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Who Were the Diggers?

An Essay About Our Radical Forebears

In April 1649, a group of about a dozen men and women broke ground on disused land outside London, in hopes of establishing an agricultural commune.

The Diggers and their kindred groups were part of the incredible milieu of the English Civil War of the 1640s – one of the most open and inspiring periods of European history.

Although dispersed by landlords' thugs, the Diggers' efforts have echoed down through history, inspiring groups like Reclaiming, Food Not Bombs, and others.

This short essay is one of about 20 history articles on our website, including Luke Hauser's latest, *Our Magical Ancestors* – a 40-page illustrated survey of our lineages – see below.

History essays: WeaveAndSpin.org/history/

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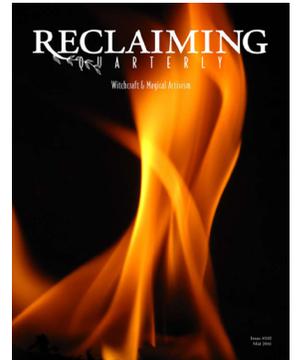


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the diggers & the english revolution

by George Franklin
graphics by Bob Chauley

INTRODUCTION

In 1649, St. George's Hill
A ragged band they called the Diggers came to show the people's will
They defied the landlords, they defied the laws
They were the dispossessed reclaiming what was theirs

— Leon Rosselson, "The World Turned Upside Down"

On April 1, 1649, a group of about a dozen men and women broke ground on St. George's Hill, near London, in hopes of establishing an agricultural commune.

Calling themselves "True Levelers," but known to contemporaries and to history as "The Diggers," they planted crops and erected shacks on the previously untilled land.

Over the next few months, their numbers grew to over fifty men, as well as an unknown number of women and children. They were pledged to nonviolence and committed to making the wastelands fruitful.

In Gerrard Winstanley's words, "The Earth shall be planted, and the fruits reaped, and carried into storehouses by common assistance of every family; The riches of the storehouses shall be the common stock to every family: There shall be no idle person or beggar in the land." (*The Law of Freedom in a Platform.*)

Despite their ultimate dispersal, the

Diggers have exercised a fascination on subsequent generations out of proportion to their small numbers and short-lived experiment. Who were these people, and what was their relationship to their times?

THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

*They make the laws, they train us well
Their clergy dazzle us with heaven, or they
damn us into hell*

*We will not worship, the God they serve
The God of greed who feeds the rich while
poor folk starve*

First, a bit of context. Around 1530, King Henry VIII broke with the Papacy and initiated the English reformation. Unlike the continental reformation, the English version was strictly contained within a strong, hierarchical "Anglican" church.

1600 was the heyday of the English monarchy (and coincidentally also the prime of William Shakespeare's career). Queen Elizabeth reigned supreme. She

and her hand-picked advisors determined economic, religious and foreign policy. The state-controlled Anglican Church ruled religious matters with an iron hand. Parliament was little more than a rubber stamp for royal proposals.

But even at this time, a loosely-organized network of "puritans" were agitating for a more populist brand of Protestantism. This more personal outlook on Christianity was persecuted by the Anglican church, so much so that many of the more ardent puritans emigrated — some to the Calvinist Netherlands, and a smaller number to the new world, aboard ships such as the Mayflower (1620).

This situation persisted through the 1630s. Customs revenue from the growing foreign trade allowed King Charles I to ignore Parliament, which was not even allowed to meet during the 1630s. But in 1641, impending war with Scotland forced Charles to convene Parliament in search of increased military taxation.

The House of Commons, by now dominated by the puritan-minded London merchant class, attached stringent conditions to the financial grant, including demands for regular meetings of Parliament and for the impeachment of the King's chief

advisors, the hated Earl Of Strafford, and Archbishop Laud of Canterbury. When Strafford was tried and executed, Charles threw down the gauntlet, attempting to arrest several Parliamentary leaders. The City of London rose in rebellion, hiding the Parliamentary leaders and besieging the King with resolutions in their support.

The King and Archbishop Laud withdrew from London. Overnight, the authority of the established Church crumbled. Censorship and suppression of independent puritan congregations withered. An unprecedented wave of pamphlets and broadsheets documented the surge of political and spiritual free-thinking that emerged from the shadows.

The King rallied loyal troops to his banner. Parliament responded by establishing its own Army — the final step toward revolution — and a small-scale civil war ensued. The military balance tilted back and forth, but by 1646 the financial prowess of the London merchants, supported by the common people of London and the economically-advanced southeast of England, gave a clear victory to Parliamentary forces. The King surrendered, and pledged to support a constitutional monarchy.

The next several years saw much covert maneuvering by the duplicitous King, ending in his trial and execution by

Parliament in January, 1649 — the first time in European history that a reigning monarch was tried and executed by an elected representative body.

The Levellers

The sin of property, we do disdain

No one has any right to buy or sell the Earth for private gain

By theft and murder, they stole the land

Now everywhere the walls spring up at their command

It is tempting to see the Levellers — the first “proto political party” in European history — as a radical anti-landlord formation dedicated to abolishing private property and to eradicating all distinctions of wealth and poverty. And this is exactly how their wealthy opponents tried to portray them.

In fact, the very name “leveller” was thrust on them by their adversaries, much as progressives in the United States used to be labelled “communist.” When we examine their pamphlets and political platforms (of which dozens

survive), it is clear that what this loose network of writers and agitators wanted was economic protection and electoral rights for small artisans and farmers. Leveller tactics included urban demonstrations and especially the circulating of mass petitions which enabled English workers (few of whom had voting rights) to pressure Parliament.

The Levellers were the first



organized group in European history to explicitly advocate what we today take for granted as individual civil liberties. Freedom of speech, worship, and the press, as well as full equality before the law and trial by jury, were carefully spelled out in the several “Agreements of the People” which the Levellers circulated as petitions. The thousands of signatures on these Agreements were put forward as a model for a new social contract between the English people and their government.

In the mid-1640s, at the height of the Civil War, the Levellers gained great influence among the rank and file of the Parliamentary Army, appealing to the enlisted troops to demand political rights in return for their military service. The Army at this time had a far broader social base than did the merchant-dominated House of Commons, and more than once the military leadership did in fact use the threat of direct intervention to purge Parliament of royalist and other reactionary elements.

But when the Levellers proposed extending the electoral franchise to include thousands of small farmers and craftspeople, the oligarchic Army generals drew the line. In a series of debates that rank among the most fascinating documents of the period, the Army generals outmaneuvered the Leveller agitators. A few small uprisings

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with a Polish dance "Rorospol" which features Laurie's multitracked violin work. A wonderful, processional composition.

Side two opens with a spirited set of jigs: "Lads of Duns / Up in the Morning / Fair Handsome Maids." Charlie is again in excellent form!

This is followed by "Scottish Fran Haverro" where the violin is again multitracked. I love the textures Laurie gets by weaving various harmonies together.

The next selection is "La Bruxa," the Sorcerer or Witch. Laurie introduces the tune with her violin weaving a magical spell. Charlie's piano then plays the opening theme adding elements of jazz and blues as this gorgeous song winds along. I think this is my favorite performance on the tape.

A run at a lively set of reels should set toes a-tapping. Which leads to the traditional lament "Down by Greenwood Side." A tale of infanticide to restore a mother's "virtue", and the heartbreak it brings to the young woman in the end.

The tape begins to wind down with the medley "Cuckoo's Nest/Heart's Ease/Hit and Miss," a soothing trio of melodies.

The final selection, "Armbagsleken (forspel)," has a Slavic feel, and reminds me of a music box. A pretty and decorous ending to a wonderful collection of music.

The sound of this set is excellent, and I can leave it in the auto-reverse cassette deck for hours. Derek Bianchi of MuscleTone Studios in Berkeley is to be commended.

Rights of Man is available through Shambala Books, 2482 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704. Laurie can be contacted at (510) 486-8040.

Diggers

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by enlisted troops were crushed, and as the Civil War wound down, the Army was purged of radical elements.

In the aftermath of King Charles' execution, Parliament, faced with opposition from these populist forces as well as from recalcitrant royalists, appointed General Oliver Cromwell head of the government. For the

next decade (the 1650s), Cromwell held sway over the English Commonwealth, steering a course favorable to the propertied classes. Under Cromwell, organized political movements had no breathing room. Dissent was channeled into radical religious movements such as the Quakers, the Seekers, and the Ranters, and into small-scale direct action.

THE DIGGERS

*We come in peace, they said, to dig and sow
We come to work the land in common and to
make the wastelands grow*

*This Earth divided, we will make whole
So it will be a common treasury for all*

And so we come to the Diggers. Once the Levellers were purged from the Army, any broad avenue of political participation was closed to commoners. Religious radicalism attracted many people, but some, such as the pamphleteer Gerrard Winstanley, still sought a direct political outlet.

The phenomenon of "Digging" is to be distinguished from the widespread practice of "squatting" wastelands, which occurred throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and early modern times. Landless individuals and families would try to establish a toehold in marshlands or forests, eking out a living on the margins of society.

What made "Diggers" unique was the communal nature of the action, and the presence of an explicit political program. Scattered reports dating as far back as 1600 actually use the term "Diggers" to describe direct action to reclaim unused land. We know little about such movements, all of which were quickly suppressed.

But with the breakdown of censorship in the 1640s, a writer such as Winstanley could circulate essays and appeals laying out a clear rationale for seizing and developing wasteland. Winstanley's writings comprise the earliest extant collection of "communist" pamphlets:

"And that neither the Earth, nor any fruits thereof, should be bought or sold by the inhabitants... Every family as they want such

things as they cannot make, shall go to these shops, and fetch without money." (*The Law of Freedom in a Platform.*)

Who were the Diggers? Except for Winstanley and a handful of other agitators, we know next to nothing about the individuals involved. Because few Diggers were actually arrested and brought to trial, we lack even the court records that might allow us to piece together scant biographies of participants. We can only guess that their ranks included religious visionaries, political dissidents, and landless laborers.

We know that beginning in April 1649, they built cottages and planted crops on St. George's Hill and other locations outside of London. They visited local markets and recruited poor laborers to join their efforts. From Winstanley's writings we can surmise that the Diggers hoped to inspire other groups with their vision, providing land and work for the dispossessed of England and subverting the dominant economic structure that depended on a permanent underclass for cheap labor.

Dispersed...

*From the men of property, the orders came
They sent their hired thugs and troopers to wipe out
the Diggers' claim*

*Tore down their cottages, destroyed their corn
They were dispersed, but still the vision lingers on*

Who dispersed the Diggers? Again, we don't precisely know. Parliament sent troops to check on the situation, but General Fairfax reported that the Diggers posed no threat and ordered his troops to leave them alone.

The immediate attack on the Diggers apparently came from local farmers. Economically pressed by the large property owners, the smaller farmers relied on the wastelands to graze livestock and gather firewood. As so often in social conflict, small producers were pitted against the landless in a conflict for the meager resources not dominated by the rich.

Uprooting of crops escalated into brutal
continued on next page



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Diggers

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physical assaults on the Diggers themselves. When their development on St. George's Hill was razed, the Diggers reappeared at Cobham Heath, a few miles away, and resumed cultivation. But the attacks continued, and by April 1650, the Diggers had been driven from the area.

Winstanley continued his agitation for some years, and there are numerous reports of other Digger colonies appearing at various sites over the next several years. But no settlement was able to survive, and the movement faded.

...But Still the Vision Lingers On

*You poor take courage, You rich take care
This Earth was made a treasury for everyone to share*

*All things in common, all people one
We came in peace, the orders came to cut us down*

Yet if the Diggers failed in their attempt to establish a permanent settlement and an alternate economic system, their influence survives to this day.

Although no definite records exist, it is likely that some of the poorer emigrants to the

British colonies in the later 1600s were inspired by the Digger experiments, and that their spirit lent a more radical tone both to the eventual rebellion against the British crown and to the conflicts within the colonies/states over property rights versus political and economic equality.

More recently, in San Francisco in the 1960s, a group calling themselves The Diggers served free meals, organized street theatre which helped inspire the San Francisco Mime Troupe, set up a free medical clinic that was a forerunner of the Haight Ashbury and Berkeley Free Clinics, and held communal celebrations of solstices and equinoxes.

Since 1980, Food Not Bombs, a network of activists in dozens of cities throughout the U.S., Canada and Europe, has carried on the legacy of organizing political radicals and the dispossessed into a formidable social movement. And when Bay Area activists rallied to defend Peoples Park from the claws of developers in the early 1990s, the Diggers song quoted through this article became the unofficial anthem for that piece of "reclaimed land."

Wherever we see communitarian political encampments, at Nevada Test Site, Headwaters Forest, Ward Valley and elsewhere, these gatherings testify to the survival of the spirit of the Diggers — all things in common, all people one, sharing and preserving the treasury that is our Earth.

We work, we eat together, we need no swords

We will not bow to the masters or pay rent to the lords

We are free people, though we are poor

You Diggers all stand up for glory, stand up now

Further Reading

Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution* — an economic and political history of England in the 1600s, focusing more on governmental

politics than on grassroots movements.

Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* — an outstanding book on the Diggers, Levellers, Quakers, Ranters and other populist groups in the English revolutionary era.

Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* — Winstanley's most famous tract, with an extensive introduction by R.W. Kenny focusing on the Diggers. (*Shocked Books, 1941/1973 — probably out of print — contact Reclaiming Quarterly for more information.*)

A.L. Morton, ed., *Freedom In Arms* — Leveller pamphlets, transcripts of the famous Putney debates, as well as a 50-page introduction on the Levellers.

Thanks for feedback from Reclaiming Quarterly staffers and Steve Nadel.

The song quoted in this article, "The World Turned Upside Down" by Leon Rosselson, is from his album "RosselsonGs," on Fuse Records. A great place to find this and other topical music is Down Home Music, 10341 San Pablo, El Cerrito, CA 94530, (510) 525-2129.

Book of Living & Dying

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for the territory, most of the writers here seem to take Avalon pretty literally.

At the moment of death, Starhawk writes, the veil between the physical world and the otherworld is thin. "A great vortex of powers and energies is created." Ancestors, spirit guides, deities may all appear to the dying one. There are suggestions for helping the soul orient itself in its new circumstances, particularly helpful if the death was violent, unexpected, and/or far away from loved ones. As one might expect of any theology, blessings for the dead and suggestions for memorial services are included in the book—essential both for guiding the released soul and comforting the living.

The Deep Self entity takes the "time" it needs in the otherworld, then decides to give human life another go. "The dead become the unborn, who return again to life after an interval of rest, healing, and renewal." Belief in reincarnation is well-documented as indigenous to pagan Celtic and pre-Celtic cultures, from which we derive much of our craft. Starhawk's inclusion of karma in the "standard" Pagan theology is more problematic. Originally from Hindu and Buddhist theologies, karma is a complex philosophy that, in our pop culture, has been simplified to a buzzword. Its briefest definition is

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