

The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley

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On Sunday 1 or Sunday 8 April 1649 – it is difficult, as the editors note, to establish the date with certainty (vol. 1, p. 28) – five people went to St. George’s Hill in the parish of Walton-on-Thames, Surrey and began digging the earth. They sowed the unfertile ground with parsnips, carrots and beans, returning the next day in increased numbers. The following day they prepared more land for cultivation by burning at least ten acres of heath, much to the displeasure of several locals. By the end of the week between 20 and 30 people were reportedly labouring the entire day at digging. It was said that they intended to plough up the soil and sow it with seed corn. Yet they also apparently threatened to pull down and level all park pales, thereby evoking fears of an anti-enclosure riot (a familiar form of agrarian protest). Their acknowledged leaders were two former apprentices of the Merchant Taylors’ Company, William Everard (1602?–fl.1651) and Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76). Everard seems to have been a Parliamentary spy during the English Civil War, was implicated in a plot to kill Charles I, gaoled and subsequently cashiered from the army. Thereafter he was imprisoned by the bailiffs of Kingston in Surrey, accused of blasphemously denying God, Christ, the authenticity of the scriptures and the efficacy of prayer, and then charged with interrupting a church service in a threatening manner. He also called himself a prophet and was portrayed as a mad man. Winstanley came from Wigan and had learned his trade in London, where he can be connected with ‘staunchly Presbyterian networks’ during the early 1640s (vol. 1, p. 9). His business, however, had been severely disrupted by wartime, reducing him to bankruptcy. Afterwards with his wife Susan he relocated to Cobham in Surrey, supporting himself as a grazier by pasturing cattle, harvesting winter fodder and digging peat on waste land – for which he and several others were fined by the local manorial court (as inhabitants they lacked the customary rights of tenants to take fuel from the commons).

Everard justified the new communal experiment with a vision, while Winstanley declared that during a trance he had heard the words ‘*Worke together. Eat bread together*’ (vol. 1, p. 513). St. George’s Hill was revealed as the place where by their righteous labour and the sweat of their brows work should begin in making the Earth ‘*a common Treasury of livelihood to whole mankind, without respect of persons*’ (vol. 2, p. 80). Nonetheless, complaints were soon made to the authorities against these supposedly distracted, crack brained, ‘disorderly & tumultuous sort of people’ (vol. 1, p. 29) and fearing a royalist rendezvous gathered under cover of the commotion caused by such ‘ridiculous’ activities, the Council of State dispatched two cavalry troops commanded by Captain John Gladman to investigate. Brought before Lord General Thomas Fairfax at Whitehall on 20 April, Everard and Winstanley refused to remove their hats in deference. Everard, moreover, allegedly asserted during questioning that he was of the race of the Jews and that the people’s liberties had been lost since the Norman Conquest. Though the Diggers adhered to the Golden rule to do to others as they would be done unto, intending to perform gospel injunctions by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, Walton’s inhabitants were predominantly hostile to their message. Opposition took various forms: the Diggers’ plantation was trampled down, their wooden houses burned, cart sabotaged, a draught horse maimed and cattle driven away; clothing, linen and food was stolen; men and a boy were victims of physical violence; enemies filed suits for trespass against them in Kingston’s court; several were imprisoned in Walton church and one in Kingston gaol. These obstacles proved insurmountable and after less than 21 weeks the Diggers reluctantly abandoned their efforts. A new colony established on the Little Heath in neighbouring Cobham sometime in late August endured for approximately 34 weeks until mid-April 1650 when the Diggers were forcibly evicted. Other communities founded at Iver (Buckinghamshire) and Wellingborough (Northamptonshire) were also short-lived, while too little is known of alleged Digger activity at Barnet (maybe Friern Barnet, Middlesex), Dunstable (Bedfordshire) and Enfield (Middlesex), or at unidentified locations in Gloucestershire (possibly Slimbridge and Frampton), Kent (plausibly Cox Heath, Cox Hall or Cock Hill), Leicestershire (perhaps Husbands Bosworth) and Nottinghamshire.

Unlike the Levellers, whose memory was invoked and appropriated by radicals in the late 18th century as part of their republican heritage, traces of the Diggers almost vanished though they were noticed by among others the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume, the philosopher and novelist William Godwin, the French politician and historian François Guizot, and the biographer Thomas Carlyle, who pitied them as a ‘poor Brotherhood’. Indeed, not until the growth of bourgeois liberal-, socialist- and Marxist-inspired historical studies did they begin to merit extensive discussion – notably with the publication in 1895 of a

book by Eduard Bernstein, a German journalist exiled in London, which traced the struggle for democracy and social reform together with the growth of atheistic and communistic tendencies in early modern England. Since then the Diggers have been successively appropriated, first by campaigners for public ownership of land and Protestant Nonconformist believers in peaceful co-existence, subsequently in the service of new political doctrines that have sought legitimacy partly through emphasizing supposedly shared ideological antecedents. Recently they have even been insensitively incorporated within a constructed Green heritage. All of which is a remarkable legacy for a defeated movement and Winstanley himself, whose extant writings were published (several in more than one edition) between 1648 and 1652.

Indeed given that Winstanley was – in Mark Kishlansky’s memorable if somewhat facile formulation – ‘a small businessman who began his career wholesaling cloth, ended it wholesaling grain, and in between sandwiched a mid-life crisis of epic proportions’, there is a case to be made that his significance has been overinflated.⁽¹⁾ Who after all but academics would read him today had he stopped writing before the foundation of the Digger colonies? Moreover, the Diggers’ long-term political, religious, economic, social and literary impact was negligible – at least until the late 19th century. These views sit comfortably with the so-called revisionist interpretation of early modern England, whose practitioners have stressed consensus and contingency rather than class or ideological conflict in their analysis of political and religious instability. One outcome of this approach has been the attempted marginalisation of radicalism during the English Revolution. Thus prominent figures within what might be termed the canonical English radical tradition (itself largely a 20th-century historical construction) have been regarded as unrepresentative of the conforming, traditionalist, uncommitted majority; their extreme opinions advocated for only a brief period of their lives; their influence upon society exaggerated both by panicked political elites and skilled propagandists preying on fears of property damage or cautioning against introducing religious toleration and its corollary, moral dissolution. And yet there is a strong argument to be made that Winstanley’s heterodox religious views were not an unexpected aberration but the product of a spiritual journey with distinct puritan and General Baptist phases. Recoverable through reminiscences, citations, allusions, suggestive parallels and circumstantial evidence, this indicates that Winstanley’s religious radicalism was more deep-rooted and of longer duration than the brief hiatus currently allowed by revisionists. Likewise, the importance of Winstanley’s death and burial as a Quaker – something once questioned – cannot be understated. Several contemporary critics believed that Winstanley’s works shaped the formation of Quaker thought and as the editors rightly observe ‘there are many affinities between Winstanley’s radical religious ideas and those of the Quakers’ (vol. 1, pp. 23, 59, 71). His life is therefore ‘marked by some continuities as well as startling ruptures’ (vol. 1, p. 24).

The first of Winstanley’s writings to be reprinted after his death was *A Letter to the Lord Fairfax* (June 1649), which appeared in volume nine of the *Harleian Miscellany* (1808–11). Although the Diggers’ song together with manuscript letters to Fairfax and his council of war were published by Charles Firth in his edition of *The Clarke Papers* for the Camden Society (1891–1901), not until the 1930s were other writings by or attributed to Winstanley reissued when extracts from *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (April 1649) appeared in A. S. P. Woodhouse’s collection of contemporary texts *Puritanism and Liberty* (2), and *The Law of Freedom* (1652) was reprinted by the Sutro Library, California (3). Then George Sabine, a political scientist at Cornell University, issued an edition of *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*.⁽⁴⁾ Sabine reprinted all except the earliest three of Winstanley’s pamphlets for which he provided abstracts. But his crucial omission of these pre-Digger texts distorted the trajectory of Winstanley’s thought – an imagined journey from Calvinist convictions to social philosophy – by emphasizing the perceived rational elements at the expense of the supposedly mystical. Accordingly, democrats, socialists and Marxists welcomed it. Forestalled by Sabine’s edition, Leonard Hamilton and other members of the Oxford University History Society (the self-styled ‘Diggers of 1939–40’) published an inexpensive selection from Winstanley’s works with an introduction by Christopher Hill in 1944.⁽⁵⁾ Again the so-called mystical writings were misleadingly excluded. In 1973 Hill issued another edition of Winstanley’s selected writings published by Penguin. His introduction presented Winstanley in modern dress as an advocate of ‘human progress’, ‘reason’ and ‘international brotherhood’; an author whose insights ‘may be of interest to those in the Third World today who face the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society’.⁽⁶⁾ Whatever one thinks of Hill’s portrayal

of a radical, largely secular Winstanley, given his influential contributions to the field of English radicalism in general and the Diggers in particular, it is fitting that this new edition of *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, issued to mark the 400th anniversary of Winstanley's birth, is dedicated to his memory.

And what a superb inter-disciplinary collaboration this edition is. Eagerly awaited for over a decade, pooling together the expertise of three heavyweight scholars, it has established the definitive version of Winstanley's oeuvre following modern editorial conventions. Drawing on the research of James Alsop, John Gurney and other scholars, as well as incorporating some archival discoveries of their own, the lengthy introduction admirably surveys what is known of Winstanley's biography. In addition, the editors provide a useful discussion of the principle aspects of Winstanley's social, political and religious thought. But the real glory of this edition is the painstaking work that has gone into the extensive notes. These provide necessary historical context, elucidation, the sense of a number of words in contemporary usage and full quotations not only from every verse of the King James Bible cited by Winstanley but also a great number of identified allusions. If that were not enough, the second volume contains transcriptions of manuscript letters and other documents containing Winstanley's words, together with a biographical appendix that provides information (where known) about every individual named in Winstanley's writings.

The innovative editorial decision to follow contemporary practice and distinguish the five pre-Digger writings from the later works by having the first volume of this edition reproduce the contents of *Several Pieces Gathered into One Volume* (1649) in the same sequence as they originally appeared is one that I applaud. Likewise, I agree with the adoption of the superior second editions of the first four writings as the copy text. This necessitates having *The Breaking of the Day of God* (dedicatory epistle dated 20 May 1648) appear before *The Mysterie of God* (1648), contrary to the order preferred by Sabine. In the editors' support I would suggest that *The Mysterie of God* was issued after 20 May 1648 since it contains evidence of Winstanley's belief in universal redemption: this doctrinal error was punishable by imprisonment if disseminated from that date and explains why the first edition does not indicate a printer or publisher.

Rather than dwell on minor technical points I offer in the spirit of scholarly co-operation a few observations that may be of benefit should there be an opportunity to produce what, given the cost of these two volumes, would be a very welcome paperback edition (see appendix). If space, time and expense permits, students of Winstanley would doubtless also appreciate images of the original title-pages, maps, an index of Winstanley's biblical citations and a fuller discussion of his possible sources. But that may be an unreasonable request when Professors Corns, Hughes and Loewenstein have given us so much already. For now at last Winstanley, the 'foremost radical of the English Revolution', who stands shoulder to shoulder with John Donne, Francis Bacon, John Milton, Andrew Marvell and John Bunyan as one of the 'finest writers' of a 'glorious age of English non-fictional prose' (vol. 1, p. 65) has an indispensable scholarly edition of his writings befitting both his undoubted literary talents and profound insights. A complete edition of his writings what is more, which will constitute the bedrock of future studies that 'typically follow, rather than precede, the establishment of a complete and reliable text' (vol. 1, p. 66).

Notes

1. Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed. Britain 1603–1714* (Harmondsworth, 1996), p. 196.
[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty, being the Army Debates (1647–9) from the Clarke Manuscripts with Supplementary Documents* (Chicago, IL, 1938).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gerard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (New ed., San Francisco, CA, 1939).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley. With an appendix of documents relating to the Digger Movement*, ed. George Sabine (Ithaca, NY, 1941).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Gerrard Winstanley. *Selections from his Works*, ed. Leonard Hamilton (London, 1944).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Winstanley: *The Law of Freedom and other writings*, ed. Christopher Hill (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 9–10.[Back to \(6\)](#)

Appendix

vol. 1, p. 55, ‘Antinomian in his radical spiritual impulses and in his profound scepticism about human laws and institutions’; I am unsure about the validity of this statement, which is contradicted by a note to *The Mysterie of God*, ‘Winstanley pejoratively characterizes antinomianism, later associated with the Ranters, before dismissing it from serious theological consideration’ (vol. 1, p. 299 n. 122).

vol. 1, p. 71, John Clowes or James Cottrell as printer of the second editions of *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1649) and *The Mysterie of God* (1649); Cottrell is known to have printed four works in 1650 but no work can be assigned to him before that date with confidence. On the other hand, he had been bound apprentice to John Raworth and then Ruth Raworth, and was made free of the Stationers’ Company in 1646. Significantly Ruth Raworth printed a work by John Saltmarsh and another by Hugh Peters for Giles Calvert in 1646.

vol. 1, p. 307 n. 260, possible allusion to Matthew 9:36; more likely is Matthew 10:6.

vol. 1, p. 477, ‘A waiter for the consolation of Israel’; alludes to Luke 2:25.

vol. 2, pp. 1, 20 (and vol. 1, pp. 79–82), *A Declaration to the Powers of England*; accepting all the editors’ arguments I still think the original and more familiar title of *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* should have been retained.

vol. 2, p. 231 n. 142, Laurence Clarkson’s *A Single Eye, all Light no Darkness* (London, 1650) ‘was not published until October 1650’; this is incorrect. From allusions to ‘he that calls light darknesse, and darknesse light, good evill, and evill good’ (vol. 2, p. 181) as well as ‘a single eye’ (vol. 2, p. 204), it appears that Winstanley had either heard Clarkson preach or read Clarkson’s *A Single Eye* – though whether in manuscript or as a printed text remains unclear. This ‘impious and blasphemous’ book was brought to the House of Commons’ attention on 21 June and on 27 September was ordered to be burned by the hangman.

vol. 2, p. 291, ‘There shall be neither Beggar nor idle person’, vol. 2, p. 293, ‘*There shall be no idle person nor Begger in the Land*’, and vol. 2, p. 300, ‘*The glory of Israels Commonwealth is this, They had no Begger among them*’; the source here is probably Sir Edward Coke, *The Second Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England* (1642), p. 729, ‘... so as we shall have neither Beggar (as the law of God commandeth) nor idle person in the Common-wealth’; cf. vol. 2, p. 103 n. 32.

The editors are very grateful for this thorough review in *Reviews in History* and would like to thank the reviewer and the journal for alerting historians and literary scholars worldwide to the new edition of Gerrard Winstanley’s works.

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