

A Radical History of Britain. Visionaries, Rebels and Revolutionaries: the Men and Women who Fought for Our Freedoms

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The cover to the hardback edition of Edward Vallance's *A Radical History of Britain* shows a Union Jack superimposed on a montage (King John signing the Magna Carta, the German Peasants' War of 1525 ([1](#)), the Women's Suffrage Movement, the Jarrow Crusade and the Battle of Cable Street) designed to illustrate the book's subtitle: *Visionaries, Rebels and Revolutionaries – The Men and Women who Fought for our Freedoms*. One would be forgiven for thinking that the far-right and, for all its recent rebranding, racist British National Party would welcome such imagery. As Vallance himself notes, their 2005 manifesto entitled *Rebuilding British Democracy* claimed that:

This country is the birthplace of modern democracy. This is no surprise; it is clear from what is known of the way in which free men and women among Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norse ancestors had a significant say in the running of their societies that personal freedom has deep and strong roots among the native peoples of our islands. Even when those freedoms were suppressed, as under the time of feudal darkness that followed the Norman Conquest, and again during the pauperisation of the yeomanry and creation of an urban proletariat during the Enclosures and Industrial Revolution, our people have always fought and even died to secure them again. From Magna Carta to the Peasants' Revolt, through the Levellers, the Chartists, the early Labour movement and the suffragettes, we have defied the executioner, the rack, and the

prison door to wrest liberty of conscience, speech, action and political association from monarchs, barons and bosses, and from popes, priests and censor.[\(2\)](#)

Moreover, both the chronological scope of Vallance's book – from the West Saxon King Alfred to the present day – and its focus on Magna Carta, the Peasants' Revolt, Jack Cade's Rebellion, the 'Commotion Time' (once known as 'Kett's rebellion'), Levellers, Diggers, *The Rights of Man* and *The Rights of Woman*, Luddites, Peterloo, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Chartists, the Suffrage Movement and early Socialism uncannily echo this aspect of the BNP's 2005 manifesto. The only notable dissonance is a final chapter on 'The Fight against Fascism' which contains a brief account of the one-time Labour MP Oswald Mosley, his Blackshirts and the famous 'Battle of Cable Street' on 4 October 1936, which in Vallance's view sits, 'like the Jarrow "Crusade" ... rather uneasily within a history of the Labour movement' (pp. 535–6). As the dust-jacket declaims:

From medieval Runnymede to twentieth-century Jarrow, from King Alfred to George Orwell, by way of John Lilburne and Mary Wollstonecraft, a rich and colourful thread of radicalism runs through almost a thousand years of British history ... traces a national tendency towards revolution, irreverence and reform wherever it surfaces in all its variety ... unveils the British yeomen and preachers, millworkers, poets, miners and intellectuals who fought and died for religious freedom, universal suffrage, justice and liberty ... shows why, now more than ever, their heroic achievements must be recognised and celebrated.

Besides the disconcerting juxtaposition of Vallance's subtitle *The [British] Men and Women who Fought for our Freedoms* with the BNP's sloganeering 'our people have always fought and even died to secure [freedoms]', there are other arresting equivalences. Thus Vallance's insistence that the 'very limited nature of British liberty' is undermined by the 'untrammelled power of Parliament' together with his remedy to prevent 'further assaults by the government on civil liberties' – namely, 'some body of specially protected British constitutional law, incorporating the rights of the citizen' – sounds not just like a variation on the 'opportunistic' David Cameron (pp. 549–50), but also the BNP's 2005 manifesto:

The rights of British citizens ... must be set down in a formal Bill of Rights, the starting point for which should be those parts of Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights of 1689 which are still relevant to modern times.[\(3\)](#)

Again, writing of the 'massive public demonstrations' and the 'millions who marched' against the 'illegal' Iraq War, Vallance's widely-shared uneasiness about the 'British Parliament's ability to ignore the will of the people' (pp. 43, 550, 552) resonates with the BNP's isolationist call to 'withdraw all British troops with immediate effect from Iraq'. Finally, having pointed out something well-known to historians – that the provisions of Magna Carta, both in its initial incarnation and subsequent versions, were mythologized and that for all its symbolism it 'guarantees very little' in a British legal context – Vallance declares that 'the political agency of the British people has been crucial to the defence and extension of our rights and freedoms'; 'fragile freedoms', what is more, that 'need to be jealously guarded if they are not to be encroached upon' (presumably a response to the counter-terrorism bill of 2008, with its provision to detain terrorist suspects without charge for forty-two days). So co-opting Percy Bysshe Shelley's anger after the Peterloo Massacre, Vallance ends with his belief in the British people's readiness to rise once again "like lions after slumber" and the ultimate 'lesson of Britain's radical history: the struggle for our freedom goes on' (pp. 43, 551–2). A call to arise and be doing which, it must be said, repeats the message of the BNP's 2005 manifesto:

Now our dearly-bought birthright of freedom is under mortal threat once more.[\(4\)](#)

This is emphatically not to suggest that in constructing his notion of *A Radical History of Britain* Vallance has knowingly acted as a cheerleader for the BNP. All the same it is, as he recognizes, a malleable tradition. And hence one readily appropriated for political purposes by the Right as well as, more familiarly, the Left. Indeed, although the 19th-century witnessed the piecemeal rediscovery or recovery of what is now generally called British radicalism, that process was predominantly associated with two broadly left-wing historiographic trends. One was bourgeois and liberal, essentially concerned with tracing the growth of democratic and republican ideas in response to acute social and economic tensions. The other was Socialist and Marxist, likewise emphasizing secular class struggle but this time under the shadow of capitalism. While the former approach was promoted during the 20th century by certain North-American based scholars concerned with the development of individual liberties and constitutional restraints on the authoritarian exercise of power, as well as the intellectual antecedents of the American Revolution, the latter became particularly associated with, among others, Protestant nonconformists, members of the Fabian Society and Communists. For it was one-time English members of the Communist Party and the briefly influential 'Historians' Group of the Communist Party such as Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, A. L. Morton and E. P. Thompson who were instrumental in creating a tradition of Marxist history in Britain that was severely critical of 'non-Marxist history and its reactionary implications'. Noted for its 'moral exhortation', their passionately debated agenda had an urgent tone because, as Hill remarked, 'History plays an important part in the battle of ideas today'. Furthermore, Hill underlined the political value of a Marxist approach, believing that it alone could 'restore to the English people part of their heritage of which they have been robbed'.[\(5\)](#) Accordingly, while Morton penned *A People's History of England* (1938), Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and Hilton *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (1973), Hill for his part turned from a doctrinaire Soviet-style class conflict explanation for a supposed 'English bourgeois revolution' during the mid-17th century to an extremely influential study of radical ideas entitled *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (1972). Hill's subsequent essay 'From Lollards to Levellers' (1978) attempted to provide both a genealogy and ecology for 'lower-class' radicalism by exploring the continuity of radical ideas within an orally transmitted 'underground tradition'. The fruit of this largely co-operative venture was a partly fabricated – in the sense of both manufacture and invention – single, continuous English radical tradition spanning from the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 to the Chartists and beyond. Yet it appears that these histories also had another, self-serving, purpose as Glenn Burgess has recently suggested:

The core historical project lay in the relationship of present to past embedded in the recovering of a radical or revolutionary heritage that could make communism not an alien, foreign and unpatriotic implant into the green and pleasant lands of the sceptred isle but a suppressed native tradition.[\(6\)](#)

Vallance too acknowledges the problematic nature of 'a British radical tradition', and is critical of what he sees as the 'historical continuum' presented in the 'great works' of Hill and Thompson; a 'continuum of radicalism' which 'arguably confused passing similarity with actual influence'. Nonetheless, contrary to what he identifies as the 'urgings of some conservative historians', Vallance insists that the idea of a British 'radical tradition' should not be abandoned (presumably this would have been a very different work had he heeded these unnamed conservative historians' advice). Instead, he defends it as 'viable and important' – as no 'mere fiction' – maintaining that many of the groups and individuals under discussion were 'undoubtedly "radical" within the context of their own time'. Vallance, moreover, claims that 'there were a number of important continuities between radical movements', that it was a 'variegated and ever-changing tradition' constantly 'reinvented' by a variety of different radical groups from generation to generation over the centuries to suit their own ends (pp. 12–18). All of which begs the obvious question: if Vallance's radical history of what is predominantly *England* – the wider British dimension of the title is largely absent until

after the Napoleonic Wars – is in fact little more than a sequence of episodes in context sometimes connected only tenuously or in retrospect and separated until the beginning of the fourth part of his book by gaping chronological gulfs (1215, 1381, 1450, 1549, 1641–50, 1688–89, the 1760s), then what purpose does it serve?

Clearly Vallance aspires to be taken seriously as a scholarly authority in this field, but this is a far from convincing performance. Indeed, given the distressingly anorexic bibliography of primary sources (a shade over two pages) and heavy dependence on secondary literature one could hardly expect *A Radical History of Britain* to be brimming with original research or fresh insights. And while Vallance has undeniable literary talent, far too often – notably in the second and third chapters of his book – he closely paraphrases, without acknowledgement, the single modern authority upon which he is relying, namely Alastair Dunn's *The Peasants' Revolt. England's failed Revolution of 1381* and I. M. W. Harvey's *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*. (7) To illustrate the point, there are some examples in the [appendix](#) to this review (a thorough investigation would probably reveal more).

Yet there is another purpose to Vallance's book: a political agenda. Located somewhere to the left of New Labour in *Guardian*, *New Statesman* and John Pilger reading territory (pp. 11, 38, 40–2, 430–1, 531, 551), displaying an evident if understandable distaste for Thatcherism (pp. 52, 228, 260), *A Radical History of Britain* is intended as a celebration of the British people's capacity for dissent and, when necessary, recourse to direct action in defending their liberties and securing new rights (pp. 11, 13, 18, 38–9, 119–21, 181, 201, 526–7). Nor to Vallance's mind is his narrative a record of heroic failure, but rather a testament to the achievements of British radicals and radical movements. Continuing in this vein, he is scathing of the heritage industry and its sanitisation of popular struggle – a condemnation he extends to 'the media's use of chocolate-box imagery' (pp. 430–1). Unlike the musician and lyricist Billy Bragg, whom he quotes approvingly, and his fellow left-wing artists and writers, Vallance appears to stop just short of seeking 'to "reclaim the flag" from the far right' – whether the Cross of St George or the Union Flag is unclear (p. 546). Although the Left has sometimes been accused of 'sentimentalism' (cf. pp. 126–7), even of romanticising its perceived radical inheritance – which before the nineteenth century did, more often than not, end in at least temporary defeat – there is a very serious issue at stake here. And that is the uses and value of public history.

As historians we have a collective responsibility to maintain the highest standards of scholarly rigour, especially when undertaking the challenging yet rewarding business of educating non-specialists. Furthermore, shaping aspects of the past to advance present-day political goals is a practice almost as old as the discipline itself. Anyone engaged in this enterprise, however, must take the greatest care not to legitimise the indefensible or give ammunition to dangerous extremists.

Notes

1. I assume this was intended to illustrate English peasant rebellion. The image, however, is taken from the title-page of the anonymous *Handlung, Artickel und Instruction ... von allen Rotten und Hauffen der Bauren [Act, Articles and Instruction Concerning all Gangs and Mobs of Farmers] (1525)*. This contained the so-called *Twelve Articles of the Swabian peasantry*. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/BNP_uk_manifesto.pdf [2]> [accessed 4 March 2010], and partly quoted on p. 547. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *ibid.* [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *ibid.* [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. E. Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in *Rebels and their Causes. Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, ed. Maurice Cornforth (London, 1978), pp. 21–47; R. Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880–1980: Part One', *New Left Review*, 120 (1980), 52–5, 73–5; Alastair MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England. An Essay on the Fabrication of Seventeenth-Century History* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 79–87, 101–21. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. G. Burgess, 'Introduction', in *English Radicalism, 1550–1850*, ed. Glenn Burgess and Matthew Festenstein (Cambridge, 2007), p. 4. [Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Alastair Dunn, *The Peasants' Revolt. England's failed Revolution of 1381* (Stroud, 2004).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (1st edn., London, 1970).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford, 1991).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. M. Mate, 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion: Sussex in 1450 to 1451', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 661–76, at 672.[Back to \(10\)](#)

Appendix

the fatal blows were struck by a royal esquire, Ralph Standish, who ran him through, repeatedly, with a sword ... Tyler still had the strength to remount his horse, and he managed to ride a few paces towards his followers, before collapsing again.

[Dunn, p. 133.]

the mortal blows were landed ... by a royal esquire, Ralph Standish, who ran Tyler through repeatedly with his sword. Tyler nonetheless struggled back on to his horse and managed to ride a few paces back to his own supporters before collapsing.

[Vallance, p. 70, with no note; all Vallance's references to Dunn have ceased by this point, and his next four references (notes 32, 33, 34, 35) are to R. B. Dobson's *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*.[\(8\)](#)]

he was soon dragged back to Smithfield, where he was beheaded. But, given the severity of the wounds that he had already sustained, Tyler may well have been dead by the time he was brought back to Smithfield. In a grisly display, Tyler's severed head was placed on a pole, and paraded before the rebels.

[Dunn, p. 133.]

... dragged him back to Smithfield, where he was beheaded. By this point, given the severity of his earlier injuries, he may well already have been dead. His severed head was put on a pole and paraded in front of the remaining rebels.

[Vallance, p. 70, with no note.]

At some point on 16 or 17 June Richard II's order countermanding the charter ... reached St Albans ... The new charter placed the Abbey and its buildings under his protection, and threatened grave punishment against any who inflicted any damage.

[Dunn, p. 146.]

At some point on 16/17 June, Richard's order countermanding his earlier charter concessions reached St Albans. This counter-charter protected the Abbey and its buildings and threatened

dire punishment to any who challenged it.

[Vallance, p. 71, with no note.]

The ghoulish sense of humour of the Suffolk rebels was indulged ... who made the head of Cavendish confess into the ear of Cambridge, and then the two exchanged kisses.

[Dunn, p. 154.]

The Suffolk rebels displayed a ghoulish sense of humour, first making the head of Cavendish appear to confess its sins to Prior John Cambridge, then making the two exchange kisses.

[Vallance, p. 72, with no note.]

On 17 June ... an expedition of twelve horsemen and twenty-five archers set out from London for Kent under the leadership of the King's elder half-brother, Thomas Holand, Earl of Kent, and Sir Thomas Trivet.

[Dunn, p. 169.]

On the 17th, an expedition of twelve horsemen and twenty-five archers was sent from London to Kent under the leadership of the King's half-brother Thomas Holland, Earl of Kent, and Sir Thomas Trivet.

[Vallance, p. 75, with no note.]

Ball was sentenced to be drawn, hanged and quartered, and the execution was carried out in the King's presence on the following day ... His remains ... were quartered and sent to the four corners of the kingdom.

[Dunn, p. 174.]

John Ball was ... sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. The execution was carried out the following day and his remains were sent to the four corners of the kingdom.

[Vallance, p. 76, with no note.]

[Stephen Slegge] and Robert Est, a gentleman from Maidstone, together with a great gang, allegedly 200 strong, broke into the close of Edward Neville, Lord Abergavenny, at Singlewell, two miles south of Gravesend, looted his granary, and assaulted his servants.

[I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*, p. 39.(9)]

... with Robert Est, a gentleman from Maidstone, and a gang of some two hundred men he broke into the close of Edward Neville, Lord Abergavenny, at Singlewell, two miles south of Gravesend. They looted his granary and assaulted his servants.

[Vallance, p. 82, with no note; while Vallance's previous note (note 4) cites Harvey, pp. 29–30, his next note (note 5) on p. 86 is to M. Mate's 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion: Sussex in 1450 to 1451'.(10)]

During the 1440s, then, both Norfolk and Suffolk were in the grip of adherents of the duke of Suffolk.

[Harvey, p. 44.]

By the 1440s, the counties of both Norfolk and Suffolk were in the grip of adherents of the Duke of Suffolk...

[Vallance, p. 82, with no note; the next note on p. 86 refers to Mate, 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion'.]

The notorious Sir Thomas Tuddenham of Oxburgh acted as MP for Suffolk in 1431 and thenceforward for Norfolk in three parliaments...

[Harvey, p. 45.]

The notorious Tuddenham of Oxburgh acted as MP for Suffolk in 1431 and, from then on, for Norfolk in three parliaments...

[Vallance, pp. 82–83, with no note; the next note on p. 86 refers to Mate, 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion'.]

Perhaps the best-recorded example of his heavy-handed use of force comes in January 1449 when he and Lord Moleyns backed and incited the attack and seizure by a large gang comprising several hundred armed men of John Paston's manor at Gresham, smashing gates and doors, rifling possessions in the house; and, with the manor taken, combing the countryside in pursuit of Paston's friends, tenants, and servants through houses and barns, stabbing into sheaves and straw after their quarry. Poor tenants of the manor were intimidated into making false complaints in the hundred courts against these associates of Paston who naturally dared not appear in public to defend themselves in court, nor could they even obtain copies of the complaints to answer them by law because the keeper of the court was in league with Lord Moleyns and Tuddenham.

[Harvey, p. 47.]

The most infamous example of his methods came in January 1449. Heydon and Lord Moleyns, Bishop of Chichester, backed by a large gang comprising several hundred armed men, incited the attack and seizure of John Paston's manor at Gresham in Norfolk. Heydon's men smashed gates and doors, rifled through Paston's possessions and, with the manor taken, combed the countryside, pursuing his friends, tenants and servants in and out of houses and barns, ruthlessly stabbing at sheaves and straw after their quarry. Poor tenants of the manor were intimidated into making false complaints in the hundred courts against these associates of Paston, who naturally did not appear in public to defend themselves in court. Nor could they even obtain copies of the complaints so as to answer them by law, because the keeper of the court was also in league with Moleyns and Tuddenham.

[Vallance, p. 83, with no note; the next note on p. 86 refers to Mate, 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion'.]

They marshalled themselves into some kind of military array, appointing captains to order their ranks. These leaders hid their identities behind such names as 'King of the Fairies', 'Queen of the Fairies', and 'Robin Hood', a trick used by poachers. Thomas Cheyne, the captain in chief, went under the name of 'the hermit Blewbeard'.

[Harvey, p. 65]

They organised themselves into a military-style array and appointed captains under various pseudonyms – 'King of the Fairies', 'Queen of the Fairies' and 'Robin Hood' – a trick ... that rebels had also employed in 1381. Thomas Cheyne himself went under the name 'the hermit of Blewbeard'.

[Vallance, p. 85, with no note; the next note on p. 86 refers to Mate, 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion'.]

Cheyne was captured with the aid of some of the citizens of Canterbury on Saturday, 31 January, just a week after the rising had begun ... [he] was sent to Westminster to be judged and was subsequently hanged, drawn, and quartered at Tyburn ... His head was sent to London

Bridge and his quarters were distributed between London, Norwich, and two of the Cinque Ports; although not without some difficulty, since no one was willing for fear of their lives to take on themselves the job of transporting the dismembered corpse to its several destinations

[Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*, pp. 65–66]

Cheyne was finally captured with the aid of the citizens of Canterbury on Saturday 31 January, just a week after the rising had begun. He was taken to Westminster to be judged and was then hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. His head was sent to London Bridge and his quarters were distributed between London, Norwich and two of the Cinque Ports; although not without some difficulty, since no one was willing, for fear of their lives, to transport the dismembered corpse to its several destinations.

[Vallance, p. 85, with no note; the next note on p. 86 refers to Mate, 'The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion']

There was another story that he was a sorcerer of the black arts, capable of summoning up the Devil in animal guise, and that during 1449, whilst living in Sussex in the household of Sir Thomas Dacre, he had murdered a pregnant woman and had had to flee the country ... At least a portion of this may have been true: between December 1448 and December 1449 a John Cade, yeoman, of Hurstpierpoint in mid-Sussex, did abjure the realm, the escheator for Surrey and Sussex taking 20s. from the profits of Cade's horse, gown, and bed. The manor of Hurstpierpoint was held at this date by Sir Thomas Dacre. He was son of Lord Dacre of the North but he himself made his links among the most prominent families of the South-East. Indeed, his son-in-law was the very Sir Richard Fiennes, future first Lord Dacre of the South, whose uncle was the notorious Lord Saye...

[Harvey, pp. 78–9]

In another tale he was a sorcerer of the black arts, capable of summoning up the Devil in animal guise; during 1449, while living in Sussex in the household of Sir Thomas Dacre, Cade was said to have murdered a pregnant woman and then fled the country. This part at least may be true. Between December 1448 and December 1449, a John Cade, yeoman, of Hurstpierpoint in mid-Sussex, did 'abjure the realm' (promise to go into exile), while the escheator for Surrey and Sussex confiscated twenty shillings from the profits of the sale of Cade's horse, gown and bed. Hurstpierpoint at this time was held by Sir Thomas Dacre, the son of Lord Dacre of the North but with links among the most prominent families of the South East. (Indeed, his son-in-law was the very Sir Richard Fiennes, future 1st Lord Dacre of the South, whose uncle was the notorious Lord Saye.)

[Vallance, pp. 87–8, with no note; the next note (note 7) on p. 91 does quote Harvey, but refers to page 88 of her book]

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