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Jim Murphy reviews – *A Radical Reader: The struggle for change in England 1381-1914*

Edited by Christopher Hampton

Fighting for our freedoms

The past, as L R Harvey once thoughtfully observed, is like a foreign country: they do things differently there.

Or do they? According to Christopher Hampton, little has in fact changed in merrie England over the last 600 years.

Witness the perennial struggle between privilege and poverty, a struggle which has driven the course of English history from the days of Wat Tyler to the outbreak of world war one. All experience has not been valuable; all change has not been progress.

For “all our freedoms have had to be fought for again and again by the oppressed, sometimes over ground already strewn with the wreckage of defeat, if always under different conditions.” Wealth and power are forever watchful of their chance to reverse any gains made by the poor who in turn will battle on to complete their “unfinished business”. This was England then, this is England now.

Not a sophisticated vision of history, I think you will agree, but it makes for a suitably romantic introduction to *A Radical Reader*, an anthology of prose and verse, prepared to record the authentic voice of a struggling people down the ages.

Shakespeare, Milton and Dickens are some of the bigger names contained; less commonly presented but perhaps more interest are selections from Chartist tracts, snatches of popular song, early feminist writings etc.

Naturally enough, and Hampton concedes this, the book is an uneven read for not all the pieces have great literary power, but they are none the less fascinating for what they convey of a people in ferment, of the radical ideas which fired the imagination of thinking men and women.

The more famous authors are more generally selected with particular contributions from Shelley, Blake and the young Coleridge, noteworthy here for a wonderfully over-the-top speech entitled the Dunghill of Despotism.

Let me not divert you from what remains a very interesting and lovingly researched anthology which offers hundreds of good quotes with which to pepper speeches and articles. An excellent birthday gift for the socialist who has everything.