

Gerrard
Winstanley
and the
Diggers



edited by
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We know surprisingly little of the life of Gerrard Winstanley. In a nutshell, he was born in the village of Wigan in 1609. His father was a mercer or cloth merchant, and Winstanley followed in his footsteps. In 1629 he was apprenticed to the trade in London and at twenty-eight went into trade for himself. In 1632 he married, in 1643 he went bankrupt. As did so many questioning people of the time he went through a series of religious experiences and drifted through a number of radical Christian sects including the Quakers. He is probably the first to equate God not with some celestial big brother, but as the spirit of good which exists in all people. As such he predated the Christian anarchism of Tolstoy by some two hundred and fifty years. He finally disappears totally into the mists of history and we do not even know the date of his death. Perhaps in a sense like Joe Hill he never died at all.

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On April 1, 1649 a little group of unemployed laborers and landless peasants gathered at St. George's Hill near Walton-on-Thames in Surrey and began to dig up the common land and prepare for sowing vegetables. Their leaders were William Everard and Gerrard Winstanley. At first they only aroused curiosity and sympathy but as time went on the local lords of the manor, the gentry, aroused the populace and a mob shut up the Diggers in the church at Walton until they were released by a justice of the peace. Again they were captured by a mob and locked up in the nearby town of Kingston and again released. On April 16 a complaint was laid before the Council of State, who sent two groups of cavalry under a captain Gladman to investigate.

Gladman, reported that the incident was trivial and sent Everard and Winstanley to London to explain themselves to Thomas Fairfax. They explained that since the Norman Conquest, England had been under a rule of tyranny which was now abolished, and that God would now relieve the poor and restore their freedom to enjoy the fruits of the earth. The two men also explained that they did not want to interfere with private property but only to plant and harvest on the many wastelands of England and to live together holding all things in common. They were certain that their example would be followed by the poor and dispossessed all over England and in the course of time all men would give up their possessions and join them in community. This is of course a theme which has echoed down through the centuries of communal experimentation.

A month later Lord Fairfax himself stopped on his way to London to see the experiment, and decided it was a matter for the local authorities. In June another mob including some soldiers, assaulted the Dig-

gers and trampled their crops. Winstanley complained to Fairfax and the soldiers were apparently ordered to leave the Diggers alone. In June the Diggers announced that they intended to cut and sell the wood on the common, and at this point the landlords sued for damages and trespass. The court awarded damages of ten pounds and costs, and seized the cows Winstanley was pasturing on the common, but released them because they were not his property. Winstanley was in financial trouble for years and taking care of others livestock for a small fee was one slender way of bringing in income for the little commune.

Perhaps because of the judgement, and the fact that their crops had been destroyed the Diggers moved in the autumn to the common of Cobham Manor, built four houses, and started a crop of winter grain. By this time there were over fifty Diggers. When they refused to disperse, Fairfax, his patience at an end finally sent troops who along with the mob destroyed two of the houses and again trampled the fields. The Diggers persisted however and by spring they had eleven acres of growing grain and six or seven houses and similar movements had sprung up in Northamptonshire and Kent. The landlord who was a clergyman named John Platt turned his cattle into the grain and led a mob in destroying houses and running out the Diggers and their women and children.

On April 1, 1650, Winstanley and fourteen others (Everard had disappeared sometime before this, there was some evidence to show he had become unbalanced) were indicted for disorderly conduct, unlawful assembly, and trespass. There is no record of how the case turned out but this is the last we hear of the experiment in communism at Cobham.

Thus ends the Digger movement, a small episode which barely made news in the crude newspapers of the day and which almost certainly would have been lost to us but for the amazingly lucid and compelling series of pamphlets which Winstanley published all during the existence of the movement. These writings constitute the first systematic presentation of libertarian communism or anarchism in English.

Community

Likewise I heard these words; 'Worke together. Eat bread together. Declare all this abroad.' Likewise I heard these words: 'Whosoever it is that labours in the earth or any person or persons that lifts up themselves as Lords and Rulers over others and that doth not look upon themselves equal to others in the creation, the Hand of the Lord shall be upon the labourer. I the Lord have spoke it and I will do it. Declare all this abroad.'

The New Law of Rightousness 1648

The earth with all her fruits of Corn, Cattle and such like was made to be a common Store House of Livelihood, to all mankinde, friend and foe, without exception.

A Declaration from the Poor
Oppressed People of England
1649

Now this same power in man that causes divisions and war is called by some men the state of nature which every man brings into the world with him ... But this law of darknesse is not the State of Nature.

Fire in the Bush 1650

When this universal equity rises up in every man and woman, then none shall lay claim to any creature and say, This is mine and that is thine. This is my worke, that is thine. But everyone shall put their hands to till the earth and bring up cattle, and the blessing of earth shall be common to all; when a man hath need of any corn or cattle, he shall take from the next store-house he meets with. There shall be no buying and selling, no fairs and markets ... and all shall cheerfully put to their hands to make those things that are needful, one helping another There shall be none lords over others, but everyone shall be a lord of himself, subject to the law of righteousness, reason and equity which shall dwell and rule in him, which is the Lord.

The New Law of Rightousness 1649

And this particular property of mine and thine that brought in all misery upon people. For first it hath occasioned people to steal from one another. Secondly it hath made laws to hang those that did steal. It tempts people to do an evil action and then kills them for doing it.

Ibid

No man can be rich, but he must be rich, either by his own labors, or the labors of other men helping him; If a man have no help from his neighbor, he shall never gather an Estate of hundreds and thousands a year; If other men help him to work, then are those Riches his Neighbors, as well as his own, for they be the fruit of other mens labors as well as his own. But all rich men live at ease, feeding and clothing themselves by the labor of other men and not by their own; which is their shame and not their nobility: for it is a more blessed thing to give than to receive. But rich men receive all they

have from the laborers hand, and what they give, they give way other mens labors not their own.

The Law of Freedom in a Platform
Or True Magistracy Restored

Religion

The doctrine of a man-like God set apart from Nature is the doctrine of a sickly and weak spirit who hath lost his understanding in the knowledge of the Creation and of the temper of his own Heart and Nature and so runs into fancies.

The Law of Freedom in a Platform
or True Magistracy Restored 1652

To know the secrets of nature, is to know the works of God; and to know the works of God within the Creation, is to know God himself, for God dwells in every visible work or body. And indeed if you would know spiritual things it is to know how the Spirit or Power of Wisdom and life, causing motion or growth, dwells within and governs both the several bodies of the stars and planets in the heavens above and the several bodies of the earth below as grass, plants, fishes, beasts, birds, and mankind.

Ibid

... the power of Life (called the Law of Nature within the creatures) which does move both man and beast in their actions; or that causes grass, trees, corn and all plants to grow in their several seasons; and whatsoever anybody does, he does it as he is moved by this inward Law. And this Law of Nature moves twofold viz. unrationally or rationally.

The Law of Freedom in a Platform or
True Magistracy Restored

Where does that Reason dwell? He dwells in every creature according to the nature and being of the creature, but supremely in man. Therefore man is called a rational creature. This is the Kingdom of God within man. Let reason rule the man and he dares not trespass against his fellow creatures, but will do as he would be done unto. For reason tells hem - is thy neighbor hungry and naked today? Do thou feed and clothe him; it may be thy case tomorrow and then he will be ready to help thee.

The New Law of Rightousness 1648

Beliefe in an outward heaven or hell is a strange conceit, a fraud, a fancy which your false teachers put into your heads to please you with, while they pick your purses and betray your Christ into the hands of flesh and hold Jacob under to be a servant still to Lord Esau.

Ibid

True religion and undefiled is this, to make restitution of the earth which hath been taken and held from the common people by the power of Conquests formerly and so set the oppressed free.

A New Years Gift for the Parliament and the Armie, 1650

And do we not yet see that if the Clergie can get Tithes or Money they will turn as the Ruling power turns, anyway...to Papacy, to Protestantisme; for a King, Against a King; for monarchy, for some government; they cry who bids most wages, they will be on the strongest side for an earthly maintenance ... There is a confederacie between the clergy and the great red Dragon. The sheep of Christ shall never fare well so long as the wolf or red Dragon payes the Shepherd their wages.

Ibid

In the beginning of time the great creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasury ... not one word was spoken in the beginning that one branch of mankind should rule over another.

The True Levellers Standard
Advanced 1649

Government

... the Kingly power sets up a Law and Rule of government to walk by; and here Justice is pretended but the full strength of the Law is to uphold the conquering Sword and to preserve his son Propriety... For though they say the Law doth punish yet indeed the Law is but the strength, life, and marrow of the Kingly power upholding the Conquest still, hedging some into the earth, hedging out others; giving the Earth to some and denying the Earth to others, which is contrary to the Law of Righteousnesse who made the Earth at first as free for one as for another... Truly most Laws are but to enslave the Poor to the Rich and so they uphold the Conquest and are Laws of the great Red Dragons.

A New Yeers Gift for the Parliament and the Armie

... the power of inclosing Land and owning Propriety was brought into the Creation by your ancestors by the Sword which first did murther their fellow-creatures men and after plunder or steal away their land.

A Declaration from the Poor
Oppressed People of England

They have by their subtle imagination and covetous wit got the plain-hearted poor or younger brethren to work for them for small wages and by their work have got a great increase.

The True Levellers Standard
Advanced 1649

O you Parliament-men of England, cast those whorish laws out of doors, that are so common, that pretend love to everyone, and is faithful to none. For truly, he that goes to law, as the proverb is, shall die a beggar. So that old whores, and old laws, picks mens pockets and undoes them ... burn all your law books in Cheapside, and set up your government upon you own foundations. Do not put new wine into old bottles; but as you government must be new so let the laws be new, or else you will run farther into the mud, where you stick already, as though you were fast in an Irish bog.

A New Yeers Gift for the Parliament
and the Armie

... if once landlords, then they rise to be Justices, Rulers and State Governors as experience shewes.

The True Levellers Standard Advanced

... the power of the murdering and theeving sword fomerly as well as now of late years hath set up a government and maintains that government; for what are prisons and putting others to death, but the power of the Sword to enforce people to that government which was got by Conquest and sword and cannot stand of itself but by the same murdering power.

A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed
People of England

By large pay, much Free-Quarter and other Booties which they call their own they get much Monies and with this they buy land.

Ibid

Sources

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