

**Sofia** - September 2006

**David Boulton** reviews - *A Radical Reader: The struggle for change in England 1381-1914*

Edited by Christopher Hampton

**Let's say it straight out. This is a marvellous book.** In the six hundred pages Hampton tells the story of five hundred years of 'struggle for change', and he does so in the words of the men and women, agitators, rebels, poets, satirists and even preachers, who not only talked the talk but walked the walk, living, and sometimes dying, in their quest for a republic of heaven in England's green and pleasant land.

They are all here in this brilliant selected anthology: the ones who have long been part of the radical canon – Wat Tyler, John Lilburne, Gerrard Winstanley, Milton, Blake, Shelley, Byron, Dickens, Morris, Harriet Martineau, Josephine Butler, Sylvia Pankhurst, Karl Marx – but many less-familiar names too, from the Peasants' Revolt through the English Revolution to Chartism and socialism. And some whose names we shall never know are also honoured: the author of Martin Marprelate tracts that raged against Elizabethan pomp and episcopacy; the anonymous 'Real Friend to the People' who wrote a 'Declaration of ... Rights of the Commonality of Great Britain' in 1782; the journalist who wrote for the illegal 'Poor Man's Guardian' in the 1830s.

Both in his chronological and well-linked selections and his incisive introduction, Hampton shows himself well aware of the critical connection between religious and social radicalism. The inspiration for social transformation was often a fresh re-envisioning of the kingdom teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. We find it in the excommunicated priest John Ball, in the Quakers George Fox, John Lilburne and Gerrard Winstanley, in the visionary Blake, and even in the atheist Shelley (who on the quiet was a bit of a fan of Jesus). For activists like these, armchair radical theology was not enough.

As Winstanley put it, 'action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing'.

Which leaves me wondering where Sea of Faith would fit in the radical tradition – if, indeed, it would fit at all. We pride ourselves on our radical theology. Leaving aside the question of whether it really is very radical in the twenty-first century to propose that religious faith and its gods and demons are wholly human creations, what connections have we made in our twenty-odd years between the religious radicalism we profess and the social radicalism that should surely be its outcome? Let's be honest. Not enough.

Listen to Hampton on the voice of radical protest: 'It is not the voice of the moderate middle-ground opinion urging the virtues of compromise and accommodation to make an unpalatable system more acceptable. Those who adopt such a course may call themselves radicals, but they cannot challenge the underlying conditions that are the causes of injustice and oppression.' Ouch.

Winstanley too: 'Everyone talks of freedom, but there are few that act for freedom, and the actors for freedom are oppressed by the talkers and verbal professors of freedom.' Ouch again. Are we as a self-described 'radical' network actors as well as talkers, or mere 'verbal professors' of the egalitarianism, the social justice, the war on poverty and oppression that must be at the heart of religious tradition?

These are not good times for social radicals. We have seen days of hope come and go. But it was always so. Jesus' kingdom of heaven turned into a church that proselytised with fire and sword, the Peasants' Revolt collapsed with the murder of Wat Tyler, the English republic was strangled after ten short years, the dream of international socialism was shattered by Stalin's tyranny. Closer to home, our own attempts in SoF a generation to see of what appeared to be a declining religious fundamentalism largely failed, as religious fundamentalism of every shade staged a world-wide-come-back. Its

failure, then, endemic to the radical project? Are the poor (and superstitious) always with us?

Hampton includes Arthur Hugh Clough's answer, written as he watched French troops kill off Mazzini's republic in Rome in 1849:

Say not the struggle nought availeth ...  
For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back, through the creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main ...

As our own *Sofia* wrote in *The Guardian* recently, 'The Christian epic story of salvation and the final coming of heaven on Earth is an imaginative portrayal of a humanist project for justice and peace'. The long history of the project may as easily be written in its setbacks as in its stirring victories. But to quote Hampton's introduction again, "the struggle has had to be continually renewed by the people ... Again and again they have come back, beyond exhaustion – those 'conscious and conscientious men', as Milton put it, 'who in this world are counted as the weakest', but without whose unwavering courage, 'the force of this world' cannot be defeated". [Hampton, incidentally, adds conscious and conscientious women to Milton's men. Milton's radicalism deserted him when it came to exclusively gendered language].

*A Radical Reader* was first published in 1984, since when, as Ken Coates writes in his Foreword to this new edition, 'the Thatcher years extinguish many hopes, and ... New Labour extinguished more'. The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and its publishing arm, Spokesman Books, are to be congratulated for reissuing it now. 'Say not the struggle nought availeth' ... But say, too, that the struggle demands action as well as words, deeds more than creeds. If in this wounded world our religious humanism fails to find effective expression in social action, it will hardly deserve a place, or even a footnote, in the English radical tradition.