between the ILP and the POUM in the Spanish conflict. Matteo's rousing speech was even reproduced for an ILP pamphlet, entitled *Democracy or Revolution in Spain*. In his speech Mateo rejected both the reformism of the liberals and the Stalinism of the Communist Party. Instead he advocated an alliance of revolutionary workers as the only means of defeating Franco and fascism. This reflected the new broad-left position of the ILP, finding itself sandwiched between Labour and the Communist Party, and to the left of British politics. The Communists were the central target for condemnation from Matteo:

The attacks made on POUM by Spanish Stalinism and international Stalinism clearly reveal the role they are playing. From the beginning of the Revolution, POUM has exposed the line of Moscow Communism which tries to make believe that the Spanish workers and peasants are struggling just to save the bourgeois Republic!¹⁵⁴

These anti-communist sentiments drew strong support from the conference, together with a broad-left call for an alliance of revolutionary workers. These were ideas which were not far removed from the libertarian socialism of Fenner Brockway and G. D. H. Cole. Matteo called for even closer links between the POUM and the ILP, and with the anarchist factions of Spain represented by the CNT:

¹⁵⁴ Johan Matteo, *Democracy or Revolution in Spain* (Independent Labour Party, 35 St Brides Street, London, 1937) p. 4

It seeks a united front with the CNT, because this organisation, in spite of its absence of clarity, is a great revolutionary force.¹⁵⁵

Events in Spain had brought the ILP into an unlikely alliance with both Trotskyites and anarchists. This was a broad-left opposition to the totalitarianism of Franco and Stalin. In this revolutionary alliance, the ILP was to reclaim a radical inheritance which was rooted in the socialist ideas of William Morris, with Stalin and the Communist Party now playing the role once reserved for Hyndman and the SDF. George Orwell was the central figure most associated with this new mood within the ILP. Actively involved in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell became a lifelong champion of the broad-left libertarian socialism which was central to the radicalism of the ILP. Orwell totally rejected the totalitarianism of Stalin and the Communist Party, and this became a central theme of his later novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell vividly recalled his experiences fighting with the POUM in the ILP contingent in Spain in his novel *Homage to Catalonia*. On his return to England he was hired as the literary editor of *Tribune*, the newspaper of the newly formed Socialist League. Sharing its name with the earlier movement of William Morris, the new League comprised many figures associated with Fabian socialism and the ILP, including G. D. H. Cole and Harold Laski, but also Aneurin Bevan and Stafford Cripps. The new Socialist League also held within its ranks a young Michael Foot and Barbara Castle. The new Socialist League was formed to promote socialist and anti-fascist policies within the Labour Party, and not as a movement outside it. Many of its members now believed the earlier policy of disaffiliation adopted by the ILP was a mistake. Despite these tactical differences the League actively

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 7

promoted links between itself and the ILP, and even the Communist Party, in a show of left unity against fascism. In the 1930s Orwell, had begun his involvement in politics as a strong supporter of the ILP and its unique brand of socialism, and described his reasons for joining the ILP contingent to fight alongside the POUM in Spain. As he stated in an article for the *New Leader*, in June 1938:

Because the ILP is the only British party- at any rate the only one large enough to be worth considering- which aims at anything I should regard as socialism.¹⁵⁶

Like many intellectuals of his generation in the 1930s Orwell was deeply concerned with the rise of fascism at home. He believed the ILP was the only political party with the independence needed to combat fascism in Britain:

I believe that the ILP is the only party which, as a party, is likely to take the right line either against Imperialist war or against Fascism when this appears in its British form. And meanwhile the ILP is not backed by any monied interest, and is systematically libelled from several quarters. Obviously it needs all the help it can get, including any help I can give it.¹⁵⁷

The independent spirit embodied within the radicalism of the ILP had obviously chimed with Orwell, the political maverick. Sealing his political allegiance during the

¹⁵⁶ George Orwell, *Orwell and Politics*, edited by Peter Davison (Penguin Books, London, 2001) p. 36

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 36

crucial period of the 1930s. Orwell had no wide-eyed illusions about the political conflict in Spain, or indeed about the anti-fascist forces supported by the ILP:

I never pretended, then or since, to agree in every detail with the policy the POUM put forward and the ILP supported, but the general course of events has borne it out. The things I saw in Spain brought home to me the fatal danger of mere negative anti-fascism.¹⁵⁸

It is interesting that within this period Orwell held a growing sympathy for Spanish anarchism. This is reflected within his recollections of the conflict. As the historian Peter Marshall has noted:

He confessed that if he had understood the situation better he would have probably joined the anarchists. Orwell moreover went out of his way to correct the misrepresentations of the anarchists and syndicalists in England.¹⁵⁹

Orwell came to see a crucial link between the radical ideas of libertarian socialists and those of the anarchists. An intellectual link which had its historical roots embedded within the radicalism of the Levellers and Diggers of the English Civil War, it is sometimes asserted that these ideas even came to influence modern political figures such as Gandhi. In a review of *Selections from the Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, which

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 36

¹⁵⁹ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 462

was published for *the Observer* in September 1944, Orwell notes of Winstanley's

Diggers:

Even the poor, humble English Diggers, as these pamphlets show, were able in their few years of activity to disseminate ideas which may have contributed to Spanish Anarchism and may even have remotely influenced such thinkers as Gandhi.¹⁶⁰

In this review Orwell gets to the very heart of English radicalism and its core symbolic belief in a lost utopia destroyed in the Norman Conquest that had implications for the anti-colonial forces opposing Britain's imperial control. Winstanley's visionary ideas drew heavily on this radical narrative and the fight to remove a Norman Yoke forced upon the Saxon English. The return to a lost utopia of ancient rights and liberties was the core theme within English radicalism in ideas which found their expression in later utopian movements such as anarchism, that still looked to a primitive communal past as a source of inspiration. Orwell even adds a little national chauvinism into the mix:

¹⁶⁰ George Orwell, *Orwell and Politics*, p. 339

He clings to a belief which seems to haunt all thinkers of the Anarchist type. The belief that the wished-for Utopia has already existed in the past. The land did once belong to the common people but has been taken away from them. According to Winstanley, this happened at the Norman Conquest, which in his eyes is the cardinal fact in English history. The essential struggle is the struggle of the Saxon common people against the Frenchified upper class.¹⁶¹

The link to an English nationalism was not lost on Orwell, as he aimed to wrest this nationalism from the hands of Oswald Mosley and his fascist Blackshirts. Orwell sought to reclaim this ancient nationalism for the cause of modern socialism. A classic example is *The Lion and the Unicorn*, with the added title, *Socialism and the English Genius*, which was published in 1941 at the height of the Second World War in which he hoped for 'a specifically English Socialist movement'.¹⁶² Orwell allied the notion of patriotism to the cause of social and political reform in work that consciously renewed political ideas which had once been central to Victorian Tory-radicalism. This was a war for national survival, fighting the forces of Hitler and fascism and galvanising the nation into a new spirit of national unity and hope for the future. Orwell uses the political radicalism of the past as a new weapon of war. It was a radical weapon against the Nazi threat to a democratic and socialist future. Orwell was a central figure in a new national myth making, which centred around the 'Dunkirk Spirit' and a nation pulling together in the darkest days of conflict. As he stated:

¹⁶¹ *ibid* p. 340

¹⁶² George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (Penguin, London, 1941, reissued, 1981), p. 72.

I have spoken earlier of the soundness and homogeneity of England, the patriotism that runs like a connecting thread through almost all classes.

After Dunkirk anyone who had eyes in his head could see this.¹⁶³

Orwell believed the war could be a powerful agent for social and political change by bringing social classes together in a common struggle:

There are very few people in England who really want to see their country conquered by Germany. If it can be made clear that defeating Hitler means wiping out class privilege, the great mass of middling people will probably be on our side.¹⁶⁴

Some of these themes have been picked up within the work of current historians, particularly a national narrative of patriotism in Robert Colls' recent work on Orwell, entitled, *George Orwell English Rebel*.¹⁶⁵ Orwell believed the turmoil of total war would unleash social forces which would achieve the historical aims of English radicalism:

*In the short run, equality of sacrifice, 'war communism', is even more important than radical economic changes. It is very necessary that industry should be nationalised, but it is more urgently necessary that such monstrosities as butlers and private incomes should disappear forthwith.*¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ George Orwell, *Orwell and Politics*, p. 109

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 121

¹⁶⁵ Robert Colls, *George Orwell: English Rebel* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013), ch. 6.

¹⁶⁶ *George Orwell, Orwell and Politics*, p. 122

In his view, the social structure of pre-war Britain would be gone forever as a new age of social democracy emerged. These were the practical hopes of many intellectuals on the broad-left. Orwell's own political heroes were the failed dreamers of a radical past: utopians like Gerrard Winstanley and William Morris, and mystical democrats like Whitman and Rousseau. As he noted in an article for the *Manchester Evening News*, which was published in the wake of the war in January 1946:

The pamphlets of Gerrard Winstanley, the digger from Wigan, whose experiment in primitive Communism was crushed by Cromwell, are in some ways strangely close to modern left-wing literature. The 'earthly paradise' has never been realised, but as an idea it never seems to perish in spite of the ease with which it can be debunked by practical politicians of all colours.¹⁶⁷

Orwell became very protective of this radical tradition, defending it from the encroaching hands of Marxist historians. In a review of Christopher Hill's *English Revolution*, published for the *New Statesman* in August 1940, he launched a broadside against the Marxist approach to the political upheavals of the English Civil War:

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 424

A Marxist version of the Civil War must represent it as a struggle between a rising capitalism and an obstructive feudalism, which in fact it was. But men will not die for things called capitalism or feudalism, and will die for things called liberty or loyalty, and to ignore one set of motives is as misleading as to ignore the others.¹⁶⁸

Orwell was a lifelong critic of the Communist Party, and of those who slavishly followed its narrow orthodoxy. This view had been sharpened by his experience in war-torn Spain, where the Communist led government had launched a bloody purge of Trotskyites and anarchists. As he noted in the preface to *Animal Farm*, published in March 1947:

To experience all this was a valuable object lesson: it taught me how easily totalitarian propaganda can control the opinion of enlightened people in democratic countries.¹⁶⁹

Conclusions

Despite valiant efforts Orwell was unable to prevent the Communist appropriation of English radical history, particularly during the turbulent period of the Popular Front at a time when the Communist Party sought to recruit members from the broad liberal left by appealing to an older democratic past. In this, the Communist Party was treading a well-worn path used by earlier Marxist movements. Following the SDF and the Socialist

¹⁶⁸ *ibid* p. 97

¹⁶⁹ *ibid* p. 318

League, the Communist Party also sought to align itself with an older democratic tradition in an effort to widen its political support and appeal. Here the intellectual legacy of the ILP lived on through the political works of George Orwell. This was a legacy that was a unique brand of left libertarian socialism, which had deep suspicions of the totalitarian impulse in Soviet Communism. It was a tradition with deep roots in an English radical past. In conclusion, the ILP can be viewed as a unique movement within the British left. It came to symbolise the high idealism of the British labour movement in its formative years and the strong links to an older democratic tradition. This movement tapped into an older democratic history to offer up its unique vision as an alternative to the Communist Party. It carried with it many important intellectual figures of the British left: figures such as G. D. H. Cole, H. N. Brailsford and George Orwell, who came to symbolise this unique socialist vision. There was also a strong shift of focus within England's radical past, as the ILP moved away from its radical-liberal origins towards a broad-left socialism. This was particularly reflected in the literature of the 1930s and 40s, which provides a central period of focus within this study and is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The Deliberate Appropriation of a Radical Past: The Communist Party and the Popular Front

If anything came to symbolise the deliberate appropriation of an English radical past it was the Communist seizure of democratic history during the period of the Popular Front. This chapter analyses the attempts by the CPGB to appropriate older radical traditions in an effort to expand its base and to supplant the Labour party as the organised focus for working-class activity in Britain. In assessing this strategy, this chapter analyses the appeal of the popular pageants and tableaux organised by the CPGB that were designed to draw on an older radical constituency, and considers the success of this policy of uniting the disparate elements of the labourist/liberal tradition around opposition to Fascism and the National Government. Further, the chapter scrutinises the history and traditions woven together during the Popular Front years, and considers the elements governing the choice of period and the events selected for inclusion in this narrative. In addition, this treatment reveals the absence of rigid ideological purity as an essential element of the CPGB, in line with the flexibility of the British left more broadly towards the theorisation of political struggle.

This was a period when the Communist Party claimed English radical history as its own in its efforts to gain wider membership and appeal as part of a deliberately orchestrated strategy. In this, the British left continued to draw upon an English radical tradition from which it claimed a direct inheritance. The emphasis on a radical democratic past also reflected the lack of a rigid Marxism within the core ideas of the British left. This was in contrast with the more theoretical approach which came to

characterise European socialism. The tendency to avoid a fixed or rigid ideology, in favour of a radical democratic history and tradition, characterised the political core of the British left throughout its history. As already illustrated, this tendency reached back to the very origins of the British labour movement and to its founding figures, particularly William Morris, who drew more inspiration from the radicalism of the Middle Ages than from the political theories of Karl Marx. This tendency can be traced forward to prominent figures in the British left and the labour movement of the twentieth century. It is illustrated in the political writing of H. N. Brailsford and in the historical work and studies of G. D. H. Cole, with its Morris inspired 'Guild Socialism'.¹ This was a tendency clearly seen within the later work of E. P. Thompson in the era of the New Left.

The point of focus and interest within this radical past was to move and change throughout the history of the British left. In its early years the ILP placed a clear focus on its radical-liberal roots and Victorian reformist inheritance. From the 1920s this focus shifted away to the revolutionary radicalism of the English Civil War and to the dissenting movements of the Levellers and the Diggers. The shift of emphasis marked a conscious effort to finally distance the labour movement from its earlier roots within the radical wing of liberalism. Out went the radical Richard Cobden and his liberal reformism, and in came Gerrard Winstanley and his revolutionary Diggers, waving their pitchforks and banners in angry defiance at the world.² The radical traditions of the

¹ David Goodway, 'G.D.H. Cole: 'A Socialist and Pluralist'', in Peter Ackers and Alistair J. Reid (eds.), *Alternatives to State Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave, 2016) pp.245-270

² John Gurney, *Gerrard Winstanley: The Digger's Life and Legacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), pp. 111-128

English Civil War were also appropriated and remoulded by the Communist Party from 1935 to 1939, which marked the period of the Popular Front.

Within this crucial period the Communist Party was to claim English radical history as its own, laying claim to a pluralist democratic inheritance in a deliberate and sustained effort to gain new recruits from the wider liberal left.³ This was now a deeply contested history and tradition, as the Communist Party strove to increase its membership through an appeal to a broader-left community, less impressed by narrow theory and political ideology. In a new drive for recruits the Communist Party now staked its own ideological claim to a wider radical past, and to a history of struggle and popular democratic history. This was now a serious contest for the ownership of the past: a battle which was played out within English radical historiography.

The Popular Front and the CPGB

The Popular Front was brought into existence by the 7th Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1935. As a creation of the Communist Party, the unique feature of the new Popular front was its appropriation of national democratic history and traditions. This was in line with the new orders from Moscow, which called for serious efforts to recruit followers from a broader socialist and liberal left through an appeal to national democratic traditions. The forces of fascism were usurping these historical traditions for their own belligerent ends. It was now the duty of Communists to recover the revolutionary traditions of the past in the struggle against this new fascist

³ See Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989), ch. 2.

menace. The speech by the Bulgarian Communist, Georgi Dimitrov, to the 7th Congress in Moscow summed up the new aims and approach of the Popular Front:

Mussolini makes every effort to make capital for himself out of the heroic figure of Garibaldi. The French fascists bring to the fore as their heroine Joan of Arc. The American fascists appeal to the traditions of the American War of Independence, the traditions of Washington and Lincoln... Communists who do nothing to enlighten the masses on the past of their people...in a genuinely Marxist spirit, who do nothing to link up the present struggle with the people's revolutionary traditions of the past...voluntarily hand over to the fascist falsifiers all that is valuable in the historical past of the nation.⁴

The Popular Front would see the Party draw inspiration from what had previously been regarded as a bourgeois decadent pre-Marxist past. As well as fulfilling the immediate political ends of the Party, this older democratic tradition was also recruited to serve its wider political aims and objectives. The historian Raphael Samuel makes this same point in his article, 'British Marxist Historians':

⁴ G. Dimitrov, *Report of the 7th Congress of the Communist International, Moscow 1935* (Published in Sofia Bulgaria 1979)

Communists, in this period, set about deliberately fostering a sense of democratic heritage, and in those 'March of History' pageants which the Party organised in 1936, Cromwell's portrait was borne proudly aloft along with those of John Ball and Watt Tyler. In line historically, with the broad democratic alliance which the Party was attempting to build, class-struggles – such as the Peasants' Revolt and the English Civil War – were presented as fights for freedom, and, as in Liberal-radical history, the focus of attention was on 'the common people' rather than the industrial working class.⁵

The appropriation of a radical democratic tradition was not unique to Britain during the period of the Popular Front. Czech Communists had recruited the radical Protestant reformer Jan Hus, to their patriotic and revolutionary cause. Hus had an interesting link to Wycliffe and the Lollards in his militant campaign against the excesses of the Papacy and was exploited by the Communists at a time when the Catholic church was developing its own links to the fascist movement in Europe.⁶

The ten years spanning 1935 to 1945 were to exert a powerful and lasting influence on the British left. These crucial years witnessed the rise of European fascism and the events of the Second World War. Both were major factors in creating the brief alliance between Communists, liberals and democratic socialists, which was the main objective

⁵ Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History', *New Left Review* 120, March/April 1980 (Alden Press, Oxford) pp. 41-42

⁶ Zdenek Vybiral, 'Hus in Historical Memory', in Jacob Smrcka, Blarika Zilynska and Eve Dolezalova (eds), *Jan Hus: Courage to Think. Courage to Believe. Courage to Die* (Jan Hus Museum, L Konstan, 2015), pp.152-163

of a Popular Front. The Popular Front strategy had a powerful and lasting influence on many political and intellectual figures in the British left and, although receiving stern criticism from leading figures within the Labour Party, is sometimes credited with paving the way for an alliance of parties during the war years.⁷ It exerted its influence emphatically on the Unity Campaign, the Left Book Club, and especially the Communist Party Historians' Group, which was its greatest legacy. The radical movements and figures of the past were now to be incorporated into a new 'people's history' and Marxist pageant of heroes. The bygone democrats of England's past were now resurrected and recruited to the cause of the modern International. The Levellers and the Diggers now became early harbingers of the Communist cause and an inspiration in the new fight for 'freedom' and 'democracy'. These radical movements of the past were to be the inspiration for those now engaged in the struggle against fascism, as the Communist Party incorporated a political tradition which was largely inherited from radical liberalism. The ten years of the Popular Front saw the party annex a tradition which was central to the many movements of the British left. Much of the liberal element of this tradition had been jettisoned by a labour movement now seeking to distance itself from its origins within radical liberalism. A consequence of the Popular Front was the political re-adoption of this radical-liberal tradition by the Communist Party to gain its own democratic credentials.

Many of the intellectual figures recruited to the ranks of the Communist Party also brought with them an older democratic tradition, which came to exert its own powerful

⁷ Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Quartet Books, 1975), ch. 5. For Herbert Morrison's criticisms of the Popular Front see, *Unity, Peace and Security: Pollitt's Reply to Morrison* (London: The Workers' Library 1936), pp. 2-7.

influence on British Communism. A roll-call of these figures includes, A L Morton, Christopher Hill and a young E. P. Thompson. In this regard, the Communist Party was to play its own crucial role in reviving an English radical tradition with a focus on the revolutionary radicalism of the English Civil War.

An interesting example of this political manipulation was the march of history event organised for Sunday, September 20th 1936. The Popular Front march to Hyde Park was advertised through a pamphlet which was produced by the London District Communist Party and entitled 'The March of English History'. The front page displayed the new style and direction of Popular Front propaganda, adorned with the names and faces of England's radical democratic past. The historical figures of Wat Tyler, John Milton, Oliver Cromwell, Charles James Fox, Lord Byron and Robert Owen all stare from the page as illustrious forerunners of the socialist, and now Communist Party cause. The march and its pamphlet were typical of the new Popular Front strategy and style. The people were urged to march: 'With red flags and banners and with the great figures and events of English History.'⁸ The new Popular Front strategy articulated by Dimitrov was clearly illustrated throughout the whole theatrical event. The new tone was patriotic and even nationalistic, seeking to reclaim a popular national past from the grip of fascism. This had little in common with the rigid internationalism which was previously displayed by the Communist Party. The old official line from Moscow and the Comintern had stated:

⁸ The London District Communist Party, *The March of English History*, Pamphlet (The Communist Party, London 1936) p. 6. Marx Memorial Library.

The Communist International must, in fact and deed, be a single Communist Party of the entire world. The parties working in the various countries are but its separate sections.⁹

The old internationalism of the Party was replaced with a new emphasis on the native democratic traditions of each individual country. The harsh rhetoric of Marxist-Leninism was now softened with the democratic language of Victorian radicalism. The new Communist Party of the Popular Front was now the campaigner for: 'A Free and Merry England.'¹⁰ English history was now a recruiting sergeant for the cause of the Communists and their fight against fascism:

While we bear aloft the Red Flag of modern socialism, we continue on the road trodden by the great names of England's people- Simon de Montfort, Wat Tyler, Hampden and Cromwell, John Wilkes, Charles James Fox, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, William Cobbett, the Chartists, William Morris, Keir Hardie and Tom Mann.¹¹

The Communist Party was now the movement carrying forward this proud tradition of English radical democracy, laying claim to a tradition at the heart of the British labour movement and the broad left. This was a new fight for freedom and justice against the growing menace of fascism:

⁹ *Statutes of the Third Congress of the Communist International* (Moscow, 1920)

¹⁰ The London District Communist Party (Pamphlet) p. 3

¹¹ *ibid* p. 11

We, the Communists of today, remind you of the heritage of England's long struggle for freedom in order that you shall join us in preventing that freedom being trampled under fascist jackboots, and that out of today's Democracy shall come tomorrow's Commonwealth in which man shall no longer exploit his fellow.¹²

The new language of the Party reflected William Morris or an earlier Gerrard Winstanley. The dictatorship of the proletariat was now substituted for a People's Commonwealth; the class struggle was now a struggle for freedom. The language and ideas of the English Civil War, and the democratic aspirations of the Victorian radical, replaced the fiercer ideological rhetoric of the time. The main thrust of the Communist pamphlet, and the Hyde Park march, was a clear demonstration of solidarity for Republican Spain. The struggle of a legitimate democratic government against an unlawful fascist invader was portrayed in the light of England's own democratic past and support for freedom and democracy abroad:

By our great agitation in aid of the Spanish people in their fight for life and liberty we carry forward the English democratic tradition, which always rallied to those who fought for liberty, whether Garibaldi in Italy, or Abraham Lincoln in America.¹³

This new political stance deviated sharply from the previous position of the CPGB, which had displayed a contempt for the British labour movement and its English

¹² *ibid* p.12

¹³ *ibid* p.12

bourgeois democratic traditions. The Communist Party had viewed the Labour government of 1929, as being in league with 'robber imperialists', its foreign policy: 'Unifying the war plans of the imperialists against the Soviet Union, and sanctifying and organising the bloody suppression of the colonial movement.'¹⁴ In 1929 the Party had sought to: 'Mercilessly expose the pseudo-lefts, the main prop of the MacDonald government.'¹⁵ Now the Communist Party was seeking an alliance with these same groups from the bourgeois liberal left. Viewing itself as the new ally and inheritor of a radical democratic past, this appeared the culmination of a Whig history of political struggle and social progress.

This was a central theme promoted and expressed within the wider works of the Popular Front. Indeed, this view was to resonate within the intellectual circles of the party long after the Popular Front project had been abandoned. A good example was a pamphlet published by the Communist Party in 1948 and entitled *The Story of the English Revolution*. Its author was the influential Marxist historian and loyal Party member, A. L. Morton. Morton viewed the Communist Party as the ultimate destination of English radical history and discerned its imagined unbroken origins reaching back to the Leveller movement of the 17th century:

¹⁴ *Resolution of the 11th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (CPGB, Leeds, November 1929)

¹⁵ *ibid*

The Levellers first introduced a new conception into politics - the conception of democracy as the continuous activity of the whole people. In doing so they made themselves the first of a glorious succession that has continued unbroken right down to our time: the Wilksite Radicals, the English and Scottish Jacobins, the Reformers of the age of Cobbett, the Chartists, the early socialists and the Communists today all draw their inspiration from their predecessors and ultimately from the Levellers.¹⁶

The Popular Front was to see the Party portray itself as the final piece in a long and distinguished radical history: ultimately it was the true custodian of a democratic tradition and the only guarantor of its historical development. In the concluding paragraph to his famous 1938 *People's History of England*, A L Morton viewed the future progress of humanity as bound up with support for Soviet policy and its stand against European fascism.¹⁷ An obvious question was the sincerity of the party in this new conversion to a native democratic past. Was there anything genuine in the new belief that it was the only rightful heir to a progressive radical history? In his Popular Front speech of 1935, Georgi Dimitrov clearly signalled a major change in Communist Party thinking. The stark choice now facing the workers of Europe, he argued, was one between liberal democracy or brutal fascism:

¹⁶ A. L. Morton, *The Story of the English Revolution* (The Communist Party, London, 1948) p. 16

¹⁷ A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1938) p. 527

Now the working masses in a number of capitalist countries are faced with the necessity of making a definite choice, and of making it today. Not between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism.¹⁸

The Literature and Historiography of Popular Front History

If the crucial Dimitrov speech of 1935 witnessed a major change of tone from Moscow, the cynical episode of the Nazi-Soviet pact would bring the observer back to a more cautious view of Moscow's sincerity in its claims to the mantle of the democratic past. This became the view of Victor Gollancz, a former fellow traveller with the Party. It cannot be ignored that the Popular Front brought a large influx of new members to the Communist Party, particularly between the crucial years of 1936 to 1939. A major factor for this expansion was a lack of response to the rise of fascism by the established political parties of the time. The impotence of the Chamberlain government and the general confusion of the Labour Party's response to fascism produced compelling reasons for many to join the Communist camp. It was inevitable that many of these new recruits would bring with them the intellectual baggage of a more diffuse socialist and radical-liberal tradition. This played some part in explaining the unique nature of British Marxism in the 1930s. As the historian Raphael Samuel, has noted:

¹⁸ Dimitrov, Report of the 7th Congress

Thirties Marxism in Britain, though under the undisputed leadership of the Communist Party, was very much a hybrid, with a strong admixture of liberal humanism, reflecting the character of the new recruits.¹⁹

This factor may also have played its part in explaining the incorporation of a democratic iconography into British Communism in the Popular Front period. The new historical imagery adopted by the party was as much influenced by its new eclectic membership as by the planned orders from Moscow. In focusing on an older democratic tradition, the Communist Party was imitating Hyndman and the SDF, using this democratic heritage to draw recruits from a wider radical tradition to the new cause of Marx. In the years of the Popular Front, political movements were judged by their actions and deeds in defence of democracy in Spain. For many of these new and less than orthodox recruits, the Communist Party was not found wanting. A major legacy of the Popular front was its intellectual output and the lasting influence of the writers and historians who came to be formed during the years when it was in its ascendancy. In the field of history alone, a small sample of these names includes A. L. Morton, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson.

Of equal importance was the Left Book Club, which was founded by Victor Gollancz, John Strachey and Harold Laski in the summer of 1936. Created to be the educational arm of a united front and using 'knowledge' as a weapon to resist Italian fascism and German Nazism, these prominent intellectual figures of the British left were to play a key role in the Communist attempt to revive a native English radical tradition and

¹⁹ Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History' p.24

brought this diffuse and eclectic heritage within a Marxist framework. Two books reflect the long lineage and legacy of this attempt within the field of history, both published by Victor Gollancz: A. L. Morton's, *A People's History of England*, which was published in 1938 at the height of the Popular Front, and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, which was published in 1963 at the height of the New Left. The historian Christopher Hill also continued to publish his ideas well into the final years of the twentieth century. These works reflected the enduring legacy of a Popular Front interest in the English Civil War and the Puritan revolution. One of Hill's last books was, *The English Bible and the 17th Century Revolution*, which was published in 1993 and dedicated to Edward and Dorothy Thompson, his fellow travellers in the field of historical study. He also wrote movingly at the end of his life on John Bunyan and the legacy of his Pilgrim's Progress.²⁰

The 1930s and 40s were to witness the publication of many books on the subject of 17th century radicalism. The Left Book Club also reflected this new interest and focus. Joseph Needham's, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, which was published in 1939 under the pseudonym of Henry Hollorenshaw, and D W Petegorsky's *Left Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, which was published in 1940, are crucial examples of the new historical emphasis. Joseph Needham was to emphasise the revolutionary nature of English history, drawing parallels between the English revolution of the 17th century and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. A firm supporter of Communism, Needham reflected the powerful urge to appropriate this radical past on behalf of the

²⁰ Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (Penguin: London, 1993), and Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and His Church* (Oxford University Press, 1988), ch. 29.

'new cause' of the Communist Party. In his view, it was the English, not the Russians, who ignited this revolutionary tradition with the overthrow of a tyrannical king. As Needham noted in *The Levellers and the English Revolution*:

It is striking to recall that in the 17th century Englishmen were regarded throughout Europe after 1649, with some such feelings of horror as Russians after 1917; for it was Englishmen, not Russians, who set the example in Europe of executing a King when his actions seemed to be clean contrary to the good of the people.²¹

Like A. L. Morton, Joseph Needham viewed the Levellers and Diggers as the first true champions of a Communist philosophy, advocating the setting up of: 'What we should now call collectivised agriculture.'²² Needham was an interesting figure in his own right. He was rooted in, and came from, a scientific background which reflected the large number of recruits to the Communist Party from the scientific community. *The Levellers and the English Revolution* also reflected political and historical sentiments which were found within wider circles of the British left, particularly during the Popular Front period. From the Putney debates to the wider agitation of the Levellers, the Civil War was the unique crucible which forged English radical social thought:

²¹ Henry Hollorenshaw, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1939) pp. 12-13

²² *ibid* p. 19

The importance of the Levellers movement for British Socialism today lies in the fact that the ideals of Socialism and Communism are not, as so many people think, something of foreign origin, French or Muscovite, alien to the genius of the English people. The truth is exactly opposite. Englishmen, in their revolution of the 17th century, were the first to visualise, and fight for, the co-operative socialist commonwealth.²³

This was a new fusion of patriotism and socialism, of progressive political ideas with a sense of English national identity which was equally reflected in the contemporary writing of George Orwell. Orwell was a firm opponent of the Communist Party, though a strong supporter of the Popular Front, and of the revival of an English radical tradition.²⁴ Needham was a firm supporter of Communism, though he still maintained a strong belief in Christian socialism and saw these two contradictory beliefs reconciled within the spiritual radicalism of Gerrard Winstanley and his Digger movement.

In his work, *Left Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, David Petegorsky makes a similar, if less nationalistic, point about the Digger movement. Taking a more orthodox Marxist position, Petegorsky noted that:

The Diggers were unquestionably a movement of the dispossessed and property-less, their social doctrine wholly a proletarian ideology.²⁵

²³ *ibid* p. 93

²⁴ Bounds, *Orwell and Marxism*, pp. 41-50.

²⁵ David W Petegorsky, *Left Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* (Victor Gollancz Ltd, London 1940) p. 13

In his view, the radical political factions of the English Civil War were now the crucial social movements of the past, the first to firmly challenge entrenched economic power within English society. They were the precursors of social movements leading up to and beyond the Popular Front and the Communist Party. Now they were brought within the Marxist pantheon of heroes. The Levellers and the Diggers were defined by the fact that they could not accept formal political equality, but also demanded economic equality as their goal. The Diggers were the first political movement to experiment with a primitive form of communism, which sought to finally wrest the land from the hands of a corrupt aristocratic elite.

Many broad-left publications from the Popular Front reflected an equal interest in England's turbulent Civil War past. Often the language, tone and subject matter differed little from the publications of the Communist Party. An example was the broad-left newspaper, *Tribune*, the first issue of which appeared in January 1937, as the spearhead for a broad-left version of the Popular Front, known under the name of the Unity Campaign. *Tribune* reflected the views of many of the leading figures in the broad-left. The controlling board comprised such luminaries as Stafford Cripps, Harold Laski, H. N. Brailsford and Aneurin Bevan. A *Tribune* editorial dated Friday May 7th 1937, under the heading 'The Socialist Task', reflected the clear radical tone of the newspaper. Speaking of the recent unemployment marches, and the need to defend democracy in Spain, the editorial ran:

We have to fight for power to change the social pyramid, and in its place, erect a Commonwealth, in which the social and economic equality of all has become a reality and the wealth produced by the workers pours upon themselves.²⁶

This Commonwealth inheritance was a historical tradition which was equally claimed and fiercely defended by the broad left. Like much of the broad-left language of the Popular Front, a diffuse Marxism was couched in the ideological sentiment of an earlier radical past. This was language equally reflected in Aneurin Bevan's pivotal social divisions of 'Poverty, Property and Democracy'. Throughout the Popular Front period, *Tribune* produced a series of historical articles by Leslie Brewer, which dealt with English radical history through a series of miniature pen-picture biographies. Figures incorporated included political radicals as diverse as Shelley, Keir Hardie, Charles James Fox and William Morris. Indeed, the Unity Campaign and the Communist Popular Front were to draw on this same stock of radical democratic figures. A Communist Party pamphlet, produced for the 1936 Hyde Park march, was to focus on the same historical tradition. The pamphlet drew on a radical history of democratic struggle, but also on a Whig and liberal history of evolving constitutional reform. The Communist chronology included the illustrious events of Magna Carta and the Habeas Corpus Act, as well as the Great Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867. These were hardly the triumphs of a radical 'people's history', let alone a revolutionary proletariat.

²⁶ *Tribune*, 'The Socialist Task' Editorial (May 7th 1937)

The aim of a broad anti-fascist alliance ended abruptly with the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. The brief and unholy alliance of Hitler and Stalin effectively ended the honeymoon for the broad-left and the Communist Popular Front, although its intellectual legacy was to remain potent throughout the war years and beyond. The Popular Front had played a major role in reviving a native democratic tradition that would merge with a national patriotic war effort in the 1940s. This was compellingly promoted in the contemporary writing of George Orwell and was equally illustrated in the publications of the Army Bureau for Current Affairs. As Raphael Samuel notes:

Colonel Rainsborough's ringing declaration that 'the poorest hee that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest hee' served as a clarion call for the democratic aspirations of the time. The notion of 'freedom in arms' also had an obvious contemporary relevance. Those plain russet-coated soldiers who 'knew what they fought for and loved what they knew' seemed, historically speaking, first cousins to the men who had fought fascism in Spain or the heroes of the Eighth Route Army.²⁷

For Samuel, the new national democratic spirit had created a revived interest in the issues of citizenship and equality. These were new concerns which played their part in the extraordinary Labour victory of 1945. Michael Foot passes a similar, and typically broad-left judgement, on these domestic events. In romantic prose, which echoed the radical language adopted by the left in the period, Foot took the view that:

²⁷ Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History' p. 27

Community life, so far from being disrupted by bombs and blackouts, was being richly renewed. Many an Air Raid Precaution Centre became a miniature mock Parliament, with class barriers broken, tongues untied and accents forgotten. Men and women became comrades and England caught a glimpse of what a co-operative Commonwealth might be. With this new spirit went a political ferment directed partly against the squalor of the past and partly in excited hope towards the future and peace when it came.²⁸

These descriptions of a shared struggle played their part in sustaining the powerful myth of a 'people's war' which had annexed itself to an English radical past. This is illustrated in Josiah C Wedgwood's, *Forever Freedom*, which was a classic compendium of literature, prose and poetry on the theme of England's radical history that was typical of the Popular Front period. Wedgwood was a Labour convert from radical-liberalism and drew heavily on this history to reinforce the national struggle against fascism. His work includes stirring references to the Chartist poets, Ernest Jones, Gerald Massey and Ebenezer Elliott and earlier radicals such as Gerrard Winstanley.²⁹ Michael Foot exemplified the pivotal influence of an English radical tradition on the British labour movement. As a major figure in post-war British Labour, Foot played an important part in keeping its flame alive within the literature of the left. Though the Communist Party had manipulated English radical history as part of a broader political strategy, this history continued to resonate with party members long after the Popular Front project had ended. Its eclectic ranks retained their sincere attachment to a native democratic

²⁸ Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, Volume 1 1897-1945* (Macgibbon & Kee, London, 1962) p. 330

²⁹ Josiah C. Wedgwood (ed.), *Forever Freedom* (Pelican, London, 1940) pp. 69-70; 135-6; 131-134

history and revolutionary past. The 17th century and the English civil war were particularly singled out as a crucial period for Marxist attention and study. This was perceived as the era of England's first true revolution and the beginnings of the first truly radical social movement. It was an era which attracted attention from writers, intellectuals and historians, who delved into England's radical past to find a source of modern inspiration.

A Communist political strategy to win hearts and minds for a Popular Front would have a wider influence on the broader circles of the British left. These intellectuals enjoyed greater freedom and were less constrained by the changing Party line from Moscow. The *Left Review*, was a major voice of the new Popular Front intelligentsia in the 1930s. Aimed at this new coalition of the left, its articles gave an equal weight to the democratic struggles of the past as to the socialist struggles of the modern world. Its contributors came from many shades of anti-fascist opinion at the time. They included both party, and non-party members, fellow travellers and affiliates. Its political spectrum covered a robust swathe of opinion, embracing Marxists, liberals and anti-fascist Conservatives, though its focus remained concentrated on the broad-left alliance of the Popular Front. Many of the articles within *Left Review* were to look back to the radical icons of England's democratic past. Seminal figures, which included Tom Paine and William Blake, were chosen to illustrate England's long history of continual struggle against tyranny and injustice.³⁰ The Guild Socialist and labour historian, G. D. H. Cole, was to sum up the new ethos and direction of the publication:

³⁰ For the *Left Review*, see Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991), ch. 1.

The British working class is all too apt to forget that it has a history. It has, in fact, the longest continuous history of struggle of any section of the world's workers- The Civil Wars of the 17th century left behind them a legacy of social radicalism, which lived on through the Whig ascendancy of the 18th century; and this radicalism lived on to fuse itself with the earliest struggles of organised workers for a share in both economic and political power.³¹

The new cause of modern socialism had its roots firmly embedded within the 'good old cause' of Civil War radicalism. In another article from May 1937, Tom Paine 'The Rebellious Needleman' is described as: 'One of the doughtiest champions of political freedom and liberty of thought.'³² Paine is portrayed as the unique product of this dissenting revolutionary tradition:

Tom Paine, the son of a small Quaker farmer, did not impress his fellow townsmen as being in any way an unusual character. But a hatred of oppression coloured by the traditions of Cromwellian days which are still strong among the non-conformists of the Eastern Counties, an indomitable spirit and a gift for ready self-expression, gradually pushed him to the forefront.³³

As with many of the articles from the Popular Front, a strong emphasis is placed on the Nonconformist background to English radical social protest. It is also a curious fact

³¹ G. D. H. Cole, 'Left History', *Left Review*, vol., 3 (1937).

³² Samuel Hill, 'The Rebellious Needleman: Tom Paine', *Left Review*, vol., 3 (1937), pp. 202-207.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 203-204.

that the literature of the Popular Front could contain glowing biographies of political figures as diverse as Tom Paine and Joseph Stalin. Many within the British left had failed to view Stalin as a totalitarian figure. The 1936 Soviet constitution was even hailed by many as the most democratic in the world! Paine and Stalin were both seen as equal defenders of the same democratic values. The radical poet William Blake was another figure who frequently featured within the literature of the Popular Front. Indeed, his attraction for the British left has continued into the present era, in large part, due to the work of the English Marxist historians, A. L. Morton and E. P. Thompson. A *Left Review* article, dated February 1937, broke away from the attempt to explain Blake in purely Marxist and materialist terms. The economic and social milieu of his age was completely overlooked and his class position ignored. Instead, the author focused on Blake's mysticism, and on the unorthodox mythical idealism of the revolutionary poet. William Blake's lyrical 'Jerusalem' was viewed as a mystical embryonic socialism:

How little do all those organisations who swear weekly not to cease from mental fight realise the kind of Jerusalem which, according to the authority of their author, they are undertaking to build!³⁴

The Marxist philosopher and historian, T. A. Jackson, wrote a series of articles for *Left Review* that embodies this tendency. Jackson was a curious figure within the ranks of the Communist Party, being thoroughly absorbed in the radical ethos of an earlier socialism. Raphael Samuel has frequently referred to Jackson as: 'The late product of Clerkenwell

³⁴ Randall Swingler, 'The Imputation of Madness: A Study of William Blake and Literary Tradition', *Left Review*, vol., 3 (1937), pp. 21-28.

radicalism.’³⁵ Indeed, after the war Jackson produced an autobiography, entitled, *Solo Trumpet*, which alludes to the radical traditions from this part of London, emphasising the small workshop-based artisan radicalism of Clerkenwell Green.³⁶ In an article entitled, ‘Dickens the Radical’, Jackson took a new and very unorthodox Communist position, attacking Dickens for his deep suspicion of the parliamentary system. This was apparently the obstacle which held Dickens back from a practical engagement with the struggles of his time:

It is no doubt true that Dickens never fully realised the cumulative force of his own indictment of bourgeois society. Hence he did not draw the theoretical conclusions that, to us, seem to have been staring him in the face. Much of the failure to do so must, no doubt, be attributed to the fact that the very strength of his prejudice against Parliament and Parliamentarians held him back from participation in actual, practical, political struggles from which he would have learned both the need for and how to achieve the theoretical comprehension of his own work, which was the chief thing that he lacked.³⁷

Jackson’s article exemplified the new strategy of political engagement adopted by the Communist Party. This was the resurrection of an older political tradition which saw Parliament as the central forum for contest and debate. Dickens the radical had rejected Parliament and its politicians. Jackson, the Communist, now embraced Parliament as the

³⁵ Raphael Samuel, ‘The Lost World of British Communism’, *New Left Review* (March/April 1986) p. 79

³⁶ T.A. Jackson, *Solo Trumpet: Some Memories of Socialist Agitation and Propaganda* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1953), chs, 1-2.

³⁷ T. A. Jackson, ‘Dickens the Radical’, *Left Review*, vol., 3 (1937), pp. 88-95.

principal platform for political struggle. The Popular Front was to witness the reversal of previous party views on the cherished pillars of liberal democracy. The Communist Party now began to embrace the institution of Parliament together with its liberal-democratic history.

The Popular Front and Religion

This tendency was also extended to the forbidden territory of religion and a Protestant Nonconformist past. This was a major departure from previous Marxist orthodoxy within the party. The Popular Front had crucially brought a new attitude towards religion and to its radical role in shaping a democratic past. As late as 1930, the Communist line had been militantly antagonistic towards Christianity. Voicing the uncompromising atheism of Moscow the traditional view asserted:

Before all the world: Christianity stands decadent, corrupt, the enemy of science, the defender of private property, the defender of capitalist civilisation, the crusader of war against the greatest revolution in the history of mankind.³⁸

A major change began with the 7th Congress of the Communist International which marked a greater tolerance towards religion in an effort to broaden the appeal of the Party. In Britain, the 1935 symposium, 'Christianity and the Social Revolution', marked a major sea-change in Communist Party thinking. One party follower, Dr Joseph Needham

³⁸ 'Christ and Communism', *Communist Review*, 11 (1930), p. 7

(aka Henry Hollorensaw) was to make a powerful comparison between the 'radical' Jesus of history and a new revolutionary proletariat organised against fascism:

We cannot expect any recovery of the Jesus of History in those who are reconciled to the social order and its moral values, or who flinch from class and party strife. The apocalyptic crisis has descended upon our age, not prematurely as in the time of Jesus, but in the fullness of time. The church may try, but it cannot succeed today in crucifying the Christ. The new Christ is an insurgent proletariat, the uprisen people of God, and the Church which fails to do him reverence must be cast forth into the outer darkness. The day of the Lord is at hand.³⁹

Jesus was now firmly rehabilitated and brought within a Marxist pantheon of heroes. This marked a return to older images of the 'just Christ' who would officiate over a period of justice and prosperity. Needham consciously drew upon the apocalyptic language of Protestant dissent for his new message of a proletarian millennium. Raphael Samuel has noted the seismic effect of this new attitude towards religion which had a major impact on the field of Marxist history:

³⁹ Joseph Needham, Contribution to John Lewis et al, *Christianity and the Social Revolution* (1935)

There was a new recognition in this period of the revolutionary role of religion in the past and a determined attempt on the part of Communists to claim the tradition of radical Non-conformity as their own. Homage was paid to the Bible as the revolutionists' handbook of the 16th and 17th centuries, and revolutionary Puritanism was called upon to give Communism an English lineage.⁴⁰

British Communists drew inspiration from the same stock of dissenting heroes which had inspired radical liberalism. Bunyan, Cromwell and Milton were now the rehabilitated representatives of a proud revolutionary past. The old heroes of the ILP were now appropriated by the Communist Party and its Popular Front who claimed a stake in this contested radical history and democratic past. The new attitude to religion also marked a major transition from the positions of the past. A new political reality demanded a new political approach, both by the party and by its new members, in the face of a growing threat from fascism. In a collection of essays entitled, *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, Margot Heinemann expressed the new view:

The Seventh Congress signalled a break with earlier attitudes to religion, looking to co-operation with those varied faiths against fascism and war. Communists working in local peace councils often found that Quakers and church people were among the most active and influential.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History,' p. 51

⁴¹ Margot Heinemann, *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (Lawrence & Wishart, London 1985) p. 176

Many publications from the Popular Front period grappled with the issue of reconciling the opposing forces of Communism and Christianity. The work of Hewlett Johnson, the Red Dean of Canterbury, exemplified the effort. An advertisement from the *Left Review* of April 1937, for the book *Christianity, Right or Left?* by Kenneth Ingram displayed in bold captions the main contention of the book:

That Communism is by no means incompatible with religion is Mr Ingram's main contention. He also provides a powerful indictment against Fascism and looks forward to a pact between Russia, France and Great Britain.⁴²

It is in the province of history that we witness the best example of a new Communist interest in a native radical Nonconformist past. Many intellectual contributions from the left became focused on this field of radical democratic history. Two crucial works from the Popular Front were A. L. Morton's, *A People's History of England*, which was published in 1938, and Christopher Hill's, *The English Revolution*, published later in 1940. Both became seminal histories of an English radical tradition and represent a new and inclusive re-evaluation of England's democratic past by the Communist Party. Indeed, Communists were to draw on this native radical past throughout the 1930s. Both Morton and Hill were dedicated Communist Party members. Morton was also an early convert, joining the Party in 1929. Both histories were the product of dedicated Party intellectuals and were deliberately aimed at a mass readership. They also became part of a wider political initiative that involved recruiting English radical history in the

⁴² Advertisement, *Left Review*, vol., 3 (1937), p. 191

struggle to win hearts and minds against a rising fascism. These were histories which were more than willing to recruit a national democratic tradition in the cause of a Communist Popular Front. Both historians present the standard Marxist view of historical development, in which material and economic forces become the focal point for explanations of the past. Both historians also re-adapted this Marxist orthodoxy to recognise the central role of Protestant dissent in shaping England's revolutionary past.

Christopher Hill used a standard Marxist argument to explain the origins of the English Civil War. The Puritans who stood behind Cromwell represented a new and rising middle-class. The City-merchants, yeoman farmers and independent artisans who sought to remove the old feudal order of Crown, Church and landed aristocracy provided the backbone of his support:

The new economic developments of the 16th and 17th centuries made the old economic and social and political system hopelessly out of date.⁴³

Hill makes a comparison between the 17th century defenders of feudalism and the modern defenders of liberal capitalism:

Their role was the same as that of many liberals at the present day who think how nice it would be if capitalism could still work in the 'liberal' 19th century way, without having to resort quite so frequently to fascism and war.⁴⁴

⁴³ Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1940) p. 15

⁴⁴ *ibid* p. 15

Hill viewed the growth of modern fascism as the last dying gasp of a reactionary capitalism unable to return to its liberal Victorian past. This had a parallel with the elites of the 17th century, who sought a return to the glory days of feudalism in the face of a new revolutionary Puritanism which sought to sweep them away. A. L. Morton's, *People's History*, is an equally interesting work. Echoing sentiments which were found in earlier non-Communist radical histories, a point of particular focus was the Norman Conquest, of which he notes:

The Normans introduced into England a body of written and rigid feudal law which was the expression of an intensified exploitation that tended to force all cultivators into the one mould, that of serfs.⁴⁵

Morton's Popular Front history echoed the newly directed view of religion. With his emphasis on its positive role as a revolutionary force within English history, of the Peasants' Revolt, he writes:

The villeins who declared 'We are men formed in Christ's likeness and we are kept like beasts', were growing conscious of their human dignity. The rising had a background of primitive communism, strongly Christian in character.⁴⁶

As in earlier radical-liberal histories, Morton draws on the crucial influence of religious Nonconformity upon a radical democratic past. The English vernacular Bible of

⁴⁵ A L Morton, *A People's History of England* (Lawrence & Wishart Third Ed, London 1996) p. 50

⁴⁶ *ibid* p. 99

the 17th century, in his view, had a liberating and revolutionary impact upon English society:

Once the Bible was common property and not a book in an unknown tongue available only to priests, the key to the mysteries lay in the hands of any man who could read. Protestants made the Bible the text book of their party and its study the centre of their practice. For the men of the 16th and still more the 17th century it was a veritable revolutionists' handbook.⁴⁷

Morton draws even further upon this radical-democratic history, with a description of the 16th century conflict with Catholic Spain. The Protestant victory over the reactionary forces of Spain paved the way for the progressive economic and political development of England:

The war with Spain can best be understood as the first phase in the English revolution. First, because it was a defeat for feudal reaction in Europe- and second, because the classes inside England which defeated Philip were exactly those which afterwards led opposition to Charles.⁴⁸

Morton makes an implicit parallel between the reactionary Spain of Philip II and that of Franco, a fascist dictator claiming to defend the Catholic Church. The Puritans who ignited the English Civil War are a progressive historical force, working to advance the

⁴⁷ *ibid* p. 156

⁴⁸ *ibid* p. 171

democratic aspirations of their time. This was a religion which was far removed from the reactionary faith of the modern age:

Puritans felt their triumph inevitable and their enemies to be God's enemies. Against any man, be he king or priest, who ventured to lay burdens or chains upon them they felt entitled to fight with any weapon that the Lord put into their hands - all of which is really saying, in the Biblical language of the 17th century, that they were conscious of their mission as a historically progressive class engaged in a revolutionary struggle.⁴⁹

In his *English Revolution*, Christopher Hill also becomes a Marxist champion of this Protestant radical tradition. This had a national dimension because religious and political freedom were traditionally seen as ingrained within the English way of life:

Because Cromwell, stabling in cathedrals the heroes of the most disciplined and most democratic cavalry the world had yet seen, won a victory which for ever stopped men being flogged and branded for having unorthodox views about the Communion service.⁵⁰

There was an implicit message within Hill's work which was a rejection of the previous Whig histories of the past. English history was not a quiet process of peaceful incremental reform but a series of turbulent political struggles. The democratic struggles of the English Civil War had been turbulent and revolutionary. These were

⁴⁹ *ibid* p. 186

⁵⁰ Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution*, p. 18

convulsions which were radical lessons for the present as well as the past. The democratic rights created in these distant struggles now needed defending in the present:

Historians have done their utmost to stress the 'continuity' of English history, to minimise the revolutionary breaks. The important thing is that the social order was new and would not have been won without revolution. It is struggle that wins reforms, just as it is struggle that will retain the liberties which our ancestors won for us.⁵¹

The rehabilitation of religion and a Nonconformist tradition was also a reflection of the new recruits who had joined the Communist Party in the Popular Front. As Raphael Samuel noted when he examined the background of many Marxist historians of the period:

The historians recruited to the Party in the period of the Popular Front seem to have come, quite largely, from a background of 'liberal-dissent'.⁵²

The Popular Front was never the exclusive property of the Communist Party. Many from the broad liberal left were equally aware of the threat to democracy posed by fascism and were more than willing to join a broad alliance against it. A. J. Cummings reflected the views of a liberal columnist of the *News Chronicle*. He was very aware that the new direction of the Communist Party might be nothing more than a cynical tactic dreamed up by Dimitrov in Moscow. Nevertheless, in an article for *Left Review* entitled

⁵¹ *ibid* pp. 78-79

⁵² Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History,' p. 52

'The Radicals of Today', Cummings rejected the view that Communists were simply hijacking radical liberalism for their own cynical ends:

For my part I do not believe that it is the governing motive of the many sincere and able men of the left who are advocating the only discoverable constitutional method by which it can be hoped to plan and to carry in effect an early programme of social justice, liberty and peace. But even if they have in mind a distant objective, this does not affect my attitude to a Popular Front. For one thing, the immediate issues are too critical for any quarrel about distant objectives to be relevant. If democracy breaks down and the world dissolves into chaos, then as a good Liberal said recently, there will be no property to defend, no liberty to safeguard, nothing to socialise. The threats, open and veiled, aimed at these democratic rights are having a really extraordinary effect on the minds of hundreds of thousands of young men and women who have just reached voting age. Whatever they may call themselves- they are in reality young Radical democrats.⁵³

This new inclusive democratic spirit marked a departure from previous internecine conflict within the left. The Communist Party had departed from its previous orthodoxy to embrace a wider democratic tradition. These changes were reflected within the field of Marxist history with a changing attitude towards religion and its impact on the radical social movements of the past. The new inclusive spirit was to have its

⁵³ A. J. Cummings, 'The Radicals of Today', *Left Review*, vol., 2 (1936)

intellectual legacy in the works of A. L. Morton, Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. Though the British Communist Party remained bound to the edicts from Moscow, the intellectual legacy of an inclusive approach to the past outlasted the Popular Front movement.

Rallies, Pageants and the Popular Front View of the National Past

Popular production for a mass audience had been a crucial ingredient of the Communist strategy to win hearts and minds for a Popular Front. Mass rallies and events were staged by the party in a bid to project the Popular Front as a major mass movement. In their cultural context of parades, marching bands, amateur theatricals and dressing up, the Popular Front pageants were in a long tradition of community engagement and pastimes outlined by Paul Readman in his research project on the local pageant tradition in Britain.⁵⁴ Rallies, pageants and plays were staged to put across the new message to a mass audience that was less engaged with academic history. The *March of History* pageant and the accompanying rally in Hyde Park, which was organised by the Communist Party in 1936, provided a much-imitated model which was used throughout the period.

These events usually began with a march that culminated in a central rallying point, which often involved a large stadium. The concluding rally usually combined choral singing and political speeches, brought together with a play performed on a historical

⁵⁴ See Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme and Paul Readman, 'Commemoration through Dramatic Performance: Historical Pageants and the Age of Anniversaries, 1905-1920', in T.G. Otte, (ed.), *The Age of Anniversaries: The Cult of Commemoration 1895-1925* (Routledge, London, 2018), pp. 195-218.

theme, which the rally had commemorated. Historical themes swept across England's radical past to embrace a wide swathe of democratic figures and movements. *Heirs to the Charter*, was an example of a play which was produced as part of a Slater-Gyseghem pageant, which was mounted by the London District Communist Party at Empress Stadium, Earls Court, London, on July 22nd 1939. *Picture Post* described the event as: 'the largest gathering of comrades in the Party.'⁵⁵ The whole affair was staged as part of a massive recruitment drive intended to swell the national membership of the Party and gain wider support for a Popular Front. Entitled, *Heirs to the Charter 1839 to 1939*, the play commemorated the history of working class struggle and the centenary of the Chartist uprising at Newport.

The main theme of the production was implicit within the title of the play. The heirs of radicalism were the Communist Party and its Popular Front. This was the central theme implicit within many Popular Front productions. Placing the Communist Party as the focal point of a radical tradition with its roots embedded deep in English history is a major theme in the drama. At the beginning of the play, a character called *Swann* is hauled up before the magistrates for distributing an illegal newspaper. It is *Swann's* impassioned speech before authority which provides an early context for the main theme of the play:

⁵⁵ *Picture Post*, 5th August 1939 p. 32.

You and your like have taken men's freedoms away. A man used to work in his own house, in his own time. You've made him a slave in your factories. There's a way out of this slavery we tell the people - combination - and a vote for every man in the country. We sell our papers for that!⁵⁶

The historical narrative is brought quickly forward in a crucial debate between two principal characters of the play. Egremont is a young and hopeful MP, based on the character of the same name in Benjamin Disraeli's novel, *Sybil*, written in 1845, and an explicit reference back to the 'one nation' Conservative tradition.⁵⁷ Cradle-Rocker, in contrast, is a mysterious character linked to the radical Chartists. Queen Victoria has just ascended the throne, and Egremont describes this event with optimism as the beginning of a new age of possibilities. Cradle-Rocker is far less optimistic about the whole affair. Victoria reigns over two very different and unequal nations:

Egremont This is a new reign. Perhaps it is a new era. Society may be in its infancy, but our Queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed.

Cradle-Rocker Which nation? For she reigns over two.

Egremont How?

⁵⁶ Communist Party of Great Britain, *Heirs to the Charter 1839-1939* (CPGB, London 1939) p. 7

⁵⁷ See for the radical potential of Disraeli's novel, *Sybil*, Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (Fontana, London, 1979 edn.), pp. 4-5.,

Cradle-Rocker Two nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners and are not governed by the same laws.

Egremont You speak of?

Cradle-Rocker The rich and poor.⁵⁸

Heirs to the Charter, gives a voice to the revolutionary nature of Chartism in the 1830s. The year of 1839 had witnessed an early attempt at armed insurrection in Britain. The play also highlights the Chartist belief in Parliament as the institution through which it would bring about its revolutionary changes. This emphasised the radical-liberalism at the heart of the Chartist movement and revealed an implicit message within the play. It reflected the new concerns of the Party and its new mission of forging a broad democratic alliance by appealing to the democratic sentiments of a radical past. This last point comes through clearly in a debate between Julian Harney, the chairman of the Working Men's Association and chief agitator for The People's Charter, and a militant member of the movement, who sees the more immediate issues of bread and beer, not annual Parliaments, as the crucial issue on which to fight. Harney

⁵⁸ *ibid* p. 9

replies in a speech which summed up the new democratic mood of the Communist Party and its attempt to recruit radical liberal history to its anti-fascist cause:

I have been imprisoned many times for working the illegal newspapers. I have been a target because they say I have been flamboyant and a revolutionary. They say, whilst they hold up hands in horror, that I have worn the red cap of Liberty. Why were they horrified? Why was I in prison? Because they understand, as I understand, that this is a question of political power. That's the key to the economic question. It is the key to every question- political power. The Charter is a knife and fork question. That is why I am supporting the Charter.⁵⁹

This stirring rhetoric was most likely penned by Dona Torr (although firm evidence is lacking here) a key female figure within the Party and founder of the Communist Party Historians' Group. A major and often overlooked figure of the Popular Front period during its appropriation of a radical past, she still lacks a biographer - the relative absence of women in the group, emphasises the 'maleness' of the perspectives brought to bear on the radical past in the years before the 1980s. In scene 15, the play moves on to the Chartist convention where a possible general strike is mooted. One of the Chartist leaders, Bronterre O'Brien, rejects the idea on the basis that there is insufficient organisation or class solidarity amongst the workers. These are Marxist sentiments which find an echo with the mysterious character Cradle-Rocker. This name

⁵⁹ *ibid* p. 11

suggests radical and revolutionary connotations. As Cradle-Rocker states: 'We have made a start. The end is in the future.'⁶⁰

The convention is interrupted by the entrance of soldiers who arrest those gathered at the meeting. This includes O'Brien, Harney and Feargus O'Connor. Scene 17, witnesses the bleak trial of those arrested, including Chartists involved in the armed uprising in Newport. They are brought before the judge in manacles and the members of the Chartist convention are given prison sentences whilst those involved in the Newport Rising receive the sentence of death, which is commuted to transportation by a fearful government. Scene 19, moves on to a year later and the formation of a new Chartist convention better organised and prepared than before:

Chairman Citizens, this skeleton of a Convention is assembled here to put Chartism on a new basis. Behind us we have the breakdown of 1839, last year. What is the remedy?

Harney Organise, Organise.

Chairman Citizen Harney says the remedy is organisation. Citizen Harney is right. What we want is a system of regular membership, regular dues payment, a Manchester headquarters- and in due time we shall see the beginnings of a change.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *ibid* p. 19

⁶¹ *ibid* p. 22

The central message is clear about the key importance of organisation, membership and regular dues payment. These were central themes for the British Communist Party of the 1930s under the leadership of its own chairman, Harry Pollitt. Indeed, Pollitt himself had a Chartist great-grandfather, whom he mentioned with pride in a later autobiography.⁶² The play moves on, and in scene 21, the Chartists of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Staffordshire organise a general strike. At this point in the play there is an actual torchlight procession and crowds of workers chanting 'General Strike, General Strike!' At this rousing point an emotive address is read out to the strikers from the Chartist executive:

⁶² Harry Pollitt, *Serving my Time*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1940), p.9

Englishmen. The blood of your brethren reddens the streets of Preston and Blackburn and the murderers thirst for more. Be firm. Be courageous- be men. Peace, law and order have prevailed on our side; let them be revered until your brethren in Scotland, Wales and Ireland are informed of your resolution. Countrymen and brothers. Centuries may roll on, as they have fledged past, before such universal action may again be displayed. We have made the cast for liberty and we must stand like men the hazard of the die. Let none despond. Let all be cool and watchful. Whilst you are peaceful be firm, and whilst you look to the law, remember that you had no voice in making it and are therefore slave to the will, the law, the price of your masters. Strengthen our hands at this crisis. Support your leaders. Rally round our sacred cause and leave the decision to the God of Justice and of Battle.⁶³

This dramatic scene ends with the turbulent demonstration in Preston, as the Riot Act is read, missiles thrown, and soldiers open fire into the crowd. Scene 23, begins with the final Chartist convention. This scene is central to the whole narrative of the play and attempts to link the radical movement of the Chartists with the modern Communist International. A young representative from the democrats of Brussels addresses the delegates at the convention. His name is Karl Marx:

⁶³ *ibid* pp. 23-24

Comrades, the democrats of Brussels have delegated me to speak in their name to the democrats of London, and through them to the democrats of Britain, to call on them to cause to be held a congress of nations- a congress of working men to establish liberty all over the world. We in Belgium feel that the Chartists of England are the real democrats and the moment you carry the six points of the Charter, the road to liberty will be open to the whole world. Effect this grand object, you working men of England and you will be hailed as the saviours of the whole human race.⁶⁴

This radical internationalism is unveiled as the precursor of the modern Comintern. Scene 24 reinforces the appropriation of radical democracy by the Communist Party. This is played out in a scene between the two chief characters, Egremont and Cradle-Rocker. This is the culmination of the production which drives home the implicit message of the Popular Front, though Cradle-Rocker is somewhat vague and unsure of what this new communism means:

Egremont I hear constantly that the Chartists have become Communists. What does it mean?

Cradle-Rocker It means that some of us are in contact with our brothers in the fight in Europe. Some of them have formed a group of Fraternal Democrats- also called Communists. We thought we were fighting in a corner. We find it is a battle of the world.

⁶⁴ *ibid* p24

Egremont Your brother democrats abroad are called Communists?

Cradle-Rocker It is a word people use.

Egremont But what do they believe in? What is Communism?

Cradle-rocker It is a word- and a good deal more than a word.

Egremont But what more?

Cradle-Rocker I find it difficult to say.⁶⁵

The answer to this vexing problem is solved at the very end of the play, as Citizen Marx produces a manifesto for the Chartist convention. The Secretary then begins to read the opening passages of the Communist Manifesto. 'Are Copies available?' asks Julian Harney. 'They are available' answers the Secretary. At this point the production ends - the lights go on - and programme sellers placed at the back of the audience shout: Communist Manifesto! Threepence!.⁶⁶ These cleverly staged productions, which brought together rallies, pageants and plays, were a crucial part of the drive to recruit new members to the Communist Party, and increase general support for a Popular Front. This was a period in which the Party could stage such mass events to acquire the respectable trappings of an older democratic tradition. As Samuel notes:

⁶⁵ *ibid* p. 25

⁶⁶ *ibid* p. 26

With the coming of the Popular Front, the Party made great efforts to appear on the streets respectably dressed. Slogans were revised in the interest of 'unity' and some of the more sectarian songs of earlier years were discarded. There was also a determined attempt to introduce pageantry and colour.⁶⁷

The Communist Party was not the only movement to utilise such events within the period of the Popular Front. Many organisations of the left were equally effective in their manipulation of popular dramatic production to commemorate a symbolic historical event or important political theme. Many of these pre-dated the Popular Front and were themselves part of a new packaging and imagery which came to be appropriated by the Communist Party, as it sought to bring in members from the broader left. A prominent example was the 1934, *Pageant of Labour*, which was produced by the London Trades Council, and staged at Crystal Palace between October 15th and 20th of the same year. Its main purpose was recruiting young members to the trade union movement. The *Pageant of Labour* involved a clever combination of play, ballet and choral recital. It created a colourful and imaginative drama based upon the themes of working-class struggle and the history and development of the trade union movement. The play tells the story of the Fletcher family and moves through the different generations of this working-class family as it comes to terms with changing social forces. The play was divided into six historical episodes, each impacting on the lives of the Fletcher family, and entitled: 'Capital Enslaves the Worker', 'Martyrdom of the Children', 'Consolation of Philanthropy and Religion', 'London Receives the

⁶⁷ Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, pp. 89-90

Chartists', 'The Triumph of the Trade Unions', and 'The Fletcher Family 1900'.⁶⁸ The narrative ends in the year 1900, contrasting with later productions of the Popular Front which placed greater focus on contemporary events. With these later productions, the *Pageant of Labour* invokes the same roll-call of radical democratic figures from English working-class history. These include Robert Owen, William Morris and Keir Hardie, as well as, Karl Marx and H. M. Hyndman. The same radical, socialist heroes were resurrected within the productions of the Communist Party. Another pre-Popular Front pageant from the broad left was the 1934 Tolpuddle Centenary celebrations. Held at Dorchester and organised by the TUC, this event also mirrored the later pageants of the Popular Front and involved a colourful parade of historically themed floats which retold the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. This event was mirrored in later Communist productions, such as *Heirs to the Charter*. The TUC production also saw the premier of a play entitled, the *Six Men of Dorset*, on the historical theme of the Tolpuddle struggle for trade union rights and recognition.⁶⁹

The earlier broad-left productions contrast with later examples from the Popular Front in their exclusive focus on the struggles and achievements of the past. The *Pageant of Labour* ends in 1900, and the *Six Men of Dorset* with a struggle from the previous century. While later productions of the Popular Front draw heavily on the same radical tradition, they have an eye focused firmly on contemporary political

⁶⁸ Mick Wallis, *Left Pageants in Britain 1934-1944* (Manchester University, 1985) p. 45

⁶⁹ Clare V.J. Griffiths, 'Remembering Tolpuddle: Rural History and Commemoration in the Inter-War Labour History', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 44 (1997), pp. 144-169 and 'From Dorsetshire Labourers to Tolpuddle Martyrs: Celebrating Radicalism in the English Countryside' in *Secular Martyrdom in Britain and Ireland: From Peterloo to the Present*. Eds. Quentin Outram and Keith Laybourn (Palgrave, London, 2019), pp. 59-84 and Walter Citrine, 'The Martyrs of Tolpuddle' in *The Martyrs of Tolpuddle, 1834-1934* (Transport House, TUC, 1934), pp. 1-8.

events. An example of a broad-left production from within the period of the Popular Front illustrates the point. This was the 1938 pageant, *Towards Tomorrow*, which celebrated International Co-operative Day. The event involved a strong collaborative effort between the London Co-operative Society and the Communist Party and was staged at Wembley Stadium on 2nd of July 1938, to be viewed by 78,000 spectators. Three of the many Communist Party collaborators on *Towards Tomorrow* included the playwright and poet, Montagu Slater, and the pageant director Andre van Gyseghem, and Dona Torr. Both were involved in the Communist production, *Heirs to the Charter*, including the musical director Alan Bush. *Towards Tomorrow* was staged to raise awareness of the fascist threat to democracy, and of the gains and struggles of the past which the play celebrates.

A central Communist theme was the gulf dividing a capitalist system engaged in tyranny, war and exploitation, and a co-operative system pursuing peace, social justice and democracy. Once again, the production invoked the radical figures of England's past in a defence of democracy, socialism and the noble values of the co-operative movement. Hunt, Paine, Godwin, Cobbett and Owen are some of the radical figures conjured up for the modern struggle against fascism and war. Chartists, socialists, social reformers and the Rochdale Pioneers, all invoked in a common stand against modern capitalism, and its new ally fascism, were invoked and capitalism was depicted as threatening social progress in the name of profits, tanks and guns. The Women's Chorus at the end of the production echoes these sentiments and a Popular Front concern for political unity:

Make a ring around the aggressor;
Dispossess the dispossessor.
Build the warm alliances,
Of Humanity and Peace.⁷⁰

Doubts can be cast on these pageants if they are to be viewed as a popular mass movement. In many more ways, they tended to reflect the interests, concerns and ideas of a smaller elite within the Communist Party. These events did involve a strong element of mass participation. In this sense the rallies, pageants and plays of the Popular Front differed considerably from the academic articles produced by the Party, which were consumed by a narrower audience of fellow travellers and younger members of the Young Communist League. *Heirs to the Charter*, was a good example of this mass participation. It involved the input of many ordinary members from the district branches of the Communist Party. This participation also extended to involve many ordinary members of the Co-operative movement, together with the trade unions, and embracing many groups outside the narrow confines of the Party. It is certain that these events were conceived, planned and produced by a small group of central figures, as can be seen with *Towards Tomorrow*, which was produced in 1938 at the height of the Popular Front. A list of the central figures involved in both pageants includes Andre van Gyseghem - Pageant Master, Montagu Slater - Script Writer, Alan Bush - Musical Director, and Dona Torr - Script Editor and Historical Advisor. All were representative of a prominent artistic, intellectual elite within the ranks of the British Communist Party.

⁷⁰ *ibid* p. 49

The Party and its Popular Front reflected a strong element of elitist direction and control. Raphael Samuel makes the same point when describing the Communist Party of the 1930s:

The Party was honeycombed with people to look up to, people you were honoured to meet because they had given their lives to the cause. Members, by present-day standards, were extraordinarily deferential. We took our doctrine from the 'four great teachers', crediting their words with prophetic insight, invoking them as authorities, treating them as 'science'. Our political leaders enjoyed unlimited trust and were regarded by ordinary members with something approaching 'awe'.⁷¹

Dona Torr and CPGB History

A key figure in the Party was the historian Dona Torr, who became one of the most prominent and influential women in the movement. As a founding member of the British Communist Party, Torr rose to become a key organiser and a long-standing columnist for its newspaper, *The Daily Worker*. As an author and historian, she played a crucial role in translating and editing the works of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. Becoming a key founding figure in the Communist Party Historians' Group in 1946, in her many different roles as a historian, author and publisher she also became an important mentor to both Christopher Hill and a young E. P. Thompson. Playing the

⁷¹ Raphael Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', pp. 98-99

crucial role of co-author on Thompson's first major work on William Morris in 1954, she was an inspiration to him.

Importantly, Torr was a major figure within the production of many historical pageants of the Popular Front. Her research provided the groundwork for *Heirs to the Charter*, with its celebration of the Chartist centenary in 1939, and she is credited as both script editor and historical advisor. Torr attempted to organise an English Civil War commemoration for the tri-centenary in 1940, but this was overshadowed by the outbreak of war. As a pageant, *Heirs to the Charter* went regional, when productions were taken to Liverpool, Manchester and the North East, with each production pulling-in the organising efforts of the regional branches of the Communist Party. Here the Popular Front message was taken across the country. The private papers of Dona Torr reveal a woman deeply committed to the Communist cause, and particularly to the legacy of English radicalism. This is unveiled in the many papers of research produced for her unfinished biography of the syndicalist labour hero Tom Mann. These papers reveal a changing Party attitude to religion and show how this intellectual elite seized upon a Nonconformist tradition that had its roots in the turmoil of the English Civil War. In her extensive research for the biography of Tom Mann, Torr uncovered the powerful influence of English radical ideas on socialist and syndicalist thought. These were particularly influenced by the radical ideas of William Godwin:

Godwin's position was anti-capitalist, he denied the conception that capital benefited the poor by giving employment, on the contrary it prolonged their working time and fastened the yoke of slavery on them.⁷²

Dona Torr echoed the Popular Front view on religion and its rehabilitated role in English radical history. She placed a particular emphasis on Calvinism and its tradition of religious dissent rooted in the radical ideas of William Godwin:

Godwin's view was that of the peaceful revolutionist believing in the omnipotence of reason and truth and in non-resistance. He was originally a Calvinist preacher and his 'materialism' is inverted Calvinist theology. God is reason; predestination, necessity or determinism, Providence causation, the Kingdom of God ethical communism.⁷³

These sentiments are explored further in her research notes entitled, 'Notes on the Tradition of Free Thought'. Here, Torr attempts to explore the deep roots of English radicalism, stressing a radicalism firmly rooted within the traditions of religious dissent:

⁷² Dona Torr, *Notes on William Godwin for Section 3* (Communist Party Archives, 1934-56) p. 2

⁷³ *ibid* p. 1

The struggle of the English peasants and artisans to gain knowledge for themselves centred for four centuries around the right to read the most important book in the world, the Bible, for themselves, in their own language and arising from this later to know and worship god in their own way.⁷⁴

The passage shows a clear intellectual link to the later work of Christopher Hill, a historian who focused on the revolutionary impact of a vernacular English bible. The Dona Torr papers are full of little notes and interesting asides, which were later used and recycled within the rallies, pageants and plays of the Communist Party. Particularly relevant is a Manchester pageant which celebrated the centenary of the Northern Chartist movement. Torr lifts a rousing quote for the play from the Chartist leader Ernest Jones:

Get the Charter, establish Co-operation, what you will; but leave the aristocracy their land, their monopoly and their privileges, and you have done nothing.⁷⁵

Throughout her many notes and writings, Torr retained a strong Communist disdain for the successor movement of Fabian socialism. In her comments on the Fabian tract, *What Socialism Is*, she makes her views more than clear:

⁷⁴ Dona Torr, *Notes on the Tradition of Free Thought* (Communist Party Archives, 1934-56) p. 1

⁷⁵ Dona Torr, *People's Paper* (Communist Party Archives 1934-56), p. 5

The tract contains nothing that was not already to be found better stated in the famous Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels.⁷⁶

Dona Torr's clear enthusiasm for the Levellers, Diggers and Chartists did not extend to the Fabian socialists of the late Victorian era. This disdain was also extended to the ILP and its unique vision of working-class struggle. Both movements are identified with a middle-class Menshevism, at odds with an older and more genuine revolutionary tradition of English radicalism. The Communist Party (mediating its history through Torr) now saw itself as the true champion of an English tradition of revolution and dissent: a tradition that was untainted with the later movements of liberalism, labourism and Fabian socialism. Other groups who claimed this radical tradition were nothing more than rebadged liberals, at odds with the true political legacy of the Levellers and Chartists. As with an earlier SDF and Socialist League, the Communist Party now placed itself at the centre of this tradition.

Dona Torr's important influence on later Marxist historians can be clearly seen within her work, particularly on the historical projects pursued by Hill and Thompson. Her legacy was of equal importance to that of A. L. Morton, in the resurrection of English radicalism. In her notes, she writes of a potent religious tradition of dissent which was:

Very closely linked with the development of lower-class radicalism, and the great bearers of this tradition were the independent craftsmen.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Dona Torr, *Notes on the Fabian Society* (Communist Party Archives 1934-56) p. 1

⁷⁷ Dona Torr, *Notes on the Tradition of Free thought* p. 5

These ideas are clearly echoed in the later work of E. P. Thompson and his *Making of the English Working Class*. Like Thompson, Torr placed an emphasis on Methodism and its role in forging an English working-class history and identity:

The group organisation of the Methodists was adapted to their own uses by the working-class radicals who inherited a tradition of many centuries of illegal organisation.⁷⁸

In other notes and writings Torr reaches out to the new allies in the fight against fascism. In so doing, she links the radical traditions of England with the revolutionary traditions of America. This was a revolutionary tradition born out of religious dissent and given voice through the vehicle of a radical printing press. Torr invokes Benjamin Franklin as the key link between two traditions which traced their roots back to the radicalism of the English Civil War:

Franklin in his ways of thought, moral and political, was very closely akin to his comrades in England and from this point of view there is much to be learned from his autobiography but it is particularly important to understand it as typical of English revolutionary development from religious to political revolt.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *ibid* p. 9

⁷⁹ *ibid* p. 5

The CPGB and the Legacy of the Search for an English National Past

Through the period of the Popular Front, and into the war years, the Communist Party continued to portray itself as the true heir of English working-class radicalism. Communism was not to be looked upon as some strange foreign import, but the culmination of a native tradition of struggle and dissent. Ramsay MacDonald, it was asserted, had abandoned this proud tradition in his dealings with the Tories in a National Government. The radical banner was now claimed by Harry Pollitt and his comrades in the Party. For those contemporaries who remembered Pollitt, he seemed set in a traditional radical mould. For Raphael Samuel he was 'an Edwardian socialist by formation...who owed his rhetorical training to a Methodist chapel...ending his speech(es) very much in the manner of Philip Snowden with a "Come to Jesus" appeal'.⁸⁰ Pollitt was keen to see British Communism as a culmination of past radical endeavours. He wrote:

The Communist Party is born out of the historical conditions of British capitalism in exactly the same way as the Labour Party. It is no foreign importation. Its principle leaders were all members of the Labour Party, ILP, Social Democratic Federation or the British Socialist Party before they merged to form the Communist Party.⁸¹

This was in line with the new democratic aspirations of the Communist Party, as it viewed itself reinforcing the older socialist traditions of the past:

⁸⁰ Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (Verso, London, 2006), p. 54.

⁸¹ Harry Pollitt, *Unity and Victory: Report of the 16th Congress of the Communist Party* (CPGB, London, 1943) p. 17

The building of a mass Communist Party in Britain is the most decisive factor in achieving an all-round strengthening of the Labour, Trade Union and Co-operative Movement, and through this increasing the power of the working-class movement as a whole.⁸²

The *Daily Worker* was founded in 1930 to become the main newspaper of the British Communist Party. It attracted many Party luminaries and intellectuals to contribute to its columns, including figures such as A. L. Morton and Dona Torr. The paper was to play a prominent role in championing England's radical history as part of the wider Popular Front project through the 30s and 40s. Its columns were regularly filled with lively pen-picture portraits of some of the prominent figures and movements from England's radical past. In 'A Worker's Notebook', published on Wednesday, 22nd October 1935, Ralph Fox invoked the Levellers and Chartists in a 'call to arms', as the Party moved away from a position of passivism in the early years of the Popular Front:

⁸² *ibid* p. 18

The farmers, agricultural labourers and artisans who were the rank and file of Cromwell's army, who later followed Lilburne and the Levellers, were fighting men. Even the earlier John Ball and other democratic priests had marched under arms with the peasants of the Eastern counties to settle accounts with feudalism. The spirit of the Levellers came down to the Chartists- Who can read that great book 'The Revolution in Tanner's Lane', and believe that the English worker of the days of Peterloo was a pacifist? A Chartist, yes, but a pacifist, never!⁸³

English radicalism was specifically invoked in the effort to gain trade union support for a Popular Front. Under an article entitled, 'Labour Must Play a Decisive Role', published on Saturday, September 10th 1938, R. Page Arnot noted that:

Our Communist Party is the heir to the great traditions of the British working-class. Yet we do not claim this inheritance. We think only of the revolutionary highlights such as Chartism and the Peasants' Revolt. We say little of the struggle to build trade unionism- This is our tradition. This great movement was built by militants, not men like Citrine who are now trying to fossilise it. And today it is the Communists who are leading the fight to build and unite this great movement.⁸⁴

The Party now claimed a British tradition of labourism, associated with the Labour Party, as its own in an attempt to undermine the moderates in the trade union

⁸³ Ralph Fox, 'Levellers and Chartists', *Daily Worker*, Wednesday, 22nd October 1935, p. 4

⁸⁴ R Page Arnot, 'Labour Must Play a Decisive Role', *Daily Worker*, Saturday, September 10th 1938, p.. 7

movement. The *Daily Worker* was always keen to bring culture to the masses. In a section entitled, 'Men and Books', published on Wednesday, July 19th 1939, Randall Swingler reviewed the latest book to explore William Langland's medieval poem, *Piers Plowman*, a work which provided some of the ideas that had inspired the Peasants' revolt. Swingler links into English radical history and into the modern labour movement. In language borrowed from William Morris, he outlines a revolutionary vision which lay at the heart of Langland's medieval poem:

Those visionary glimpses that he had lying on Malvern Hills or on sleepless nights in London have impelled more heroic temperaments to action. His dream found life again among the Levellers and the Diggers; it underlay Chartism; it was the emotional force which built up the militant labour movement and it reaches full expression at last in the classless socialist society.⁸⁵

Not only was the Communist Party proud to appropriate a tradition of 17th century Nonconformity and dissent, it also claimed its medieval predecessor in the religious radicalism of the Lollards, an intellectual link which connected the Communist project of the Popular Front to earlier ideas expressed by William Morris and his Socialist League that proclaimed a direct link back to the radical visionaries of an earlier medieval past. This project was also pursued by the historian A. L. Morton, who drew on these earlier utopian visions within much of his later work. Radical history and religion were now invoked in the name of Communism, to be viewed as an integral part of the

⁸⁵ Randall Swingler, 'Men and Books', *Daily Worker*, Wednesday, July 19th 1939, p. 7

same revolutionary tradition: a tradition to be venerated and engaged with in the project to re-write and reclaim religious dissent in the cause of the left. This was a project which was pursued by Party intellectuals long after the Popular Front and its mission had ended and is amply illustrated in the continued work and post-war legacy of Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. This was not just an intellectual tradition but a tangible political project, as illustrated in the many *Daily Worker* articles which focused on the radical struggles of the past, particularly within the turbulent years of the Second World War. In an article entitled, *When England had a Democratic Army*, by C. E. Gore which was published on Wednesday, July 8th 1940, the events of the modern conflict are inextricably linked to the turbulent struggles of the English Civil War:

The English people once had a really democratic army, almost as democratic as that of Spain or China, or as the Red Army of the Soviet Union. When was this? Not under Mr Hore-Belisha or Mr Eden. It was as long ago as 1647.⁸⁶

Gore makes explicit the modern revolutionary implications of this earlier radical history:

⁸⁶ C. E. Gore, 'When England had a Democratic Army', *Daily Worker*, Wednesday, July 8th 1940 p. 4

With all its weaknesses, this movement of our forefathers shows what ordinary people are capable of when the traitors at the top are removed and a really democratic organisation substituted. Such democracy is far more efficient than an imposed 'discipline'. If properly led and trusted, there is nothing the people cannot do. The Red Army in the Soviet Union, the people's armies of Spain and China have hammered home this lesson of the creative energy and initiative of the people: but it was first taught in our own history, and we should never forget it.⁸⁷

Within the turmoil of the war years many Party members believed a victory against fascism would ultimately lead to a victory for Communism. The *Daily Worker* was keen to promote this view, together with the new history of England's radical past that was produced for the Popular Front. A prominent example was the advertisement which was placed in the *Daily Worker* on Saturday, July 13th 1940. This promoted Christopher Hill's new history of the English Revolution which was produced through the Communist Party publishers, Lawrence & Wishart, a company which had a long association with both Christopher Hill, A. L. Morton and E. P. Thompson. The advertisement noted:

⁸⁷ *ibid* p. 4

This year is the 300th anniversary of the first English Revolution. It is fitting that it should be marked by the appearance of a Marxist study of one of the crucial events in the history of our people. These three essays give a clearer understanding of what the Revolution meant for the working people than hundreds of accounts written by bourgeois historians.⁸⁸

This was an explicit promotion of a new 'people's history' of the nation's past. The new literature was far from parochial in its content and often involved an in-depth study of political events on the global stage. Within the same advertisement another caption promoted a new history by Dona Torr. This concerned the European national wars of independence between the years 1848 and 1871 and focused on the wider radical tradition. As the advertisement notes:

Dona Torr covers a considerable amount of little-known ground. It is the perfect introduction to a Marxist understanding of European history in the period 1848-1871.⁸⁹

In many ways, this literature was to follow the lead of the Left Book Club through its attempt to provide an eager readership with a wider picture and historical context to modern political events. Dimitrov's speech of 1935 had outlined a new political strategy for the new Popular Front, and a new intention to appropriate both a national and wider democratic tradition from the past. The crucial literary example of this new Communist

⁸⁸ Advertisement, *Daily Worker*, Saturday, July 13th 1940, p. 3

⁸⁹ *ibid* p. 3

strategy was A. L. Morton's, *A People's History of England*. This was published by the Communist Party in 1938 and was widely advertised through the Communist press. Morton's seminal history fused Marxist theory to England's radical past in the attempt to present Communism as the final destination in a long historical journey of democratic struggle. This was a new 'people's history', which tellingly ends its own journey in the Russian revolution and the founding of the world's first socialist state:

With the establishment of the first socialist state in the Soviet Union, Britain, like the world as a whole, enters a new historical epoch. The age of imperialism begins to pass into the age of the general crisis of capitalism and of the transition from capitalism to socialism.⁹⁰

The attempt to revive an English radical tradition became part and parcel of a new Communist strategy and approach to history. It aimed at creating a popular mass movement with a wide political appeal. This was a movement which deliberately targeted support from a broader socialist and liberal left through the manipulation of an older democratic past: a radical tradition that was also consciously manipulated through rallies, pageants and plays specifically organised and staged for a mass audience. *Heirs to the Charter* was a prominent example of the use of popular production techniques by the Communist Party in its efforts to win over wider support. As with A. L. Morton's *People's History*, *Heirs to the Charter* explored similar themes and ideas. The second part of the play was a shorter piece which was set within the turmoil of the Great War, and in echoes of Morton's final chapter, culminates with the Russian

⁹⁰ A L Morton, *A People's History of England*, p. 463

revolution. The internationalism expressed in Dimitrov's speech of 1935 also finds its echo in the address of a Russian soldier to his British comrades:

These examples of proletarian heroism serve as a pledge that the workers of the countries mentioned will understand the duty that now lies upon them, of emancipating mankind from the horrors of war.⁹¹

It was the new attitude to religion which marked the most striking shift within the period of the Popular Front. As the previous hard-line atheism of the Communist Party was abandoned and replaced with an inclusive approach to radical religious faith, so Communist attitudes to religion changed. A new emphasis was placed on religious dissent as the motivating force behind many revolutionary movements in the past, and a particular emphasis was placed on dissent within the Protestant tradition. There was a new recognition of the revolutionary role of religion within history, as Party intellectuals began to accept the major part played by Protestant Nonconformity in England's radical democratic past.

Many of the new 'people's histories' produced in the Popular Front were to focus on the revolutionary nature of this Nonconformist tradition., particularly from the 17th century and the period of the English Civil War. This was the revolutionary tradition of the Levellers and Diggers, both of which revered their Bible in the same way Communists revered the hallowed works of Marx, as a sacred guide in holy writ to a revolt against injustice and corrupt power. Christopher Hill's, *The English Revolution*

⁹¹ CPGB, *Heirs to the Charter*, p. 29

1640, is a key example of this new Communist history, with its new sympathy and recognition for religion. As Hill, forcefully states:

The Puritan Revolution was a religious as well as a political struggle; but it was more than that. What men were fighting about was the whole nature and future development of English society.⁹²

Was the Communist Party adopting a genuine syncretic approach to radicalism and religion in the period of the Popular Front - adapting and bending its rigid system of thought to incorporate an older set of ideas from the past? In his essay, 'British Marxist Historians', Raphael Samuel puts forward the view that British Marxism was more than able to adapt and absorb an older set of pre-existing ideas by making them its own by incorporating a radical dissenting tradition into its own canon of modern Marxist thought:

Marxism was necessarily superimposed on pre-existing modes of thought which it incorporated rather than displaced, and which were regarded as being intrinsic to the new outlook.⁹³

Samuel did recognise the deliberate nature of a Communist attempt to reclaim an older radical past, though he over-emphasised the heterodox tendencies within the British Communist Party. Particularly, he over-stressed the extent to which it could fully absorb an older political tradition, while remaining faithful to its own narrow doctrinaire Marxism. In the post-war period, the Communist Party would return to a

⁹² Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution*, p. 18

⁹³ Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians: 1880-1980', *New Left Review*, No 120, p. 23

more rigid ideological view of the world. This was largely shaped by the events of a rapidly evolving Cold War.

The event of the Popular Front did have a lasting influence on the intellectuals of the Party, and many of these key figures continued in the spirit of the Popular Front long after its political demise. The unintended consequence of the Popular Front was the creation of a more open intellectual environment. This was something the Communist Party had not planned for when it began its project of incorporating ideas and beliefs from a broader radical past. The Communist Party Historians' Group would continue this inclusive project, seeking to re-define an English radical past for the modern post-war age. Samuel uses the term 'Marxist' in its widest sense within his historiography, giving equal weight to an earlier Marxist tradition, though most of the central figures he mentions were also members of the Communist Party and continued as such after the period of the Popular Front. A. L. Morton, Christopher Hill, Dona Torr and E P Thompson all fall into this category and were all prominent members of the Communist Party Historians' Group. Samuel's work does reveal some fascinating insights into these key intellectual figures of the Party. Of E. P. Thompson, he writes:

Thompson has always used history as his pulpit- there is always, in the end, a fundamental moral issue at stake. One of the things which makes him a splendid narrative historian is a parabolic use of stories and he is no less accomplished in the ancient homiletic art of using detailed illustrations to press home complex truths. The religious strain is even more evident in Thompson's interventions in politics, where a Dissenter's suspicion of central authority and a Protestant hatred of dogma may be said to provide a central driving force.⁹⁴

Samuel could not view Thompson as an orthodox Marxist in any real sense, rather he saw him as the product of an older tradition of radical Nonconformist dissent. Indeed, this view was born out when Thompson left the Communist Party in protest at the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Thompson had abandoned Marxist-Leninism and returned to his old heroes of English radicalism, the primal source for his political ideas.⁹⁵ In appropriating an English radical tradition, the Communist Party had poached a democratic history which was claimed by broader circles of the British left.

Many major figures in the Labour Party also drew upon this rich democratic history as a primal source of political inspiration. Indeed, this became a deeply contested tradition within the period of the Popular Front, as a democratic past was recruited to legitimise conflicting ideological positions. Aneurin Bevan was a central figure within the Labour Party and the broad-left throughout the 30s, 40s and 50s. A Labour figure who defended this democratic past as a crucial tradition of social democracy, his

⁹⁴ *ibid* p. 54

⁹⁵ See on this point, Michael Kenny, 'E.P. Thompson. Last of the English Radicals?', *The Political Quarterly*, 88 (2017), pp. 579-588.

political ideas came to symbolise the enduring influence of an English radical tradition within the wider circles of the British labour movement, despite his Welshness. Bevan's political vision was not inspired by any Marxist ideology, but by an older radical view of society and the nature of power. In his seminal polemic *Why not Trust the Tories?* published in 1944 in the period of an uneasy wartime coalition, Bevan lays out his grand political vision with a telling reference to the Putney debates of the English Civil War. These were radical democratic ideas which were first formed amongst the Levellers and Diggers in Cromwell's New Model Army:

It has taken almost three centuries for the situation to unfold itself fully upon the British political stage. The three elements are now present: Democracy, Property and Poverty. There is no rest between them; rather a ceaseless struggle and ferment. Here is the matrix of the problems of modern society. They speak across three centuries, the wisdom of Thomas Rainboro': 'Either poverty must use democracy to destroy the power of property, or property in fear of poverty will destroy democracy.'⁹⁶

This radical view of political power affected Bevan's position on re-armament in the late 1930s. Though he strongly supported aid for the anti-fascist cause in Europe, Bevan was deeply suspicious of re-armament back in Britain. He believed it would increase the power of a reactionary capitalist 'Property' to destroy any rising social 'Democracy'. This was a view strengthened by the fascist sympathies of the British establishment and his belief that a fascist coup was not impossible in liberal Britain. As Bevan was to state:

⁹⁶ Aneurin Bevan, *Why not Trust the Tories?* (Victor Gollancz, London, 1944) p. 28

We should say to the country we are prepared to make whatever sacrifices are necessary, to give whatever arms are necessary in order to fight fascist powers and in order to consolidate world peace, but we are not going to put a sword in the hands of our enemies that may be used to cut off our own heads.⁹⁷

As the historian Roger Spalding has noted, Bevan's position was at odds with orthodox Marxism, both in its approach to class conflict and its analysis of political power. These were ideas drawn directly from an older radicalism and the political upheavals of the English Civil War:

At its most basic the argument was that Democracy had been created in a period of economic prosperity, in other words it was created at a time when the ruling class, characterised as Property, could afford it. When established Democracy allowed Poverty to make inroads into the claims of Property. This was acceptable during periods of prosperity, but when depressions occurred Property could no longer allow such concessions. At such points Poverty must either vanquish Property, or Property would destroy Democracy, thereby securing its position.⁹⁸

This was the central theme of Bevan's analysis of the political situation which the left faced in the 1930s, particularly during the depression and the period of the Popular Front. It was a position illustrated in greater detail within his famous essay, *In Place of*

⁹⁷ Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, Volume 1* pp. 266-267

⁹⁸ Roger Spalding, 'Michael Foot: Myth and the Labour Left', *Socialist History*, 10 (1996), p. 2

Fear. This was an analysis which had its roots firmly embedded in a Leveller view of power and the struggle for political democracy, ideas lifted directly out of the 17th century:

The issue therefore in a capitalist democracy resolves itself into this: either poverty will use democracy to win the struggle against property, or property, in fear of poverty, will destroy democracy.⁹⁹

Parliament was to be the grand arena in which this historic conflict would play out. It was the grand dramatic stage for class struggle and constitutional upheaval - the crucial field of battle between the haves and have nots, where the weapon of choice was political rhetoric. Bevan reflected many figures on the British left, who, whilst avowing Marxism, continued with a strong attachment to the principals of established parliamentary democracy. This was a political tradition inherited from the radical liberalism of the ILP and which was the true heir to the radicalism of the 19th century. *In Place of Fear* reaffirmed the central role of Parliament in this political conflict:

The function of parliamentary democracy, under universal franchise, historically considered, is to expose wealth-privilege to the attack of the people. It is a sword pointed at the heart of property-power. The arena where the issues are joined is Parliament.¹⁰⁰

Michael Foot was another major figure of the broad-left to champion this radical tradition in the name of social democracy. Michael Foot was both Bevan's biographer

⁹⁹ Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (Heinemann Ltd, London, 1952) p. 3

¹⁰⁰ *ibid* p. 5

and a campaigning journalist in the period of the Popular Front. As the historian Roger Spalding has noted in his essay, 'Michael Foot: Myth and the Labour Left', his frequent use of the term 'the people' betrayed the powerful influence of an older political tradition. Like Bevan, this was a tradition with its roots and imagery firmly embedded within the radicalism of the English Civil War:

To really understand Foot's use of the idea of the People it is necessary to look at his interpretation of history. A good indication of Foot's historical orientation is given by his radical iconography, his reference to the International Brigades as the 'Ironsides of Democracy', and his comparison of the battle for Madrid with Marston Moor.¹⁰¹

This broad-left's identification with a native radical tradition is keenly displayed in a later work by Fenner Brockway, entitled *Britain's First Socialists*. Brockway had a strong connection to the anti-imperialist movement and campaigned for Indian independence. In this work the veteran ILPer traced the origins of English socialism to the radical movements of the Levellers and Diggers. This recalled the Communist histories of the Popular Front, though Brockway was reclaiming this history in the name of a broad-left socialism. *Britain's First Socialists* is a re-appropriation of this Communist history, reclaiming the English Civil War for social democracy. Brockway freely acknowledged his Communist predecessors, particularly D. W. Petegorsky and Christopher Hill, but purposely reclaims this radical history from the hands of the Communist Party. In his introduction Brockway defined the central aim of his book:

¹⁰¹ Roger Spalding, 'Michael Foot: Myth...' p. 14

To bring home to all interested in social evolution and particularly to present-day socialists, the significance of the 17th century revolutionaries as the initiators of democratic socialist principles.¹⁰²

Just as the Communist Party had appropriated this history in the cause of the Popular Front, so Brockway now recruited this history in the cause of democratic socialism. He particularly emphasised the interconnections between the Puritan tradition and the upbringing of Labour party figures like Alfred Salter, the MP for Bermondsey.¹⁰³ Brockway reinforced the links in his description of the Digger movement, which earlier Communist writers had viewed as the first true attempt at Communism:

The Diggers seeking to supplement political democracy by economic equality, were admittedly small communities, but their philosophy and practice extraordinarily expressed the principles and values of socialism.¹⁰⁴

Crucially, these radical groups of the past are seen as the forerunners of a libertarian tradition, which championed the rights of the individual against the dominant forces of both Property and the State:

They enshrined democracy as their overriding principle- insisting that sovereignty lay with the people and calling for a Charter of Rights which would bind even the legislature.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Fenner Brockway, *Britain's First Socialists* (Quartet Books, London 1980) p.13

¹⁰³ Fenner Brockway, *Bermondsey Story: The Life of Alfred Salter* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1949), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Fenner Brockway, *Britain's First Socialists*, p. 23

¹⁰⁵ *ibid* p. 145

In common with earlier Communist histories from the Popular Front, *Britain's First Socialists* pays tribute to the figure of Gerrard Winstanley, as the key political theorist of the Digger movement and a forerunner of Karl Marx:

Two hundred years before Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, Gerrard Winstanley defined the fundamental principles of socialism. His main concern was with the private ownership of land, the main economic domination, but the analysis he made applied to the vested interests of all property as opposed to community interests. He defined the conflict in society as between the acquisitive and competitive tendencies in human nature and the tendencies for mutual aid and co-operation, and denounced any social relationship which put some in economic power over others.¹⁰⁶

Brockway regarded this radical tradition as a vital source of inspiration to any modern socialist engaged in the struggle for a mutual democratic society. Brockway seized upon this radical tradition of the 17th century to reinforce his own definition of socialism at a time of crisis for the left in the late 1970s:

Democracy requires not only common ownership, but conscious participation in administration by all engaged, trade unions becoming constructive partners. This is industrial democracy supplementing political democracy.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ *ibid* p. 127

¹⁰⁷ *ibid* p. 144

In these ideas Brockway recalls the syndicalist Guild-socialism of G. D. H. Cole, who was another prominent intellectual from the broad-left and the ILP. In a concluding passage Brockway pays a final tribute to the democratic legacy of Winstanley and the Diggers. Crucially, it is the modern labour movement which benefits from the legacy of this older socialist tradition:

Winstanley was the father of British socialism, action wedded to theory, 200 years before Robert Owen, William Morris or Karl Marx. Socialists of today, still more the socialists of tomorrow when they achieve, should cherish and keep alive the memory of the Diggers as their forefathers, their ancestors.¹⁰⁸

A broad-left claim to a radical democratic past persists into recent times with Tony Benn's *Arguments for Socialism*. A contemporary text that draws heavily on the legacy of this historical tradition it reveals the continuing importance of radical antecedence to the British left. Indeed, this radical history was a key part of Tony Benn's political strategy in the 1980s, as he attempted to take on the Labour Party establishment during the turmoil of the Thatcher years. *Arguments for Socialism* draws heavily on the radical inheritance of the labour movement and follows in the tradition of H. N. Brailsford, Fenner Brockway and Michael Foot. It provides a contested history which was claimed by the ILP in the early years of the British labour movement. The opening chapter has its focus on the four specific elements, which Benn believes are central to a historical understanding of English democratic socialism:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pp.150-151

The British Labour Movement draws its inspiration from a history that goes back over many centuries. This movement arose directly from the twin struggles by the British people to control Parliament through the popular vote and to gain the right to organise free trade unions. I have selected and amplified a number of the more important trains of thought and action from which the origins of the Labour movement in Britain can be traced. Those I have chosen are the Bible, the 17th century Levellers, the work of Karl Marx and the Labour Party's own constitution.¹⁰⁹

Benn drew upon an earlier radical analysis of history, power and political struggle, finding a central role for a Protestant tradition of political dissent. Here Benn reflects the influence of the Communist historians, A L Morton and Christopher Hill, stressing the role of religious dissent on the political struggles of the past. Benn placed a particular emphasis on the English Bible and the Protestant Reformation, as formative revolutionary forces in English history. This inflection led K.O. Morgan to describe Benn as in the tradition of 'the Fifth Monarchy Men' after one of the most militant of the millenarian sects of the 1640s.¹¹⁰ This emphasis also reflects the legacy of earlier Popular Front histories which drew heavily on these historical ideas. Benn was from a Congregationalist background, and saw the English radical tradition as an important tradition of 'positive dissent'.¹¹¹ For him, the English vernacular bible was the crucial document to understand the ideas which have shaped England's democratic history. It

¹⁰⁹ Tony Benn, *Arguments for Socialism* (Trinity Press, London, 1979) p. 23

¹¹⁰ K. O. Morgan, *Labour People: Leaders and Lieutenants: Hardie to Kinnock* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), p. 312.

¹¹¹ Tony Benn, *Fighting Back: Speaking out for Socialism in the Eighties* (London, Harvester, 1988), pp. 34-45

was a unique revolutionary text which played a central role in the forging of a unique historical movement:

The Bible has always been, and remains, a major element in our national political- as well as our religious- education. And within our movement Christian Socialists have played an important role, along with Humanists, Marxists, Fabians and Co-operators. The conflict in the Old Testament between Kings and Prophets- between temporal power and the preaching of righteousness- has greatly affected our own ideas about society. The deep conviction to be found in the Old Testament that conscience is God- given and must be supreme over man-made law, has its origins in these Bible teachings, and is still passionately held today.¹¹²

Tony Benn had drawn on a radical political tradition which was distinct from both Marxism and European socialism. The Labour Party itself had little in the way of a distinct political doctrine or ideology, and instead drew upon a diffuse set of ideas and beliefs from the past. These ideas incorporated Methodism, co-operation and a radical-liberalism that was often combined with a progressive Whig view of history. These were traditions which had formed the political vision of the ILP, together with a unique libertarian socialism inherited from the ideas of William Morris. In looking at the intellectual legacy of this diffuse tradition it is impossible to ignore the historian E. P. Thompson. Thompson was by far the most important and influential figure from the left who continued to promote this radical Nonconformist history and tradition. His vast

¹¹² *ibid* p. 24

array of work continued the intellectual legacy of the Popular Front, drawing upon a rich democratic heritage taken directly from the pages of working-class history. His most important works include, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary: The Making of the English Working Class* (the modern bible of English radical history); *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act: Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*; *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays, Customs in Common* and *Writing by Candlelight*. All were works which re-defined an English radical tradition in a quickly changing post-war world.¹¹³

As a young member of the Communist Party Historians' Group, Thompson was a late product of the Popular Front and had been mentored by Dona Torr, though with many others, Thompson renounced his membership of the Communist Party, if not his Marxism, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. As a natural radical, Thompson found it impossible to side with forces that had crushed democratic rights in Budapest. From this period on, Thompson sought to graft an older democratic tradition onto a rigid Marxism. Drawing upon an ancient tradition of libertarian dissent as a new source of inspiration for the modern left, the historian Christopher Parker has viewed Thompson as a central figure in this new Marxist initiative of creating new approaches to the past:

¹¹³ See especially in this corpus for concerns about residual elements of folk Englishness, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class* (Pelican, London, 1963); 'The Crime of Anonymity' in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson and Cal Winslow *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (Pelican, London, 1975), pp. 255-308; *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (Allen Lane, London, 1975), ch. 1; 'The Peculiarities of the English', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (Merlin, London, 1978), pp. 245-301; *Writing by Candlelight* (Merlin, London, 1980) and *Customs in Common* (Penguin, London, 1991), chs, 3 and 4.

The contrast with earlier Marxist calls to establish a 'science' is striking. Thompson would have no truck with such mysteries and clearly divided the Marxist tradition since 1956 into the rigidly authoritarian, doctrinaire, Stalinist and Althusserian brand and the Libertarian or humanist kind. He even said he would rather be a radical Christian than an Althusserian; he would at least retain a vocabulary that permitted the defence of human personality.¹¹⁴

In his most famous work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson draws heavily on a native radical tradition and upon its central role in creating a distinctly conscious English working class. The emphasis is on the powerful and lasting influence of this native democratic tradition, particularly with the artisans, labourers and weavers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in the period of the early industrial revolution, and in the turbulent years of the Napoleonic War. In this account, Thompson gives focus to the libertarian ideas in this tradition, as he notes of the radical figure Thomas Paine:

It was Paine who put his faith in the free operation of opinion in the 'open society': 'mankind are not now to be told they shall not think, or they shall not read'. Paine also saw that in the constitutional debates of the 18th century 'the Nation was always left out of the question'. By bringing the nation into the question, he was bound to set in motion forces which he could neither control nor foresee. That is what democracy is about.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Christopher Parker, *The English Historical Tradition Since 1850* (John Donald Ltd, Edinburgh, 1990) p. 199.

¹¹⁵ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 110

This description of Thomas Paine, as a libertarian champion of an open democratic society, was a contemporary broadside against the controlling forces within the Communist Party. Thompson was using English radical history in the same way Orwell had used his dystopian fiction, as a socialist polemic against Stalinist totalitarianism. Thompson gives further emphasis to this libertarian tradition in a rousing description of the radical printers of the early 19th century as they prepared to face imprisonment for their political ideals and beliefs. These small printing presses became the vital voice for popular democracy:

Imprisonment as a Radical publisher brought, not odium, but honour. Once the publishers had decided that they were ready to go to prison, they outdid each other with new expedients to exhibit their opponents in the most ludicrous light. Radical England was delighted.¹¹⁶

This radical tradition was seized upon by Thompson, as he sought to forge a New Left in the years that followed the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Thompson was a politically active radical himself and remained so until the end of his life in 1993, campaigning against the nuclear arms race and for the re-entry of a broad-based socialism onto the national political agenda. In many ways, he also epitomised the wider aims and intellectual aspirations of the Popular Front, championing an older democratic tradition of dissent, and remoulding a native tradition of 'bloody-mindedness' to re-assert the ordinary individual in national political life. Whether campaigning against social

¹¹⁶ *ibid* p. 793

injustice, the nuclear bomb, or the secretive state, Thompson was ultimately an optimist in the eventual triumph of his adopted tradition:

We seem to be reaching pessimistic conclusions. But this need not be so. For there are certain other factors which may be working on our side. One of these I can only describe as a very ancient cultural tradition in Britain of bloody-mindedness towards the intrusion of authority. It has been there for as long as my knowledge extends. In the 17th century popular hostility to the apparatus of the summoner, the apparitor and the moral inquisitions of the Church Courts was a contributory factor leading to Civil War. Agents of the Society for the Reformation of Manners or intrusive Excise inspectors were often targets of the crowd's ebullient resistance in the 18th century. Again and again, in an unbroken series of cases, public opinion has eventually come to the side of the rights of the individual against the over-mighty state.¹¹⁷

The historian Christopher Hill was another important figure who continued the work begun in the period of the Popular Front. Hill was to build an academic career on his attempt to resurrect an English revolutionary tradition from the 17th century. As Raphael Samuel remarked:

¹¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (Merlin Press, London 1980) p. 178

Christopher Hill may be said to have built his life's work on identifying the 'Good Old Cause' with that of 20th century British radicalism, and the 'priesthood of all believers' with democracy at work.¹¹⁸

The Puritan revolution was the area of English history which consumed most of Hill's attention in a series of publications which included: *The English Revolution 1640*, *Puritanism and Revolution*, *The World Turned Upside Down*, *Milton and the English Revolution*, *A Turbulent Seditious and Fractious People: John Bunyan and his Church*, and one of his final works, *The English Bible and the 17th Century Revolution*, which was published in 1993.¹¹⁹ This latter work is the final example of a historical genre that stretched back to the Popular Front, when the Communist Party had sought to recruit 17th century radicalism for a specific political end. Unlike E P. Thompson, Christopher Hill remained within the ranks of the Communist Party throughout his life, fuelling later speculation that he was a key Soviet spy during the Cold War. Hill's deep devotion to the Communist Party was not reflected in all his historical work, much of which displays a peculiarly unorthodox Marxist approach, particularly in his later life, as is witnessed in his work on John Bunyan and in relation to the cast of beggars, smugglers, pirates and assorted itinerants that populate his last book, *Liberty Against the Law*.¹²⁰ His volume, *The English Bible and the 17th Century Revolution*, rejects the grand sweep of the

¹¹⁸ Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', p. 55

¹¹⁹ See especially for radical continuity arguments, Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Penguin Books, London, 1974), p. 117; *Milton and the English Revolution* (Faber and Faber, London 1977), *The English Revolution, 1640* (Routledge, London, 2017), ch. 1 and *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth-Century* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1950).

¹²⁰ Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (Penguin Books, London, 1996), especially ch. 3 on vagabondage.

modernist approach and instead looks to the individual lived experience as the main focus of its narrative. As Hill himself notes:

One long-standing conviction of mine that struggling to write this book has confirmed is that we impoverish our understanding of the past if we chop it up into little bits labelled 'constitutional history', 'economic history', 'literary history', 'political history' and so on, no less than if we allow the statistics of demographers to conceal the human lives behind unreliable records of births, marriages and deaths.¹²¹

In his penultimate work, Hill argued that the English Bible was a powerful radical document in the 17th century, which was interpreted with revolutionary consequences for the time. These were consequences which would fundamentally change both English and world history and reverberate into the modern age. This new radical bible would produce the world's first authentic revolution. As Hill writes in sentiments that reflect E. P. Thompson:

¹²¹ Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the 17th Century Revolution* (Penguin Books, London 1994) p. 436

Historians often comment on the fact that the English Revolution had no ideological forebears. None of the participants knew that what they were living through was a revolution. The word was to acquire its modern meaning only in and because of the English Revolution, the first great European revolution - Girondins and Jacobins, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, regicide and republic, fitted into the pattern set by the English Revolution. French revolutionaries feared the advent of a Cromwell and they got a Napoleon; Russian revolutionaries worried about Bonapartism, military dictatorship and did not notice Stalin creeping up from within.¹²²

Hill's earlier enthusiasm for the Communist cause was now heavily tinged with a new post-Soviet cynicism. The project within history remained intact, though the wider political project had ended. Hill's enthusiasm for English radical history, however, remained unaffected by the wider events of the world. For Hill, this tradition had produced the world's first true revolution and the world's first true social movement. It was a radical Nonconformist tradition this was worth celebrating in its own right:

¹²² *ibid* pp. 7-8

Englishmen had to face totally unexpected revolutionary situations in the 1640's and 1650's, with no theoretical guidance such as Rousseau or Marx gave to their French or Russian successors, and no experience of any previous event that had been called a revolution. They had to improvise. The Bible in English was the book to which they naturally turned for guidance- it was central to the inheritance of the protestant English nation. It was available in print only because of the conflicts and martyrdoms of the English reformation, an essential part of the Revolution's pre-history.¹²³

A. L. Morton was another Communist Party figure who was to continue the work of the Popular Front into the modern era. His later work also reflected a similar unorthodox approach, and drew its inspiration from the diverse world of poetry, literature and art. Morton's *Matter of Britain*, was published in 1966 and contained a colourful series of historical essays that drew on themes ranging from the Arthurian Cycle to T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*. It included authors as diverse as William Shakespeare and E. M. Forster. Morton's work is an exploration of the living literary culture of Britain and of the changing social forces which came to shape it. He was especially impelled by an English-inspired sensibility that led him to condemn American cultural influences in Britain, and, the stationing of US troops and missiles in bases on British soil in the post-war years.¹²⁴ In his work, Morton drew on the romantic idea of a lost utopia from the past, on the Celtic idea of a lost Avalon, together with the radical myth of a lost Saxon commonwealth, which were both crushed in the invasion of the Normans and by the

¹²³ *ibid* p. 8

¹²⁴ A.L.. Morton, *Get Out!* (The Communist Party, London, n.d.), pp. 4-5.

imposition of a feudal order. Morton's fanciful description of the lost world of the Anglo-Saxon poet Caedmon echoes Tolkien and his idyllic Shire of the Hobbits. It had some affinities with the mystical neo-pagan ideas of the Edwardian period that imagined a fixed, immutable world of village customs and unchanging traditional ways that expressed the best of England.¹²⁵ It is a lost heroic middle-earth crushed under the Norman boot:

Caedmon, whose status was so humble that his sleeping place was in the stable, still had the right to sit in hall, and was expected to take his share in the common cultural life. This was 680 - it is quite impossible to imagine after the Conquest, when the divisions of classes was reinforced by the barrier of language. The same sort of contrast is visible between the low, wooden, rambling and generally accessible houses of the Saxon nobility, and the horrifying stone keeps that spread not only over England but all north-western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹²⁶

Morton's clear influence on E. P. Thompson is especially illustrated in the chapter entitled, 'The Everlasting Gospel'. Here he explores the radical poet William Blake, focusing in on the radical religious ideas that helped shape Blake's prophetic vision and political ideas. These were ideas which had their deep roots within the turmoil of the English Civil War. Morton's essay reflects the ongoing legacy of Popular Front history,

¹²⁵ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), p. 276,

¹²⁶ A. L. Morton, *The Matter of Britain: Essays in a Living Culture* (Lawrence & Wishart, London 1966) p. 15

and of a Marxist interest in an eclectic dissenting tradition from the 17th century. This was a tradition which also included the teachings of Jacob Boehme, the Jewish Kabbala, and the early Christian Gnostic heretics.¹²⁷ Morton then narrows down these influences to the radical religious sects that flourished in 17th century London and persisted into Blake's time:

It is not possible to prove that Blake borrowed directly from any of these, to show, for example, that he had read any of the works of Muggleton, or of Abiezer Coppe the Ranter. What can be shown is that he and they shared a common body of ideas and expressed those ideas in a common language. We can show, too, that many of the seventeenth century, Quakers, Muggletonians and Traskites, for example, did survive in London till Blake's time. And it is certain that they persisted most strongly, as they had sprung up originally, among the artisans and petty tradesmen of the thickly peopled working-class quarters. These were exactly the social circles and the geographical areas in which Blake was born and in which his whole life passed.¹²⁸

This is followed up and expanded upon by E. P. Thompson in his later study of William Blake, entitled *Witness Against the Beast*. This was a work which marked his final publication during his lifetime. Thompson began his own exploration of these obscure religious ideas after coming into possession of a secret archive of the Muggletonians by pure chance in 1975. His study shows the clear influence of Morton in

¹²⁷ *ibid* p. 98

¹²⁸ *ibid* p. 99

the belief in an alternative, underground radical tradition which had persisted undiluted from the era of the Civil War, and into which Blake's own ideas had tapped:

Alternative intellectual traditions existed also- and especially in London- at the level of family traditions, and obscure intellectual currents surfacing, submerging and then surfacing again in little periodicals, or in chapels which fractured into several petty chapels, which invited new ministers or gathered around new voices, which knit up ideas and unravelled them and knit them up again throughout the eighteenth century.¹²⁹

Thompson's posthumous work also reflects the legacy of the Popular Front, with its conscious revival of an underground dissenting tradition. The work equally reflects upon contemporary concerns of the New Left and indeed New Age movements, viewing mystical spirituality as a legitimate inspiration for modern political ideas. This was also a history from below, of social movements and a radical tradition, which Thompson believed were still relevant to a modern post-Communist world. This was a people's history in the tradition of A. L Morton. Morton was to remain far more pragmatic and orthodox in his approach to history. The grand utopian vision which had inspired English radicalism, often ended in victory for the forces of reaction, when an attempt was made to openly challenge the structures of power. This had happened to the egalitarian dreams of the Levellers and Diggers, and to the socialist hopes and aspirations of the modern left in the Spanish Civil War. As Morton notes, of ancient

¹²⁹ E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994) xix

hopes and aspirations which were dashed in the defeat of the Monmouth Rebellion in the 17th century:

When Churchill's troopers triumphed at Sedgemoor they rode down the last defenders of Cokaygne, the Utopia of all jolly fellows, of the proud, independent man, neither exploiting nor exploited, eating and drinking of his own abundance. For this was one half of the Levellers' dream, and, I think, more than half of the Levellers' strength. On the one side they were modern, rational, civilised in a measure above that of their time. On the other, they were medieval, traditional, appealing to the deep-lying desires and perpetually thwarted hopes of the people. Their power lay in the synthesis of the past and the future: their weakness and the inevitability of their defeat lay in its incompleteness and in the gap which existed between it and the objective reality of historical development - a gap far deeper and wider than that of Bussex Rhine on Sedgemoor in which Monmouth's army met its defeat.¹³⁰

This passage reflects a crucial intellectual divide between these two Marxist champions of English radical history. For Morton, this was a radical tradition which was doomed to inevitable failure, largely due to the lack of any ideological clarity or purpose. It was a tradition that was too vague and eclectic to challenge the inevitable forces of historical reality. For Thompson, this was a radical tradition which offered new hope and inspiration for the future in a post-communist, post-ideological world. A tradition

¹³⁰ A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1952) p. 112

which had defied authority and its repeated attempts to crush the democratic impulse of the people. This was a libertarian tradition of popular resistance to the brutality of early capitalism. It was a tradition of egalitarian hopes and aspirations, which could not be extinguished in the decades of reaction and suppression that followed the French revolution and the Napoleonic war. This English radical tradition was the old hope of the past, and the new inspiration for a socialist future. Thompson was now the new evangelist for this old radical cause:

They were told that they had no rights, but they knew that they were born free. The Yeomanry rode down their meeting, and the right of public meeting was gained. The pamphleteers were gaoled, and from the gaols they edited pamphlets. The trade unionists were imprisoned, and they were attended to prison by processions with bands and union banners.¹³¹

This was a libertarian tradition of popular resistance to both capitalism and authority and had deep roots in the radicalism of the 17th century. Morton had an equal respect for this radical tradition, having championed its history in the 1930s as the true ‘people’s history’ of England. For Thompson, however, this was no historical dead-end, but a vibrant and continuing tradition of democratic resistance. The Communist Party Historians’ Group could not make this ideological break from the orthodox Marxist line. As David Parker, has recently noted in his study of the CPHG, there was never any deep or permanent conversion to an older democratic view of England’s past. Rather evident

¹³¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 914

was a more nuanced approach that was still firmly Marxist in its view of this democratic history. Parker's research highlights a keen Marxist interest in the radicalism of the English Civil War, and the often very heated debates that this stimulated within the group. Christopher Hill had taken an orthodox Marxist view of the English revolution, seeing the whole event as a major social upheaval which had paved the way for modern capitalism as the dominant social force. These turbulent events had come about from the rising economic power of the bourgeoisie, a class in ascendancy, which unleashed revolutionary forces that would sweep away the old feudal order. In a document dated 1949, Hill was to echo Morton on the legacy and impact of English radicalism:

The ideology of the revolutionary bourgeoisie was Puritanism. Only a very few thinkers had emancipated themselves from the traditional religious modes of thought. But to say that Puritanism was the ideology of the revolutionary bourgeoisie does not get us very far. Puritanism is a loose word, covering a great deal.¹³²

The ideological tone of these documents became far more orthodox, and far less eclectic and all-encompassing, as the Communist Party moved away from the era of the Popular Front and into a hardening post-war world. Indeed 'ideology' became something of an obsession for the CPHG in this post-war period. A continuous attempt was now made to maintain Marxist orthodoxy within the group, despite the individual temptation to wander off on some eclectic journey in the study of England's radical past. This was now a history which stuck to a rigid Party line as attitudes hardened within the

¹³² David Parker, *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the British Communist Historians 1940-1956* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2008) p. 158

era of the Cold War. The Popular Front legacy of a new 'people's history from below' remained undiminished in the changing events of the post-war world. A new history had been created in which the struggles and aspirations of ordinary working people were now centre stage and the focus of study. This was the legacy of the Communist historians, A. L. Morton, Christopher Hill and Dona Torr, and their unique contribution to the study of the past. This legacy was taken up by their keen disciple, E. P. Thompson. The Communist Party had now embraced a wider democratic tradition, and this brief embrace was to make its presence felt for a long time within left-wing history. In his work, *Primitive Rebels*, the historian Eric Hobsbawm reflected on some of the ambiguities of this radical legacy, and its brief embrace by the Communist Party, though Hobsbawm was less convinced of the uniqueness of this tradition:

The ideological history of the British labour movements is not, of course, totally different from that of continental countries. British labour and socialist movements, like those on the continent, were dominated by the secularist-radical tradition, which provided the most influential pamphleteers from Tom Paine to Bradlaugh and Blatchford.¹³³

A curious legacy of the Popular Front, and the war years, was the unleashing of a new left-wing patriotism. This can be seen reflected in the work of many prominent figures from the period, and particularly in the work of the writer George Orwell. It is even seen displayed in the propaganda of the Communist Party which was produced for the anti-fascist war effort. The emphasis was now on a national struggle for survival to defend a

¹³³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (University of Manchester Press, Manchester, 1959) p. 128

proud English tradition of democracy. This was the implicit theme in the pageants, plays and histories produced for the Popular Front which honoured the democratic struggles of a national past. This new patriotism was in sharp contrast to the previous positions of the left, which had promoted a strong internationalism within the socialist movement. The rejection of nationalism was a reaction to the debacle of the Second International, when socialist unity had crumbled in the summer of 1914 at the outbreak of war. It was George Orwell who best summed up the new defiant mood of patriotism for the British left in the 1940s, as the nation faced the imminent prospect of a German invasion. The new movement promoted a patriotic socialism which rejected the previous internationalism of the British left:

Patriotism has nothing to do with Conservatism. It is actually the opposite of Conservatism, since it is a devotion to something that is always changing and yet is felt to be mystically the same. It is the bridge between the future and the past. No real revolutionary has ever been an internationalist.¹³⁴

Orwell had locked into the new zeitgeist of the war and into a national pride for a collective past. Orwell also drew upon a mystical radicalism, inspired by the ideas of William Blake and his vision of Albion. This was no longer a Popular Front for a beleaguered Spain, but a national 'call to arms' against the overwhelming odds faced in an imminent Nazi invasion. Orwell was now climbing the heights for national wartime propaganda. An interesting document to emerge from this period of patriotic fervour

¹³⁴ George Orwell, *Orwell and Politics* (Penguin Books, London, 2001) p. 130

was a Penguin Special entitled, *Unser Kampf* or 'our struggle'. The title was a deliberate inversion of Adolf Hitler's, *Mein Kampf* or 'my struggle'. Published in 1940, its author was the apostate Liberal MP, Sir Richard Acland, who later founded the Common Wealth Party, before eventually joining the post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee.¹³⁵ *Unser Kampf* articulated many ideas which later became central themes for the Common Wealth Party, a party which attracted intellectual figures such as the writer and philosopher, Olaf Stapledon. Author of the novels *Sirius*, *Star Maker* and *The Last and First Men*, which explored the political and philosophical issues of the time through the genre of science-fiction, Stapledon had recruited this genre in the cause of anti-fascism, as H G Wells had done in the cause of his future socialist technocracy. Central to Acland's ideas was a belief that Europe would not escape total destruction unless it was able to produce a new social, and international order. The new political order had to be based upon the principles of common ownership, vital democracy and universal disarmament, which would remove the means of destruction from all the national armies of the world. In many ways, *Unser Kampf* represents the continued legacy of an older socialist and radical-liberal tradition. Acland's collective ownership would be based upon the older radical traditions of co-operation and guild-socialism and was a synonym for the antique notion of an Anglo-Saxon commonwealth. Moreover, he sought to reactivate the progressivist tradition of alliances between liberals and labour that characterised the Edwardian period, and which he saw as reborn in the Popular Front.¹³⁶ In other books, he referred directly to Gerrard Winstanley and the peasant

¹³⁵ See for Acland's career, Mary Hilson and Joseph Melling, 'Public Gifts and Political Identities: Sir Richard Acland, Common Wealth and the Moral Politics of Land Ownership in the 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 11 (2000), 156-182.

¹³⁶ See Vincent Geoghegan, *Socialism and Religion: Roads to Common Wealth* (Routledge: London, 2011), pp. 109-141.

revolt tradition.¹³⁷ This was a liberal-socialism that rejected the proposition of a centralised state ownership in the form of nationalisation. For Acland, economic power in the control of the state was as bad a thing as its inverse, economic power in the control of a capitalist elite. Acland's radicalism would also echo Aneurin Bevan's championing of a vital democracy to defend the interests of the people, against the undemocratic forces of property:

Our actual experience of this matter shows us that the owners are quite content to run Parliamentary democracy as long as they are winning. As soon as they find they are in serious danger of really losing, they change their tactics.¹³⁸

Once democracy was of no use to the forces of property it would be cast away and replaced by fascism, and the suppression of democracy. These were ideas that were central to Bevan's analysis of power and which had their roots in the Putney Debates of the 17th century. Acland's radical answer to this thorny issue of power was to have it neither in the hands of the capitalist owners, nor in the hands of the State:

¹³⁷ Richard Acland, *What it Will be Like in the New Britain* (Victor Gollancz, London, 1942), p. 20.

¹³⁸ Richard Acland, *Unser Kampf: Our Struggle* (Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1940) p. 67

It is not a question therefore of balancing up the advantages of economic liberty under common ownership and political liberty under private ownership; on the contrary, it is a question of finding out how we can preserve and create political liberty under a system which gives us economic liberty through common ownership.¹³⁹

This was not a call for social democracy or a mixed economy, but for the complete co-operative ownership of society, without the need of the state. This was the libertarian socialist tradition of William Morris and G. D. H. Cole, a tradition which the Communist Party could never really own or claim for itself. Acland was an interesting character, an aristocratic ex-Liberal, he later joined the Labour Party and was a founding member of CND. Acland's new vision for a post-war world would sweep away, not only Hitler, but the old order represented by the figure of Neville Chamberlain - a man who had never grasped the true nature of fascism:

He wants to destroy the thing which cannot stick to the ordinary rules of supply and demand in international trade. We want to destroy the thing which accepts finance from big business to smash the organisations and the living conditions of the working man.¹⁴⁰

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Popular Front was a Communist Party project in which it claimed an exclusive right to a radical-democratic past. However, as a political project, the

¹³⁹ *ibid* p. 72

¹⁴⁰ *ibid* p. 152

Popular Front was largely unsuccessful, as others within the British left contested this same democratic history. This English radical past was an integral part of the core identity of the British labour movement and its own broad-left, radical-liberal traditions, and many key figures within the labour movement would claim this democratic past in the name of social-democracy. The 1940s saw this radical-democratic past recruited for the new war effort following the writings of George Orwell and other important figures who created a new patriotic-socialism. It also survived within the canon of the Labour party as an inspiration to the 'new Jerusalem' spirit of 1945. Retrospective articles commemorating the half century of the 1945 victory noted of the Beveridge Report the 'vividly Cromwellian style' of the document in its denunciation of 'the Five Giant Evils of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness.'¹⁴¹ The Popular Front did also, however, have a lasting impact within the field of history and historiography, as Communist Party historians played a major part in forging a new 'people's history' as an approach to the British past. This legacy was to continue with the work of A. L. Morton, Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson, historians whose work outlived both the Communist Party and the Popular Front, reviving a political tradition which was firmly grounded in 17th century religious dissent. An important legacy of the Popular Front here was the rehabilitation of religion and its radical role in the past.

¹⁴¹ Peter Crookston, 'Election Shocker', *The Independent Magazine*, 6 May 1995, p. 32 and for the background, Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo, *'England Arise': The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995), pp. 86-87.

Chapter 4

Guardians of a Radical Past: The WEA and the Intellectuals of the Left

The Workers Educational Association became the political conscience of the broad-left and the labour movement through most of the twentieth century and was the jealous guardian of an English radical past. Its intellectual figures played a major part in promoting this democratic history through the medium of books, pamphlets and WEA lectures. This chapter re-evaluates the history of the WEA. Analysing its educational materials, the books and authors it promoted, and assessing the importance of its curriculum for a new generation of Labour-inclined students, it seeks to locate the organisation in the mainstream of the radical tradition, and assess the degree to which it might be regarded as the custodian of the radical canon from the end of the nineteenth-century onwards. In addition, it analyses the role of key figures like R. H. Tawney and Jack Lindsay in the preservation and dissemination of the radical past. The WEA was a project which attracted the 'big-guns' of the British left to re-ignite labour-history through a programme of further education for the working masses. The WEA played a central role in popularising the radical historiography it promoted and provided a broad-left platform equal to the Communist Party Historians' Group.

The WEA and the Dissemination of the Story of the National Past

The WEA played a particularly prominent role in promoting an English radical tradition as a formative democratic history which shaped the socialist and labour movements in Britain. A whole generation of leading Labour Party figures were to pass through its lecture halls, drawing on key lessons learned from the pages of British democratic history. In his seminal history of the WEA, *Learning and Living*, the radical

historian J. F. C. Harrison bore testimony to the importance of the movement, and its centrality for the dissemination of radical progressivist ideas to working-people.¹ Founded by Albert Mansbridge in 1903, the WEA was built on the central principle of providing access to higher education for working people and a commitment to lifelong learning for adults from different social backgrounds. Its first meeting was held at the home of Mansbridge and soon attracted members and branches throughout the country as the movement quickly grew with co-operative and trade union support. With its self-help ethos, and implicit respectability, the movement also gained needed support from influential social reformers within the Liberal government. In many ways, the WEA mirrored the eclectic politics of the ILP, mixing up a heady brand of radical-liberalism and Fabian-socialism and a co-operative ethos of self-help and collective action. The movement also evoked a powerful ethical vision of society which was firmly rooted in a 19th century Christian and progressive idealism.² Branches soon extended out to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, with international branches being formed in Australia, Canada and New Zealand before the First World War. The subjects taught were as eclectic as the movement itself, and like its sister organisation the ILP, the WEA prided itself on being intensely non-ideological. It practised a socialism that was as diffuse as the diverse political traditions from which its members came. The WEA also attracted important intellectual figures to its cause, from R. H. Tawney and G. D. H. Cole, to A. L. Morton and Jack Lindsay who brought education, ideas, and inspiration to the

¹ J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living, 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961), ch. 2. Also see for the importance of the WEA to the preservation of radical memory, Brian Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement, 1870-1920* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1965), pp. 327-342.

² The ethical socialist vision of the WEA informed Clement Attlee's social work in the East End of London and pragmatic approach to Labour politics; see Clement Attlee, *The Social Worker* (G. Bell and Sons, London, 1920), pp. 164-167.

working masses of Britain. The eclecticism of the WEA also drew many critics, both from the left and from the right. Many from the left believed the movement had diluted working class radicalism through an over-emphasis on philosophy and the arts within its wide teaching curriculum. Others took the completely opposite view, as Jonathan Rose has noted of Fieldhouse's important survey of ideology in adult education:

Fieldhouse's own evidence, however, points to a different conclusion: if the WEA had any influence at all, it encouraged political activity and drew some students farther to the left.³

The WEA was a product of the same working-class traditions which had produced the ILP. This was equally reflected in the background of many of its students. This was not a movement conducive to a dry, arid statistical Marxism which ignored the role of individuals in shaping the past. As Jonathan Rose has noted of the eclectic ideas and reading material of the student intake in 1909, most of which had little knowledge of Marx:

³ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010), p. 271

The WEA could hardly have steered many workers away from Marxism, if only because so few of its recruits were Marxists. A 1909 survey of thirty-four prospective students for a Tutorial Class found that nine of them had read Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England*, seven Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, six Toynbee on the Industrial Revolution, five each Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workers* and at least parts of *The Wealth of Nations*, only one had even attempted Marx.⁴

This was the familiar mix of radical-liberalism and libertarian-socialism. It was a mix of older radical ideas which imprinted a unique political identity on British socialism. Orthodox Marxists were unhappy with this approach within the WEA and formed their own Plebs League in 1909. The dons and worker tutors of the Oxford University Extension Movement believed that the WEA lacked sufficient academic rigour and attention to the details of the curriculum taught.⁵ The historian Paul Salveson recapitulates these early criticisms by the left and from the mainstream:

It eschewed any political direction and won support from paternalistic employers. A new generation of radical socialists increasingly found much of the WEA's approach to be inadequate for their needs.⁶

The WEA had its roots in the diverse traditions of early British socialism, and was attuned to the democratic ethos of an earlier English radicalism. It drew much of its

⁴ *ibid* p. 279

⁵ Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995), ch. 5.

⁶ Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent: Radical Traditions for Modern Times* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2012), p. 112

inspiration from the Socialist Sunday School movement, and from earlier attempts to create a programme of broad socialist education for the workers and their children. Though labelled 'Socialist', this was a movement inspired by the older Victorian values of self-help and self-reliance. Stressing the importance of education and radical inquiry within the moral framework of an ethical Christian socialism it drew on Victorian educational traditions. This was also built upon a comprehensive programme of educational activities which were promoted by the SDF and the ILP, to cultivate a new generation of socialist boys and girls.⁷ The Socialist Sunday Schools embraced a wider radicalism which echoed the utopian idealism of William Morris. These socialist objectives are clearly on display within a pamphlet entitled, *Aim, Objects and Organisation, which were:*

The substitution for the present competitive system of society for a system of life wherein all men, women, and children, instead of being forced to seek their own individual and private ends at present, shall be enabled to set the interest of the community first, and to regard each other as having equal rights and responsibilities within the Co-operative Commonwealth.⁸

Within this new socialist education English history was to play a key role, with attention given to the democratic struggles of the past. This was a history which conveyed a detailed description of the life and conditions of people from early times till

⁷ *ibid* p111

⁸ *National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools, Aim, Objects and Organisation* (National Council, London, 1914) p. 2

the present day, including, industrial changes; evidences of the continual struggle after freedom; and the fighters for freedom.⁹ A catalogue of the literature to be taught included the works of William Morris, Robert Blatchford, Keir Hardie and Edward Carpenter.¹⁰ The, *Young Socialist Crusaders' Manual*, included chapters on:

Sports, Camping, Cooking, Exercise and Marching, First Aid, Semaphore, Signalling, Knot Tying, Needlecraft, Woodcraft, Astronomy and Esperanto.¹¹

The list of activities conveyed a powerful message of Methodist self-reliance, which was a central feature of voluntary organisations from the period. The teaching of Esperanto was the one point of departure, and a solitary progressive element within an otherwise strict military schedule of marching and practical survival skills. Perhaps this was unsurprising for a booklet published at the outbreak of war in 1914, when the prospect of a universal peace backed by a new international language seemed far into the future; and at a time when many socialists backed the empire against its enemies. Esperanto had represented the vanishing dream of socialist internationalism and the utopian expectations of an early socialist movement.¹² Subsequently, the pressures of the war led to the formation of the Woodcraft Folk organisation in 1924 that preserved intact the leftish hue of WEA education for the young, but dedicated itself to the promotion of internationalism and the understanding of other cultures as an antidote to

⁹ *National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools, Notes for Teachers* (National Council, London, 1925) p. 6

¹⁰ *National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools, Catalogue of Literature* (National Council, London, 1914) p. 7

¹¹ *ibid* p. 11

¹² Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985), ch.5

the overt militarism of pre-war youth movements like the Scouts.¹³ Pre-1914, the focus for attention within the labour movement was adult education. The idea of an independent working-class educational movement was viewed as essential in promoting socialist values within society and for the extension of further education to people previously denied the chance to progress within a class-ridden system of learning. As J. P. M. Millar, the General Secretary of the National Council of Labour Colleges noted:

In the job of building up an independent working-class educational movement it has been necessary not merely to combat the influence of the Liberal traditions inherited by the Labour Movement in its earlier stages, but to combat the educational policy of the governing class itself.¹⁴

For Millar, this was about creating a new broad-left labour movement, independent of the Liberal ideas of its past. The dominance of liberalism in the early labour movement was clearly on display in a pamphlet published by the Fabian Society in 1906 and entitled *Books for Study*. The Fabian movement still clung tenaciously to a Whig and Liberal teleology in its choice of historical literature for the workers. The 'books for study' included the Whig and Liberal Victorian histories:

¹³ L.O. Evans, *Woodcraft and World Service* (Douglas, London, 1930), ch. 1

¹⁴ J. P. M. Millar, *Education for Emancipation* (National Council of Labour Colleges, London 1937) p. 14

G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People*, and Sir Spencer Walpole's grand 6 volume *History of England*.¹⁵

The Plebs League and A Radical Curriculum

Even the more avowedly Marxist Plebs League, had an eclectic syllabus and books which included the authors:

Thomas More, Lord Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Ruskin and the romantic poet Walter Scott.¹⁶

Many of the initial lectures created for the Plebs League focused on subjects which came straight from the pages of radical-liberal history. These included:

The Revolts in the Middle Ages, The Reformation, Modern Institutions, Capitalism and Present Fallacies.¹⁷

Formed by a core group of working-class students at Ruskin College, Oxford, the Plebs League was founded to defend the teaching of Marxism on campus and faced the fierce opposition of the University authorities. Ruskin College itself was a unique institution within Oxford University and was established in 1899 to provide higher education and opportunities for working-class students. Founded by two American philanthropists, Charles Beard and Walter Vrooman, the college was intimately bound

¹⁵ Fabian Society, *Books for Study* (Fabian Society, London 1906) p. 18

¹⁶ Fred Shaw, *The Plebs League: A Syllabus and Booklist on Marxism* (Plebs League, London, n.d.) p. 3

¹⁷ *ibid* pp. 9-12

up with the co-operative and trades union movements from its very beginnings. As J. P. M. Millar had noted, there was a real struggle to establish a labour college at Oxford, which provoked a student strike to defend a socialist curriculum against the advances of the University:

The students, who were mostly trade unionists who had received a good deal of economic education in the workshop and the unemployment queue, took an entirely different view of the advances. This view found expression in the Plebs League- This strike gave birth to the first Labour College providing Independent Working-Class Education.¹⁸

Millar expresses the views of labour's broad-left and its growing support for the League in the 1920s and 30s. There were considerable differences between the League and the WEA. The WEA was very evangelical in its approach to education, and far less ideological in its political tone and spirit. This evangelism shines through in a booklet entitled, *The Workers and Education*, which was published in 1917 at the height of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, though these two turbulent events had little impact on the political tone or the language used. Two important contributions came from the Edwardian social reformers, A. S. Rowntree and Charles Braithwaite. This evangelism is strikingly summed up in a preaching passage from Braithwaite, which echoes the radical spirit of an older dissenting tradition:

¹⁸ J. P. M. Millar, *Education for Emancipation*, p. 7

By Fellowship with others in the education of mind and soul and in a common dedication to the highest, we may each one do our part to help our desolated humanity to press forward again with surer steps towards the City of God. We may each one do our part in the high task; for with us, as with every fellowship of true disciples, will be our Master Himself, the Unfailing Comrade.¹⁹

For the historians, Norman Dennis and A. H. Halsey, the WEA was one of many organisations infused with a unique English ethical socialism. As they note:

Ethical socialism is a radical tradition which makes heroic claims on people and on the society that nurtures them. It offers both a code of conduct for individuals and a guide to social reform aimed at creating optimal conditions for the highest moral attainment of every person.²⁰

This was the fusing of Victorian moral philosophy with the modern vision of a socialist society. Many leading figures in the WEA, and indeed the wider British left, shared this unique vision of the transformational individual forging the new transformed society. This was a tradition which differed from European socialism, through its bias towards individual autonomy and its deep distrust of an all-powerful state. It stressed respect and dignity as the core values of its egalitarianism. Above all, this was a socialist vision which held on to the principles of parliamentary democracy

¹⁹ John Gilman, *The Workers and Education* (Allen & Unwin Ltd, Ruskin House, 1917) p. 59. and Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Educations since 1850*, chs, 3-5.

²⁰ Norman Davis, A H Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism: Thomas More to R H Tawney* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988), p. 1

and participatory citizenship. This was the philosophy of the two leading figures within the WEA, G. D. H. Cole and R. H. Tawney, though Cole was far less enamoured with the institutions of parliamentary democracy and still clung to the ideas of William Morris, seeking his societal transformation through workers' democratic control. English ethical socialism also reflected the powerful legacy of a radical-liberal tradition within the British labour movement. This held some currency within the WEA movement and amongst its key thinkers. The work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb wielded a particularly strong influence over the WEA movement. Both had a very statist vision of socialism, which clashed with the libertarian Guild-socialism of Cole. This reflected the heterodox ideas within the WEA, and the competing visions at work within the movement. Their *History of Trade Unionism* was a major textbook which was originally published in 1894, and had its ideas reflected in many early publications of the ILP. This was a work imbued with a strong Fabian socialism which rejected the militant revolutionary politics of the Chartist era. As the Webbs noted, of this era in working-class history:

Insurrectionism, whether Owenite or Chartist, was, in fact losing its attraction for the working-class mind - The believers in a 'new system of society', were henceforth to be found in the ranks of the commercial-minded Co-operators rather than in those of the militant Trade Unionists.²¹

The Webbs exerted a powerful influence over the early literature of the British labour movement. Their history promoted steady social change through a programme

²¹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism 1666-1920* (Workers' Educational Association, London, 1919) p. 177

of political reform, and firmly rejected any revolutionary ideas from England's radical past. This was implicitly reflected in their total lack of interest in radical movements from the English Civil War, and their rejection of the failed militancy of the Chartists. The Webbs disliked the excesses of Chartist crowd politics, preferring, instead 'knowledge' Chartists like William Lovett, who was sometimes seen as a proto-Fabian, and the moderate reformer, Francis Place.²² The militant movement of Chartism would only come to the fore later on, with post-war depression and the rise of fascism. In another WEA publication, H. L. Beales gives only a brief and passing reference to the Chartist movement, viewing Chartism as a political dead-end which failed to achieve its radical objectives. The defeat of Chartism had brought the workers towards a new Fabian vision of co-operation and a moderate trade unionism. Though the Chartists and Owen had failed to achieve their political aim they were still part of a proud history of working-class struggle, a history no one should be ashamed of:

These labour movements won few victories, but they gained a sense of purpose and in the end a plan. It is easy to regard Owenite optimism in a superior way, yet from the inspiration of the Owenite vision the labour movement acquired ideals, a sense of unity and a regard for the immediately possible. The modern Labour movement has no need to be ashamed or forgetful of its parentage.²³

²² St. John G. Ervine, *Francis Place: The Tailor of Charing Cross* (The Fabian Society, London, 1935), pp. 20-27.

²³ H. L. Beales, *The Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (Longmans, London, 1928) p. 74

Another example of the WEA's literature was, *An Introduction to English Rural History*, by Geo Guest, which was published in 1920. This echoed many English radical histories from the 19th century. It told the tale of independent village dwelling Anglo-Saxons, losing their common-law rights to an invading Norman army bringing feudalism and enclosure. A new military class was to grow in the shadow of the conquest, burdening the Saxon freeman with increased taxation and oppression:

A military class also grew up. To meet the needs of these governing classes, the peasants were called upon to bear increased taxation. The noble was thus no longer the protector of the freeman: he became the master, and they were regarded as his tenants.²⁴

This rural history moves rapidly on to the Peasants' revolt against the feudal system, the first in a series of radical revolts to restore a lost common-law commonwealth from the past. This was the radical vision of a lost utopia from the pre-Norman days of the Saxons and the Celts. A radical narrative in the tradition of Gerrard Winstanley, that continued through to the socialist works of William Morris, this was a history of proletarian struggle, but with a unique English radical twist. Guest's narrative is also embedded within a liberal view of the past, notably as the English Civil War is brushed aside in favour of 'The Pioneers of Progress in Agriculture', such as Jethro Tull, Thomas Coke and Arthur Young and their development of labour-saving machinery. A Whig history of scientific and steady social progress through the process of reform is apparent in such treatments. Figures such as William Cobbett, and his campaign against

²⁴ Geo Guest, *An Introduction to English Rural History* (The Workers' Educational Association, London 1920) p. 14

rural poverty, set the scene for this specific view of the past. Guest's booklet does go on to vividly describe the rural revolts of the early nineteenth century, and the brutal treatment meted out to the rebels of 1812. In dramatic and impassioned prose which takes the reader right into the heart of events at the time, he comments:

At one stage, it appeared that the revolt might lead to an improvement in wages and conditions of life in general. But the drastic action of the Government towards the end of the year speedily dispelled the promise. Hundreds of prisoners were taken, and two special commissions were appointed to try them. It is recorded that 'three hundred prisoners lay in the gaol at Winchester, and when the Court met they were brought in batches of twenty at a time, and every one had sentence of death recorded against him'. Some of the leaders were actually hanged, and several hundred men and boys, in all, were transported. The heartlessness of this treatment is still remembered in many corners of rural England. Thus was the Last Labourers' Revolt crushed with heartless rigour, and the toilers on the soil were driven back into silent poverty.²⁵

Salvation was to come with a successful national campaign to abolish the Corn Laws, and with the establishment of a National Agricultural Labourers' Union under the leadership of the liberal hero, Joseph Arch. He was a man of sound Methodist persuasion and a true son of the soil, who epitomised the Victorian ethic of self-help, hard-work and

²⁵ *ibid* pp. 49-50

moral fortitude in the face of grinding poverty and social injustice. Guest finishes his history with a hopeful nod to a more radical and Guild Socialist future, in which workers gain a direct voice in their industry and livelihood:

The new idea is rapidly permeating the ranks of the Trade Unions that the worker is entitled to take at least some part in the control and direction of the industry in which he gains his livelihood.²⁶

Together with the Fabian influence of the Webbs, the WEA was also imbued with the politics and ethos of the co-operative movement. This movement also shared a Fabian belief in the gradual transformation of society into a moral socialist economy. For many, the co-operative movement was far more than a mere branch of retailing, but an economic model for a new and practical post-capitalist society. This was a movement built upon the radical idealism of the earliest socialists in Britain, and particularly upon the pioneering ideas of Robert Owen. The embrace of co-operation as an economic and social model, also reflected the powerful influence of older radical-liberal ideas within the labour movement. This was a means of creating socialism without invoking the interference of the state. This was a self-help socialism which would not compromise a Cobdenite view of society and of the world. As Paul Salveson has noted:

²⁶ *ibid* p. 68

The hard-headed working men and women who provided the leadership of the Co-operative movement often had an innate suspicion of the state- it was seen as a hostile external force- irrelevant to co-operation- as long as it left them alone and free to get on with their co-operating.²⁷

The co-operative movement was born out of a unique ideology, it was an example of a mutual, socialist self-sufficiency that complimented the core liberalism at the heart of the British labour movement. This was a movement inextricably linked up with the WEA and its own core values. In a WEA booklet entitled, *Co-operation, its Problems and Possibilities*, Honora Enfield outlined the history and ideals of the movement: ideals which had their roots in the reforming radicalism of Robert Owen:

Throughout his life he waged unceasing war against the system which produced the poverty and misery and degradation he saw everywhere around him. His thoughts could never escape from it, and all his wealth and boundless energy were devoted to plans and organisations and experiments for setting up a new industrial order.²⁸

Enfield highlights the crucial role of the movement in promoting further education for working people, which built on the principles of its founding fathers:

²⁷ Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent* p. 186

²⁸ Honora Enfield, *Co-operation: its Problems and Possibilities* (Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1927) pp. 1-2

The Co-operative Movement is perhaps unique among the workers' movements for the very large place it has always given to specifically educational work.²⁹

The early pamphlets of the WEA give scant attention to the revolutionary radicalism of the English Civil War and reflect the early literature of the ILP. The exception was the Guild Socialist, G. D. H. Cole, who produced a teaching syllabus for the WEA. Cole's preoccupation was English economic history, which was often perceived as the dry business of class structure and economic theory. Nevertheless, Cole did his best to insert the turbulent events of the Civil War into the curriculum which he regarded as an interesting period for the workers to study. This was a period full of exciting and turbulent events, and did not fit easily into the dry Marxist version of economic history often taught within WEA seminars. Cole acknowledged this aspect of Marxist history, with its focus on the minutiae of economic structure, while sweeping over the more colourful aspects of the past. As Cole noted:

Only in a very broad sense- can the pre-dominantly religious struggle of Cavaliers and Roundheads be explained in economic terms.³⁰

H de B. Gibbins' *English Social Reformers* was a central founding text that was appropriated by the WEA for its teaching of English radical history. This was a Victorian social history that was first published in 1892 and was strongly influenced by the new social liberalism of historians such as T. H. Green. This was a history far removed from a

²⁹ *ibid* p. 38

³⁰ G. D. H. Cole, *English Economic History: A Syllabus for Classes and Study Circles* (Labour Research Department, London, 1922) p. 19

dry Marxist view of the past. Its new social liberalism emphasised a new key role for the state as a force to release the moral potential of society, through its capacity for active social reform. Gibbins begins his history by taking the reader back to the fourteenth century, with the radical poet William Langland and the rebel priest John Ball and finishes his narrative with the work of John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle at the height of the Victorian industrial revolution. Gibbins' work does acknowledge the sudden, turbulent events, which often shaped our democratic past. Indeed, the reforming capacity of the state to liberate the individual had often required a revolutionary act to initiate the process:

There have been many sudden changes and revolutions in the development of English social and industrial history; for although the main current of evolution is generally gradual it is also, at times, accentuated and hastened by sudden rapids and cataracts in its course.³¹

For Gibbins, though, it was cool headed reform, not hot-headed revolution, which defined this democratic past. This was a faith based on a firm belief in social and political reform. It advocated a socialism rooted within the morality of Methodism rather than the materialism of Marx. This was a tradition which confounded many ardent campaigners who had tried to mould the labour movement to a more Marxist continental framework. This Methodist, radical-liberal inheritance is on prominent display within Gibbins' social history. The democratic reformers of England's past were men from this same radical tradition of Nonconformity, a tradition also rooted within

³¹ H. de B. Gibbins, *English Social Reformers* (Methuen, London, 1902, Second Edition), p. 1

the struggles and divisions of a more turbulent past. They were lofty ideals and beliefs which had their origins within Thomas More's seminal work, *Utopia*:

The attitude of religious freedom of thought and political freedom of action so noticeable in the Utopia had developed into the impatience of an Established Church, and the struggle against an absolute monarchy, that occupied the makers of English history in the days of the Stuarts. These struggles had in their natural course divided Englishmen into two great parties- the Whigs and the Tories- of whom the first represented the desire for political freedom and government by Parliament.³²

The new labour movement was portrayed as the inheritor of a noble Whig tradition of political dissent and social reform that carried the banner of an older democratic struggle into the modern age. This was a tradition which still divided the political nation into two distinct camps, much as it had done in the turbulent age of the Stuarts. Gibbins makes a strong point of the intimate connection between Methodism and the British labour movement. As he notes:

It is curious to note how many leaders of the working class have sprung from the ranks of Methodism.³³

Gibbins' history is very much a male Victorian history, which ignored the contemporary issue of women's suffrage, though he briefly mentions Charles Kingsley's support for the right of women to practice as physicians and surgeons, and the

³² *ibid* pp. 67-68

³³ *ibid* p. 93

academic abilities of women, which were championed within his historical novel, *Hypatia*, there is no more extended treatment of the subject. The book places its own focus on the industrial revolution and the appalling social conditions which this created. This narrative is placed beside the bold attempts of social reformers to change these appalling conditions. Gibbins is at his best in describing the appalling conditions of child labour within these early mills, in prose reminiscent of Charles Dickens himself:

Once in the mill, the round of slavery was unceasing- One relay of children rose wearily from their beds as another relay came to throw themselves down in their places, in beds where vice, disease, and death grew rank as in a teeming ground- Sometimes they tried to run away, but it was an almost hopeless attempt; and when brought back, their sufferings were generally worse than before, and chains were riveted upon their limbs.³⁴

This was a dramatic and impassioned description of the grim lives of working children in the period, and would have added extra pathos to the dry statistics that were often a feature of the economic history taught within WEA lectures. Gibbins focuses attention on the work of the reformer Richard Oastler, who campaigned vigorously against child labour. He helped to restrict the long and arduous hours which children were forced to work within this factory system.³⁵ Along with Methodism, Gibbins places considerable emphasis on the Christian socialist movement at the time, and on its two

³⁴ *ibid* pp. 114-115

³⁵ A number of Labour politicians also wrote about Oastler's legacy in contemporary WEA literature: see Walter Greenwood, *Richard Oastler: The Factory King* (WEA, London, 1913), p. 25.

prominent advocates, Charles Kingsley and Frederick Denison Maurice. Kingsley firmly rejected the often violent and revolutionary politics of the Chartists, in favour of a doctrine of self-reformation as the pre-requisite to true and lasting social change. Noting the controversy surrounding Kingsley's 'Letters to the Chartists', which were interpreted at the time as inciting revolution, Gibbins commented:

As a matter of fact, they were a series of constant exhortations to abstain not only from actual violence, but even from many legislative reforms, till the working-classes should be fit to receive them.³⁶

Gibbins' work of Christian social liberalism ends with the two great Victorian critics of the industrial revolution, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. Carlyle was the first great writer to confront the reality of the industrial revolution, which had given rise to the spectre of Chartism. Ruskin provided a new social vision for the working man, putting forward ideas which championed an alternative to laissez-faire through the socialisation of industry and the creation of government owned manufactories and workshops. Ruskin's ideas were now championed by a new trade union movement, which had rallied to the cause of progressive reform. Gibbins finishes his history with a powerful eulogy to the moral dimension of social-reform- echoed within the early literature of the WEA:

³⁶ Gibbins, *English Social Reformers* p. 165

In the social and industrial life, as well as in any other, a man must in very truth be born again before he can attain the heights of a new and nobler existence; and though the process of birth in the womb of Time may be slow and gradual, and perhaps even painful, there can be without it no proper entrance into the world of Life.³⁷

Many of the key ideas expressed in Gibbins' *English Social Reformers*, can be seen within the ethical socialism outlined by Halsey and Dennis. This was an ethical socialism which pervades the historical literature of the WEA. As Halsey and Dennis note, the WEA was committed to a threefold understanding of social advancement:

First, revolutionary violence was in itself an evil.

Second, was the idea that no institution, however ingenious or perfect in conception can work unless operated by people whose morality is adequate.

Third, was the completely un-Marxian idea that where a sound morality was lacking, it could be supplied.³⁸

The WEA served a strong pre-Marxist cocktail of socialist and radical traditions from the past, incorporating the moral ethos of older political values. The WEA was also to mirror the ILP, as it slowly changed its historical focus towards the radical movements of the English Civil War. This reflected a wider shift within the British labour movement, and a major shift to the left in the period of the Popular Front. The emphasis on social

³⁷ *ibid* p. 225

³⁸ Norman Dennis, A H Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism*, p. 171

reform and constitutional evolution - an integral core of English democratic history, and the legacy of Whig liberalism - was now swept aside in favour of the revolutionary movements of the past. The once rejected Chartists were now the heroes and champions of a new democratic socialism, together with the Levellers and Diggers of the English Civil War, overturning the Fabian legacy of the Webbs and its powerful influence on the Labour movement's view of its origins and past. In the 1930s Victorian liberal history, had lost its influence on the labour movement, along with the idea of peaceful, slow social reform. There was now a greater interest in the radicalism of the English Civil War, and on political movements which were more in tune with the character and mood of the times. Raphael Samuel also notes a change of focus in the 1930s, as new heroes and movements were excavated from England's democratic past. This revival was a slow burning phenomenon, beginning with Carlyle's biography of Cromwell in the 19th century and only reaching its zenith in the Popular Front, with the 'worker historians' of the Communist Party. This was also reflected in the radical role of Puritanism, as Samuel notes:

Before the nineteenth-century, Puritanism was given little more than a walk-on part in histories of the Civil War.³⁹

Peter Karsten sees the revival of these Civil War figures as symbolic of a greater need to create new 'patriot heroes' for the war effort in the '40s. This was the era of a new patriotic socialism which was reflected in the writings of George Orwell in particular. As Karsten notes of the Liberal MP, Isaac Foot, the Nonconformist father of Michael Foot:

³⁹ Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (Verso, London, 1998) p. 278

Isaac Foot, a Nonconformist MP who doffed his hat to Cromwell's statue daily on entering the Commons, edited a Cromwell Association collection of the Protector's more stirring remarks in 1941 for the benefit of 'our fighting forces'.⁴⁰

In a collection of essays entitled, *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, Alun Howkins suggests that an interest in radical puritanism began much earlier in the late nineteenth century, as the intellectuals of the left rediscovered the turbulent ideas of the 16th and 17th centuries.⁴¹ These socialists had rediscovered a new-found nationalism, inspired by the Puritan imperialism of the late Tudor period. This nationalism also came to the fore in the 1940s, underpinning the idea and myth of a 'people's war'. As the historian John Field, has noted, the WEA was to play a major role in promoting this powerful post-war myth:

It also carved out a place for itself as an advocate of post-war educational reconstruction. Whether serving as a provider or advocate, the WEA thereby helped to promote and underpin the popular quality of the war, and shaped the way in which the war's objectives were redefined in terms of civic reconstruction rather than military strategy.⁴²

⁴⁰ Peter Karsten, *Patriot-Heroes in England and America: Political Symbolism and Changing Values over Three Centuries* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisc., 1978) p. 159

⁴¹ Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England' in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds.), *Englishness, Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (Bloomsbury, new edition, London, 2014), pp. 95-111.

⁴² John Field, 'The WEA in Wartime', in Stephen K. Roberts (ed) *A Ministry of Enthusiasm: Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association* (Pluto Press, London, 2003), pp. 148-149

Jack Lindsay

The change of focus within English history is seen in the striking contrast between the earlier work of Gibbins and the later writings of Jack Lindsay, that were a product of the Popular Front period. The focus had shifted away from Victorian liberalism towards a new revolutionary radicalism that reached back to the older radical heroes of the English Civil War. As an author, poet and historian, Jack Lindsay was intimately connected with the WEA movement throughout the 1930s and 40s. Indeed, Lindsay's work came to symbolise the new historical focus and its intimate connection to the broader ideas of the Popular Front. His work also reflected the wider reach and influence of the WEA as an educational movement and came to crystallise its new radical values. Born into a well to do middle-class bohemian family in Melbourne, Australia, Lindsay graduated from the University of Queensland in 1921 and soon began earning a living as a WEA lecturer in Brisbane. This planted a lifelong commitment to socialism which was explored within his eclectic writings. Lindsay can be seen to represent a wider concept of Englishness and Britishness. Though an Australian, he seemed rooted to a British sense of history and identity, and to radical democratic ideas which were transplanted to a wider British world. This wider sense of a collective historical identity has been explored by the historians Duncan Bell and Bruce Scates.⁴³ By 1926 Lindsay had decided to move to England to pursue a career as a writer, poet and historian. Lindsay soon began to produce a wide variety of work which was read and disseminated through the ranks of the WEA and the Plebs League. Lindsay quickly established himself as an influential figure within the British left, and more importantly

⁴³ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Great Britain: Empire and the Future of the World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton, New Haven, 2007), ch.7 and Bruce Scates, *A New Australia: Citizenship, Radicalism and the First Republic* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), ch. 2.

became one of the first intellectuals of his generation to promote the radical reading of the English Civil War. An Australian who was to adopt this radical tradition through his poetry, novels and historical prose, he channelled many of the historical controversies of the period. The epiphany came in 1936 after he had read a terse and dismissive article in *the Times*, which roundly trounced a history of Chartism by the Communist author, Allen Hutt. The article went on to claim that a card-carrying Communist could never understand the history and nature of the English people.⁴⁴ Incensed by what he read, Lindsay produced a long scathing poem in reply, entitled *Who are the English?* which was published in *Left Review*, issued as a pamphlet, and staged as a mass public declamation against conventional mainstream politics at the Communist-aligned Unity Theatre in London a few weeks later.⁴⁵ *Who are the English?* soon became the rousing invocation of a radical revolutionary tradition, and a clarion call for the left in the period of the Popular Front. The dull reformist history of the Webbs was now gone forever, together with its nod to a patient liberal past. Lindsay now invoked the wild romantic poetry of William Blake and William Morris, offering up new radical heroes from a long-forgotten past - heroes airbrushed from the pages of England's proud democratic history:

⁴⁴ This controversy is reviewed in the *Morning Star*, 27 October, 2014, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1989), ch. 4.

I call on Cromwell's Ironsides and the men who listened to the many voices blown, distracted, bird cries out of the thicket of blood-darkness, and answered awry, glamoured by dark phrases, the slaughtered Lamb, the flayed carcass of their lives, the unremitting call to follow truth, to follow a bond denying their present slavery, broken by harsh echoes from the unploughed thicket.

Come, you Anabaptists and you Levellers, come, you Muggletonians, all you Belamites, fall in behind us, you are not English, comrades.

Come, you Luddites, come you men of the Charter, singing your songs of defiance on the blackened hills, invoking the storm, the whirlwind, being surer now, deciphering at last the certain earth behind the many voices confusing the moonstruck mind.⁴⁶

Of all of the rousing prose and poetry of the Popular Front period, Lindsay's is the most powerful, visceral and invocative. This was a significant moment in the revival an English radical tradition from the past, and its appropriation as the genuine voice of a national history and identity. Lindsay followed up his epic poem with more works which echoed its powerful themes, both in poetry, prose and historical writing. An example is, *England my England, A Pageant of the English People*. A pocket history which was produced for popular consumption and released on the outbreak of war; this was a history which began with the familiar theme of rights and liberties that were destroyed

⁴⁶ Jack Lindsay, *Who are the English? Selected Poems: 1935-1981* (Smokestack Books, London 2014) pp. 30-31

in the Norman Conquest. As Lindsay notes of this historical legacy, and the popular struggle of resistance against it:

Look back a thousand years into England's past and you find there the fight between the lords and the village-group, as in our present world you see the fight between financiers and capitalists on the one hand and trade unions on the other. At times the two forms of living scrape along together, then at a moment of pressure a fierce conflict arises; the rulers and the workers have to fight the matter out, to decide which kind of combination is to survive- the state-rule of force or the right of free union.⁴⁷

Lindsay's booklet even reflects a tone of anarchist Guild socialism, with its notions of a co-operative community battling the forces of capital, and of state violence imposed from above. Lindsay had not yet joined the ranks of the Communist Party, though like many intellectuals of the time, he was sympathetic to the cause. When he later joined in 1941, he was a member increasingly uneasy within its orthodoxy. This new radical history swept over a patient record of reform, to offer a new revolutionary history of perpetual struggle and conflict. It recorded a history of local communities, and combinations which fought the state and a social order imposed from above. This was still in the mould of traditional radical history, and followed the well-trodden path of lost Saxon rights crushed under a Norman boot:

⁴⁷ Jack Lindsay, *England my England: A Pageant of the English People* (Fore Publications Ltd, London, 1939), pp. 6-7

When the Normans under William conquered England, the dice were heavily weighed against the peasantry, who were now subject aliens as well as a suppressed class.⁴⁸

With Britain now facing the overwhelming might of the Third Reich, it was easy for readers to identify Germany as the new Normans, poised to conquer and enslave the British people and take away their democratic rights, to make them aliens in their own land. Echoes of ancient injustices still persisted, but so too did the radical challenge to right these ancient wrongs. In a passage entitled, *The First Modern Communists*, Lindsay pays tribute to the radical challenge of the Diggers, a movement which was rooted within this history of struggle to restore lost rights and freedoms:

Winstanley was a great thinker. He drew together the whole tradition of John Ball and the others, which the peasantry had kept alive and which had been given continual significance by their revolts.⁴⁹

Though defeated, the revolutionary legacy of Winstanley and the Diggers was the true source of English socialism and not the later traditions of liberal reform. It was a radical legacy which lived on to influence Robert Owen and the Chartists 160 years later. Lindsay's vision of Chartism reflected this new view and contrasted with the earlier ideas of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who viewed the Chartist movement as a political dead end. Like the Diggers before them, the Chartists were now portrayed as the radical forerunners of a future Communist society. As Lindsay notes:

⁴⁸ *ibid* p. 7

⁴⁹ *ibid* pp. 33-34

The unions of the Chartist days had aimed at taking over full political power and creating a communistic society on the lines of Owen's dreams.⁵⁰

The patient reform that was once praised within earlier social histories was now expunged from this proud radical past. Lindsay's radicalism was the tradition of political action rather than the cautious thought of Victorian social reformers. Lindsay rams this point home in the final passage:

In England, as nowhere else, we can find a solidly persisting communist tradition.⁵¹

Lindsay though, was no mere ideologue and his works reflected an eclecticism quite unique amongst the many writers of the British left. Like the anarchist writer George Woodcock, the Communist Jack Lindsay had an intellectual fascination with philosophy, ancient history and the classical world. Lindsay was far more at home as the renaissance man than as the Party member. Throughout the period he was to produce many popular novels on the theme of England's radical past. They included a linear trilogy of books beginning with, *1649: A Novel of a Year*, which was published in 1938, *Lost Birthright*, published in 1939, and, *The Men of Forty-Eight*, the culmination of the series which was published in 1948, and celebrated the centenary of the final Chartist uprising. All these works were widely read and disseminated through the ranks of the WEA and the Plebs League.⁵² A notable publication was, *A Handbook of Freedom*,

⁵⁰ *ibid* p. 57

⁵¹ *ibid* p. 64

⁵² Most of these books included poems, songs and verse from the periods described, as well as exhortations to follow in the steps of radical forebears: see for example, Jack Lindsay, *1649: A Novel of a Year* (Methuen, London, 1938), v-vi

subtitled, *A Record of English Democracy Through Twelve Centuries*. This was a radical history in the form of a literary anthology of various quotations in both prose and verse. Its continuing theme was the long struggle for freedom and democracy and the radical challenge to power and injustice. Most of England's literary and political figures were quoted, from Francis Bacon and Daniel Defoe, to John Wilkes and Tom Mann. The book contains an interesting collection of Whig and revolutionary writings from the past, bringing these two traditions together in a collaborative effort which reflected the new spirit of the Popular Front. The first quotation begins with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and finishes with a rousing epilogue by William Morris. The political purpose of the handbook was to: 'Clarify the issues, sustain the purpose of those in action and counter the propaganda of the backward forces.'⁵³

Many extracts in this anthology express a deep libertarian tradition that was out of step with the orthodox Party line. This represented an older radical England which was a seething cauldron of ideas about the nature of society and the way we are governed. This was not the simple arena for class-struggle and economic conflict, often promoted in the literature of the left. Like other publications from the Popular Front, a strict Marxism had given way to a more diffuse libertarian idealism. Lindsay even extracts a quotation from Marlowe's *Faustus*, entitled, 'Magic Foreshadows Science', reflective of the rich variety and mix of subject material within this unusual collection of writings. The Putney Debates of the English Civil War play a central role within this varied collection of historical quotations. This became the central narrative within English

⁵³ Jack Lindsay, *A Handbook of Freedom: A Record of English Democracy Through Twelve Centuries* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1939), viii

democratic history. It was a narrative rediscovered and, indeed, reinvented within the political turmoil of the 1930s and the period of the Popular Front. Lindsay lifts a rousing quote from the Leveller, Thomas Rainsborough, in support of a universal franchise and political rights for all, and against the monopoly of property, summoning the force of this rediscovered radical tradition:

If it be property, it is property by a law- because I think that the law of the land in that thing is the most tyrannical law under heaven, and I would fain know what we have fought for, and this is the old law of England, and that which enslaves the people of England, that they should be bound by laws in which they have no voice at all.⁵⁴

Rainsborough's libertarian denunciation of law created in the interests of property, shines through the selected quotation. The grand literary figures of England's past are also recruited to help promote this new radical history. Jonathan Swift's, *Gulliver's Travels*, is pointedly used for a clever satirical broadside against modern imperialism:

⁵⁴ *ibid* p. 136

A crew of pirates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a boy discovers land from the top-mast; they go on shore to rob and plunder; they see a harmless people, are entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name, they take formal possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten plank or a stone for a memorial, they murder two of three dozen of the natives, bring away a couple more by force for a sample, return home, and get their pardon. Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a title by Divine Right. Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives are driven out or destroyed; their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free license given to all acts of inhumanity and lust, the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants; and this crew of butchers, employed in so pious an expedition, is a modern colony sent to convert and civilise an idolatrous and barbarous people.⁵⁵

A powerful quotation is lifted from the poet William Blake, in a broadside against the de-humanisation brought about in the wake of the industrial revolution:

⁵⁵ *ibid* p. 176

Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field,
Let him look up into the heavens and laugh in the bright air:
Let the enchanted soul, shut up in darkness and in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty years,
Rise and look out; his chains are loose, his dungeon doors open,
And let his wife and children return from the oppressor's scourge,
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion and the Wolf shall cease.⁵⁶

In his article, 'Jack Lindsay's Romantic Communism', Paul Gillen notes the Australian's unique take on Marxism, which echoed A. L. Morton, in its embrace of poetry, literature and art in the service of the class struggle:

In Marxist terms the struggle for unity is expressed in terms of class struggle, alienation and historical dialectics. But for Lindsay it is also the essential enlivening spirit of poetry, ritual, myth and art. It informs the way humanity sacramentalises the ebb and flow of human division and brotherhood.⁵⁷

Paul Gillen sees Lindsay's work as a form of romantic Communism, which was unique to his eclectic writing style. In a wider context, this work was also the product of the Popular Front and its embrace of a wider intellectual landscape. In later life, Jack Lindsay had something in common with E. P. Thompson, in his move away from orthodox communism and the Party line from Moscow after 1956. As Gillen notes, this

⁵⁶ *ibid* p. 229

⁵⁷ Paul Gillen, 'Jack Lindsay's Romantic Communism', *issue 2, Westerly Magazine*, 1991, p. 11.

growing disillusionment is evident in a work which was tellingly titled, *The Crisis in Marxism*, and published later in his life:

Official Marxism had 'become a sort of scholasticism, obstructing any movement of thought to grapple with the fundamental problems of development in our world', while Western Marxism's political failure had led to disillusionment with the working class or 'a retreat into extreme intellectualism'.⁵⁸

Like Thompson, Lindsay's answer was a return to the radical values of an older democratic past. Lindsay wrote many serious histories in this rediscovery of English radicalism, and two prominent examples are *John Bunyan, Maker of Myths*, and the *Civil War in England*. Both these histories supplanted the earlier reformist history of the Webbs, and as Lindsay noted of his rediscovery of Civil War radicalism. reveal that:

The period is one to which we cannot return too often. It is one of the great periods of the world, and the greatest in our national history- Its fascination is that of a great adventure into new dimensions of life, of thought and experience- a fierce and exalted vitality, that beats throughout the nation.⁵⁹

Lindsay was to conjure up the image a New Model Army seething with revolutionary fervour, and the Levellers with their sea-green ribbons and banners, hoping to change

⁵⁸ *ibid* p. 5 and Ben Harker, 'Communism is English': Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay and the Cultural Politics of the Popular Front', *Literature and History*, vol. 20, 2 (2011), pp. 16-34. Lindsay's contemporary essays were republished in his *The Crisis in Marxism* (Barnes and Noble, New York, 1981).

⁵⁹ Jack Lindsay, *Civil War in England* (Frederick Muller, London. 1954) xiv

the world against an edict of mutiny. The Leveller uprising was ultimately doomed to fail, though it sowed the seeds for future democratic change. They were the revolutionary vanguard of their age, though too far ahead of their time in a Marxist view of the past:

Why had the Levellers failed, since their ideas have since been vindicated as the typical ideas of democracy- The main reason for the temporary failure of Leveller ideas we must place in the yet unstable development of industrial forms- The political consciousness of the Levellers was far in advance of that of the ordinary citizen. A considerable growth of the new way of life, the different kind of society and State that the men of the free market wanted, was necessary before the fundamental ideas implicit in the revolt against the King could be applied in anything like a thorough way.⁶⁰

The analysis is identical to Christopher Hill's, which was put forward in his *English Revolution*. The Levellers were the early socialists of a proud democratic past, though they could never achieve their socialist society until the economic conditions implicit in creating that society had come into play. This was classic historical-materialism and borrowed little from the earlier liberal histories of Gibbins and the Webbs. These apparently brave men of swords, pikes and pamphlets were at the mercy of greater economic forces, which they could neither defeat nor control. Lindsay was convinced

⁶⁰ *ibid* pp. 282-283

that the Digger movement had marked the birth of modern socialism, with its rational Baconian vision of a future classless society:

Winstanley may thus be justly described as the founder of modern socialism. In him we see the plain transition from peasant ideas of communal action and left puritan protests against the loss of the land-into a theory of abundance achieved through a classless society with scientific control of material processes.⁶¹

Unlike many writers of the Popular Front period, Lindsay was to emphasise the enlightened scientific vision which lay at the heart of 17th century radicalism. This was a vision largely ignored in place of its radical religious fervour. The Diggers were more than the simple anarchists despised by Cromwell and his Roundhead elite. They were the harbingers of a modern, rational and enlightened world. A direct line of descent could be seen between these political ideas and the enlightened principles later championed by Robert Owen. This was a simple vision of a socialist society, which the Diggers had pioneered in their primitive communism. These were ideas that were far ahead of their time and which appear strikingly modern to the contemporary reader. These were also ideas which Lindsay believed had sowed the seeds of the modern world. In *John Bunyan, Maker of Myths*, Lindsay looked back to the origins of the Protestant faith and within its turbulent history to the seeds of modern political class struggle. Radical Nonconformity had carried the democratic banner forward, to provide a springboard for the modern working-class movement. This was to set in motion a

⁶¹ *ibid* p. 289

pattern of conflict between those who wished to push an egalitarian movement forward, and those who wished to curtail its advance and the perceived threat they faced. Bunyan's early life was shaped through the radical conflict of the Civil War and by the democratic forces and aspirations which were unleashed:

These are the voices Bunyan heard about him in the Army- and they stirred and woke yearnings and resolutions in him, burst in excitements that he could not control, agitated him and then seemed to pass away, leaving him the prey once more of his unresolved personal discords. But the impression remained, giving the village lad surmises and intimations of larger issues, great questions and valiant arguments.⁶²

Bunyan's vision of the 'Celestial City' became the literary blueprint for a future democratic society. This was a dream and vision which had kept on burning within the traditions of radical Nonconformity. It was a unique and English vision of a future world united in fellowship and equality. It was a vision which Lindsay saw echoed in the ideas of Robert Owen and the Chartists, and within the poetry and prose of William Morris. Bunyan was the vital link between the radicalism of the English Civil War and its rebirth in the 18th century. The *Pilgrim's Progress* was a work which linked Bunyan to later radical poets such as Blake:

⁶² Jack Lindsay, *John Bunyan, Maker of Myths* (Methuen, London, 1937), p. 77

I have no doubt that William Blake read at least *The Pilgrim's Progress* and learnt there the idiom that his own revolt took: the idiom of wrath against the oppressive Law and the belief that only a morality of love and unity could save. Learnt also to think symbolically in types and forms. I have no doubt that Blake, who belonged to the class that had taken Bunyan to their hearts, read *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a child and was indelibly influenced by it.⁶³

Lindsay was not the only figure who moved to the left in the 1930s. Many stalwarts of the Fabian movement were to give their support to Stalin's regime in Russia. This included leading figures such as H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. The most significant converts to the Communist cause were the Webbs themselves.⁶⁴ After a brief visit to the Soviet Union in 1935, Sidney and Beatrice Webb were to write, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* which was divested of its question mark for the second edition two years later. This was a crucial move away from a gradualist approach, which both had championed in their social histories popularised by the WEA. The historian Kevin Morgan has charted this striking ideological change in his work, *The Webbs and Soviet Communism*. The new conversion of the Webbs was to shake the radical liberal foundations of the British labour movement and create considerable controversy, even within the leftward era of the Popular Front. As Kevin Morgan notes:

⁶³ *ibid* pp. 247-248

⁶⁴ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London, Penguin, 2009), ch.2.

Amidst their literary and institutional remains, from the Labour Party constitution and London School of Economics, to classic works on English local government and the co-operative movement, their vast apologia for Stalinism sits uneasy.⁶⁵

As the Webbs moved closer towards Soviet Communism, other figures within the British left became steadily disillusioned with the regime in Moscow, including George Orwell, and Victor Gollancz who had founded the Left Book Club as a central platform for the British Popular Front. It is no coincidence that Orwell became a crucial figure in the fight to wrest radical history from the hands of the Communist Party and to reclaim an English radical past on behalf of a democratic socialism. The conversion of the Webbs marked a crucial point in the polarisation of politics in the 1930s, as Communists, fascists and the broad liberal left fought to reclaim a native democratic tradition as their own, at a time when Mosley and his fascists attempted to reclaim the medieval guilds of William Morris. As Morgan notes, even the Fabians had their totalitarian streak, displaying a total obsession for planning and the control of society through an intellectual, technocratic elite.⁶⁶ For Orwell, totalitarianism in any form was a major betrayal of the ancient traditions of a national democratic past. The animals on the farm had wanted to remove the tyranny of the farmer, only to hand over their cherished freedoms to the power-hungry pigs of the Fabian movement with their elitist planning. Communist writers did not hold complete sway over the literature of the WEA in the period of the Popular Front. A broad left and radical liberal perspective was to be strongly voiced throughout the 1930s and beyond. England's democratic past continued

⁶⁵ Kevin Morgan, *The Webbs and Soviet Communism* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2006), p. 12

⁶⁶ *ibid* p. 156

to be a hotly contested history and was claimed by the broad left and an older liberal tradition, as well as the Communist Party. There was plenty of literature produced in the period which championed a broader view of this democratic past. A good example is *Great Democrats*, which was an interesting collection of vivid pen-portraits of some of the key democratic figures from English history. Edited by A. Barratt Brown of Ruskin College, the list of contributory authors included G. D. H. Cole, Katherine Bruce Glasier, H. N. Brailsford and Bertrand Russell. The eclectic collection of figures portrayed also included William Cobbett, John Bright, Jeremy Bentham, T. H. Green and Joseph Arch, as well as, Thomas Paine, William Morris, Karl Marx and the Chartists. In his assessment of the utopian experiments of Robert Owen, C. E. M. Joad took a measured liberal view of the radical attempts to change capitalist society:

Such were Owen's fundamental beliefs. They led him often into strange paths and the steps by which he sought to embody them in concrete fact-communities of cranks and ne'er do wells, Co-operative Trading Associations that dispensed with money, Syndicalist Trade Unions that dispensed with rules- may in retrospect seem wild and ill-advised. But Owen was essentially a pioneer, and it is unreasonable to expect of his experiments the balance and solidity of established institutions.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ A Barratt Brown, *Great Democrats* (Nicholson & Watson, London, 1934) p. 522

R.H. Tawney and the Promulgation of the Radical Tradition

R. H. Tawney was a key figure in the broad left claim to a radical democratic past, and with G. D. H. Cole promoted an independent English socialist tradition. Both were leading figures in the broad-left movement and the WEA, and both came to exercise a crucial influence over leading figures in the British labour movement. Tawney was probably the most important figure to be associated with the WEA movement: he towered over the post-war Labour Party as a crucial intellectual influence. Tawney produced many books on the theme of England's democratic past, *The Radical Tradition* being one of the better known. This work gives glowing portraits of the three key figures of Victorian radicalism: William Lovett, John Ruskin and Robert Owen, and is both a history and a passionate defence of social democracy.⁶⁸ It was also an approving nod to the post-war Labour government and its policy of nationalisation of the coal industry. Within this work Tawney also gives his passionate plea for a fairer and more democratic system of education, which was one of the core values at the heart of the WEA movement. Tawney's own political ideas were firmly rooted in a co-operative Christian socialism: ideas which had their origins in an earlier Victorian era and contributed to the unique idealism within his socialist vision. These diffuse ideas chimed with a Labour Party which had avoided any fixed ideology to favour the ethical socialism offered by Tawney. These political ideas were the founding values of the ILP and the broad-left. As Norman Dennis and A. H. Halsey have also noted:

⁶⁸ R.H. Tawney, *The Radical Tradition: Twelve Essays* (Pelican, 1964), pp. 15-42.

Tawney's conception of the social order began with the morality of the New Testament. He saw capitalism not simply as un-Christian but anti-Christian in that it converted economic means into overriding ends and thus introduced the worship of false gods. In his preoccupation with the three venerable abstractions of western politics - liberty, fraternity, and equality- he was in the tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century radicalism and an immediate descendant of William Morris, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin.⁶⁹

Raphael Samuel also makes note of this Christian element within Tawney's thought, a Christian socialism which still exercised considerable influence over the Labour Party and the WEA movement:

Tawney's version of Christian Socialism was in some sort peculiar to himself, but a Christian or Christian-derived ethic was a common property of the labour movement of his day, borrowing its terms from the transposed evangelicalism of Labour's well-born recruits; from High Church Socialism; and from the radical nonconformity which was part of its nineteenth-century inheritance. Tawney clearly felt morally at home in the Labour Party: more so, perhaps, than anywhere else except for the Workers' Educational Association.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Norman Dennis and A. H. Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism* p. 151

⁷⁰ Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* p. 247

The WEA movement was the supreme example of universal democratic education married to the radical principles of self-help and co-operation and would provide a perfect vehicle for Tawney's ethical socialist ideas. Tawney created the first university extension courses for the WEA where working-class students could experience the discussion-based tutorial methods of Oxford and Cambridge. In her contribution to a collection of essays celebrating the centenary of the WEA, Meredith Rusoff notes:

Equality of opportunity was an important element in this thought, and indeed in his life - his WEA work was one attempt to put that ideal into practice.⁷¹

The Radical Tradition by Tawney champions the WEA movement and England's radical past. The work is an eclectic collection of twelve essays which were written through a forty-year period from 1914 to 1954 and published after his death. They reflect the shifting concerns of the author and his need to resurrect a radical democratic past. Tawney first turns his attention to the Chartist movement and to one of its central figures, William Lovett. Chartism was a growing social movement which paved the way for modern socialism, though it had confused and unachievable objectives, as Tawney notes:

⁷¹ Meredith Rusoff (2003) 'R H Tawney and the WEA', in Stephen K Roberts (Ed) *A Ministry of Enthusiasm* (p. 67)

It was the revolt against capitalism which made the magic of Chartism to thousands of men who were too wretched to be willing to subordinate the passion for economic change to a single issue of political reform- The essence of Chartism was, in fact, an attempt to make possible a social revolution by the overthrow of the political oligarchy- These two objectives were not incompatible. But in an age when the mass of the working classes were without either organisation or political experience, they were not easily pursued together.⁷²

Unlike earlier criticism from the Webbs, Tawney could not reject the radicalism of the movement, though he found it disorganised in its political objectives. Chartism had been a vital political movement, and one which was inspired by an older political tradition:

They drew their weapons from the forgotten armoury of pre-Marxian Socialism. Godwin, who explained to young men in 1793 the nature of the new force which was overthrowing thrones and castles in France, and who's *Political Justice* was reprinted in 1843, at the height of the Chartist movement, and Owen- Above all, Owen had supplied reformers with an ideal for which to work, the Co-operative Commonwealth.⁷³

Tawney repudiates Owenite syndicalism for its rejection of the institutions of Parliament. William Lovett had moved the Chartist movement forward, through a belief

⁷² R. H. Tawney, *The Radical Tradition*, pp. 18-19

⁷³ *ibid* p. 24

in engaging with Parliament as the crucial instrument of reform. In Tawney's judgement, Lovett had become the first true social-democrat and a founding figure of the modern labour movement:

To Lovett democracy is less an expedient than an ideal, the vision of liberty, fraternity, and equality which had intoxicated men's minds in the days before liberalism was shorn of its splendours and its illusions. He is, in fact, a 'Social-Democrat'.⁷⁴

Robert Owen had been a great philosopher, innovator and utopian thinker, and a founder of the modern socialist movement, though, like the Chartists, Owen was a man with confused political objectives. These ideas would conflict with William Lovett's new social-democracy:

The ordinary political processes, by which abuses are corrected and reforms introduced, were dismissed by him as irrelevant or worse. It is not surprising that a trade unionist and co-operator like William Lovett, secretary of the London Working Men's Association and later of the first Chartist Convention, should both have paid tribute to the influence on himself and his fellow-workers of Owen's social teaching and have repudiated with equal emphasis the political quietism of the master.⁷⁵

Tawney was navigating a social-democratic path through the turmoil of English radical history. These were heroic figures and movements from the democratic past,

⁷⁴ *ibid* p. 26

⁷⁵ *ibid* p. 39

though not all would follow the correct path of social democracy. Tawney's own fierce radicalism was reflected in a robust condemnation of the inequalities within education. This was Tawney's own personal radical crusade, as he notes of the lamentable state of affairs within the British educational system:

There are classes who are ends and classes who are means- upon that grand original distinction the community is invited to base its educational system. The aim of education is to reflect, to defend, and to perpetuate the division of mankind into masters and servants. How delicate an insight into the relative value of human beings and of material riches! How generous a heritage into which to welcome the children of men who fell in the illusion that, they were the servants of freedom!⁷⁶

The WEA movement would represent a direct challenge to this unfair system and its corrupt material values. The WEA was also vital to supply the labour movement with a well-informed and organised membership, promoting enlightened socialist values through its democratic system of education:

The appreciation of the importance of education is far stronger and more widespread than it was in the early days of the WEA, but a push is still often needed to convert sympathy into action. It is for the rank and file of our Movement to ensure that the stimulus is supplied.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *ibid* p. 51

⁷⁷ *ibid* p. 93

Tawney had summed up the essence of a Labour campaign to educate, inspire and recruit. The inspiration was supplied through the values, ideals and example of a radical democratic past, a tradition which was promoted through the lectures and literature of the WEA. There was a fiercely fought contest for the ownership of this democratic past, and Tawney's own ideas were at odds with the Marxist historians like A. L. Morton and Christopher Hill. Tawney had little time for their glorification of the Protestant Reformation, or for the Puritan revolution and the English Civil War. These upheavals had brought capitalism and a worldly materialism, together with the loss of communal spirituality. They were not the revolutionary seeds for a future social democracy. These ideas are reflected in his classic work, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, which reveals much older radical ideas expressed within the work deriving from William Cobbett. Lawrence Goldman has noted an ambivalence on Tawney's part towards this Protestant radical past in his recent biography of him:

Tawney had strong ambivalent feelings about Puritanism, admiring it for the challenge it had mounted to monarchy and hierarchy- but condemning it also for its unbridled individualism, both spiritual and economic- Insofar as Tawney spent much of his life advocating a social Christianity which engaged with society and its problems, he was, in his own mind, trying to counter the baleful effects of the narrowing of the Christian compass by the 'Puritan Revolution'.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Lawrence Goldman, *The Life of R H Tawney: Socialism and History* (Bloomsbury, London, 2014) p. 231

Conclusions

In conclusion, the WEA was a vital movement in the promotion of an English radical past, attracting key figures of the British left to its evangelical cause. There were differing views about this democratic past, and particularly about the ways in which this history fitted into an English socialism. This debate attracted prominent intellectual figures within the British left, including Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Jack Lindsay, G. D. H. Cole and R. H. Tawney. The WEA became the microcosm and catalyst of a larger debate within the labour movement, on how to engage with its radical democratic history. The intellectual trajectory of the WEA followed that of the ILP and moved further to the left as the century progressed, though the WEA movement was always constrained within its own established traditions of broad-left democratic socialism. The WEA had sought to educate, elevate and inspire the workers of Britain, and as such became a vital arm of the British labour movement. It inspired many of its future leaders and key political figures. With the ILP, the WEA had played a crucial role in shaping the identity of the British labour movement, anchoring its politics to the older traditions of a pre-Marxist democratic past.

Conclusions

The research for this thesis has demonstrated that the British labour movement made explicit reference to an older democratic past within its earliest literature and throughout its turbulent history. The appropriation of this democratic past was an important factor within the history of the labour movement and played a crucial role in forging its unique political identity. Continental revolutionaries and socialists like Lenin acknowledged the 'quite unique character of the British Labour Party' that this produced.¹ The overwhelming body of evidence collected from primary source material reveals that this dependency on the past was a constant theme running through the formative years of the British labour movement. It is a recurring theme which equally emerges from secondary source material and historical research. John Bew's political biography of the post-war Labour Leader Clement Attlee, entitled *Citizen Clem*, is a recent example of this. Bew has noted Attlee's strong identification with an older, pre-Marxist, English socialist tradition, a tradition which had roots reaching back to the Roundhead cause of the English Civil War.² It was also a democratic tradition which Attlee believed lay at the heart of British labourism and a radical social democracy, though he was equally mindful of the English revolution's degeneration into dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell. As late as 1981, the lively commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the 1381 peasants' revolt demonstrated the continuing pull of this radical past.³

¹ V.I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1970), p. 91

² John Bew, *Citizen Clem A Biography of Attlee* (Rivverun, London, 2017), chs, 3 and 5

³ Charles Poulsen, *The English Rebels* (Journeyman, London, 1984), v.

The thesis has explored the sixty years spanning the period 1885 to 1945. These were chosen as they were crucial years for the formation of the British labour movement, and for the intellectuals of the British left who seized upon this English radical tradition. The study shows this was a period of competing social movements and political ideas, with each movement recruiting this democratic past to its newly established cause. The appropriation of an older democratic past was a crucial element in the clash of ideas within the British left, as radical-liberalism, Christian socialism and Co-operation competed with the continental ideas of Marxism and anarchism. It was these competing ideas which eventually coalesced into the emerging conflict between broad-left democratic socialism and the Communist Party.

Three core themes within the study have set the parameters for the research and have been implicit within the historical narrative of the thesis. These are **Appropriation, Historical Focus** and **Ideological Contest**. These are themes which have been a guiding methodology for the research and its effort to unpick the conscious attempt to reclaim a radical democratic past.

Appropriation

The evidence shows that within the formative years of the British labour movement the left had seized upon a radical democratic past. The appropriation of this radical history was the vital part of a deliberate strategy, that sought to gain recruits to the new cause of socialism by claiming political roots in an older democratic past. H. M. Hyndman and William Morris were the first to claim this historical tradition in the name of British socialism as they sought to entice new members into the ranks of the SDF and the Socialist League from the radical wing of the Liberal Party. As a major inheritor of this political tradition, the ILP was more successful in manipulating its history to gain

new members from the Liberal Party, though the ILP would soon have to defend this democratic legacy from an emerging Communist Party.

The Communist Party would take hold of this tradition during the Popular Front, and claim a democratic past in the name of the Comintern and the Third International. Its Marxist historians and leading intellectual figures would play a major role in resurrecting a radical tradition from the English Civil War. It was a tradition embedded in religious Nonconformity and radical dissent, that would also produce a new Communist attitude towards religion and its revolutionary role in the past. In addition, it was a legacy which would continue with the work of the Marxist historians, A L Morton and Christopher Hill.

Historical Focus

The evidence also shows there was a changing focus of interest within this radical historiography, as different figures and movements came to the fore, while others faded into the background. The early socialist movement had shared a Victorian obsession for the middle ages. William Morris believed his socialist utopia would be the return to a pre-industrial craft-based society that was free from the influence of capitalism. The SDF and the Socialist League looked to the radical heroes of this medieval past for their inspiration, notably figures such as John Ball, William Langland and Thomas More, and the radical movements of the Lollards and the Peasants' revolt. There was equal homage given to their immediate Victorian predecessors, the Chartists. In contrast, the ILP had inherited the figures and movements of an earlier radical-liberalism, notably Richard Cobden and John Bright, together with Robert Owen and the Co-operative movement.

These were figures and movements which had promoted patient democratic reform as the antidote to revolutionary turmoil.

This began to change as the ILP moved further to the left in the years following the First World War, as G. D. H. Cole resurrected the Chartists, and H. N. Brailsford and Fenner Brockway revisited the radicalism of the English Civil War. This constituted a broad-left legacy reflected in the political ideas of Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot and Tony Benn. A major shift was to come in the period of the Popular Front, when the Communist Party made an exclusive claim to this democratic past, as Party intellectuals began to focus their exclusive attention upon the revolutionary movements of the Levellers and the Diggers.

Ideological Contest

An interesting aspect of this research is that it has shown this was a deeply contested history and tradition. From the beginning of the labour movement various factions of the left had fought to claim this contested past. Socialists and anarchists laid equal claim to the Peasants' revolt, the Levellers and the Diggers, the Owenite trade unions and the Chartists. H. M. Hyndman and Rudolf Rocker made equal claim on their movements being heirs to the radical Chartists.

In the years following the Bolshevik revolution the ILP fought hard to embed itself within an English democratic tradition, positioning itself outside the growing influence and orbit of the Communist Party. Ramsay MacDonald's, *Parliament and Revolution*, was the defining manifesto of an emerging broad-left, social-democratic movement. The Popular Front would see the Communist Party claim this democratic history as its own, sparking an ideological contest of ownership with the broader British left. G. D. H. Cole

and H. N. Brailsford both claimed this English radical past in the name of social-democracy, while the Marxist historians A. L. Morton, Dona Torr and Christopher Hill, would seize upon this democratic past in the name of Communism. Both factions claimed exclusive rights to its major figures and political movements.

Out of this crucial conflict of ownership emerged one of the major figures of modern English literature, George Orwell. And it was Orwell who sought to defend this democratic history, and reclaim this radical tradition in the name of a new patriotic socialism.

Political Identity and the British Labour Movement

An underlying theme throughout this research has been the ways in which this history shaped the core identity of the British labour movement. Rooting British socialism within a unique radical past, William Morris, G. D. H. Cole, H. N. Brailsford and Aneurin Bevan all drew from the toolbox of English radical history. Indeed, this shaped their core political beliefs, together with their analysis of society and the structures of power. This is clearly illustrated in Bevan's division of society into the competing forces of 'Poverty', 'Property' and 'Democracy'. These were ideas which had their roots in the Putney Debates of the English Civil War when the Levellers tried to push for a deeper democracy. These radical ideas from the past helped shape the politics of Michael Foot and Tony Benn, who became important figures of the broad-left and drew heavily on this democratic tradition.

Central to these ideas was the importance of Parliament, as the key forum for political struggle and democratic reform. This, above all else, was the defining idea which was borrowed from English radicalism and an older Whig/liberal political

tradition. It was this core belief which separated the broad-left from the Communist Party and which set it upon the road of social-democracy.

Limitations and Further Areas of Research

This research has made use of a wide variety of primary source material in the form of manifestos, pamphlets, booklets and newspaper articles - together with historical novels and serious academic history from the period of study. There is a recognition that this material only gives the researcher a partial view of the ideas and beliefs which motivated the British left and the labour movement. This material often reflects the ideas of an intellectual elite within the party structure, and its attempt to impose its ideas upon a wider membership.

Two sources used in this research were published outside the period of study – H. N. Brailsford's, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, and Fenner Brockway's, *Britain's First Socialists*. However, these sources still represent a valuable distillation of broad-left ideas from the period of the Popular Front. Both Brailsford and Brockway were active political figures during the period and key intellectuals of the broad-left movement. Indeed, both believed they were the first to discover this radical tradition from the English Civil War.

Equally, it is recognised there was collaboration as well as conflict within the British left. The Marxist historian, Christopher Hill, was happy to edit and collaborate with Brailsford on his *Levellers and the English Revolution*, though clear dividing lines did emerge within the British left within the period of study.

As with any area of research there is much uncovered territory. Figures such as G. D. H. Cole and Dona Torr deserve much more attention from historians. As do anarchist figures such as Rudolf Rocker, who remains on the margins of serious study. This research has uncovered a vast area of further research into the appropriation of a radical democratic past. Indeed, this past continues to shape modern radical movements that seek roots and legitimacy within an older political tradition.

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