

# Old Normal: New Normal

Andy Kemp revisits

Christopher Hill's

*The World Turned Upside Down: radical ideas during the English Revolution*

(Maurice Temple Smith 1972, Penguin 1975.)

It is forty-one years since I first read *The World Turned Upside Down*. I was in the Upper Sixth, studying 'Stuart England' over the first winter of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, the last winter of the seventies. Looking back, it seems to me there was already a growing sense that the world – our British corner of it – was starting to turn; the agenda was shifting, a 'new normal' was elbowing accepted ideals and principles out of the way. The direction of travel had changed, but only time would show in whose interest.

Brought up in the north of 'that most disloyal county of Buckinghamshire', the English Civil War (strictly 'wars' of course, involving not just the English, but the Scots, Irish and Welsh) haunted my childhood. Every school-day morning the bus obeyed the finger-pointing statue of Colonel John Hampden, as 'The Patriot' ushered us across Aylesbury's market square towards the stygian fumes of the town's subterranean bus station. As a younger child I marvelled at the misshapen musket-balls embedded in the church door at Hillesden near Buckingham, relics of Sir Alexander Denton's ill-fated defence of his mansion, against the up-and-coming Colonel Cromwell. Creepier by far though, were the pickled thumb and forefinger of Sir Edmund Verney, pried from the King's standard after the battle of Edgehill, revealed to us kids with a conjuror's relish by his descendent, the late Sir Harry Verney. My great uncle's grocery store stood beside the site of the stocks and pillory-ditch, where the young preacher Benjamin Keach – one of John Bunyan's fellow Baptists – suffered public indignities for his independent conscience.

To wade into Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* – not an easy read for a seventeen year old – was to discover a whole other story of those troubled

times, a story with some of the same concerns but with a completely different cast of characters. After a few chapters I realised that most of those Civil War figures of my childhood – Cromwell, Hampden, Denton and the various Verneys, whether for Parliament or The King – were all greater or lesser gentry. They were men (all men) of property, of landed and enclosed estates, with households of servants and investments in early capitalist ventures. Some were temporarily brought low by war, but others gained status and made fortunes from it. Hill's story was about a different class of men (and women): disaffected soldiers, disobedient clergy, libertine visionaries, bankrupted tailors, depressed shoemakers, shepherds, day labourers and masterless wanderers.

But, like their better-off contemporaries, they drew no distinctions between spiritual and political aspirations; for them too, it was all of a piece.

In my A Level studies I had already encountered the Independents and Presbyterians in parliament. I had met 'free-born' John Lilburne and the Leveller faction of the New Model Army, and read about their part in the Putney Debates. *The World Turned Upside Down* set itself to explore a much more diverse landscape of political, social and religious eccentricity. Not just Levellers but embryonic Baptists, Familists, Grindletonians, Diggers (or True Levellers), Ranters, Seekers, early Quakers, Fifth Monarchists and Muggletonians. Hill showed how two



The Putney Debates 1647

decades without official censorship, nearly a century of exposure to scripture in the vernacular, the expansion of print and increased literacy, all contributed to the proliferation of radical ideas. This, coupled with the breakdown of traditional authority – the 'Church of England', bishops and the House of Lords were all abolished and the king executed –, freed the imagination of many, permitting the thinking of the unthinkable. The wars killed more than 200,000 people, crippled and ruined others, and devastated communities especially in Ireland: all this at a time when the population of the British Isles probably numbered fewer than five million. People looked to a better future – even heaven on earth – but whose vision, whose agenda would triumph? Where was God, or was there a God, in all this mayhem?

There were two reasons why I decided to revisit *The World Turned Upside Down* in September 2020.

Last summer I was given and read Andrew Bradstock's *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England* (I. B. Tauris, 2011), a fascinating and concise account, exploring the religious thinking of seven radical groups of the period. Bradstock's first line is a tribute to Christopher Hill. Like me, his first encounter with the 17<sup>th</sup> century radicals was via Hill's book, and a life-long fascination ensued. Despite forty years of fluctuating fashions in history writing, Hill's oeuvre (he wrote more than twenty books on related subject matter) is still influential. For a while he was eclipsed, and his committed Anglo-Marxist perspective fell from favour. *The World Turned Upside Down*, like any other history, was a product of its time of writing. Created in the wake of Paris '68, it resonated with renewed egalitarian hopes. Hippy-anarchy, 'free love' and 'anything goes' were recognisable bedfellows of the Ranters with their 'base impudent kisses'. Other aspects of Hill's method have received criticism, but his intention – to tell the story of 1640 to 1660 in these islands from 'the bottom up' – is still seen as ground-breaking.

Hill freely admitted in his conclusion, that others questioned the numerical insignificance of some of the groups and sects. However, he stood by the lasting significance of their ideas, that great upwelling of original thought: on scripture, theology and philosophy, democracy and property, liberty and power. Re-reading it, I experienced a great thrill of rediscovery as I delved into each chapter, reminded again and again that *this* was where I had first encountered the often unacknowledged progenitors of many later and better-known thinkers, poets and polemicists. The Leveller thinkers – Lilburne, Walwyn and Overton – prefigured the secular, democratic ideas of Swift, Voltaire and Paine; with down-to-earth practicality characteristic of Chartists living two centuries on. The extraordinarily prolific inspirer of the Diggers, Gerrard Winstanley, a great writer, for whom God was 'Reason' and whose nuanced views on property, production and the commonwealth, would find later expression in Marx and Morris. The biblical criticism developed by Strauss, Feuerbach and others, finds precursors in Milton, Henry Parker and especially Samuel Fisher. While the Ranter, Abiezer Coppe and the 'chameleon' Lawrence Clarkson (who belonged to almost all the sects at one time or another) enacted a fairly extreme libertinism, their more sober colleagues, Joseph Salmon and Richard Coppin, were the ancestors of Thomas J J Altizer and 'the Death of God'. Disputes over 'inner light' and 'that of God in all', occupied many proto-panteists and panentheists, and also inhabited the struggle between George Fox and James Nayler for the 'soul' of Quakerism. The Muggletonians developed an odd brand of non-proselytising, secularised

'immanentism' in worship, along with an antinomian spirit inherited in the next century by William Blake. Hill even found space for the quietist cleric, Thomas Traherne, whose poetry prefigured Clare's and Wordsworth's in its treatment of our relationship with nature.

I felt the second 'revisiting prompt' while mulling over another book, read just after the December 2019 election. Fintan O'Toole's *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (Apollo, 2018) is an exploration of the essential Englishness of Brexit, of how a country that once had vast colonies (of which 17<sup>th</sup> century Ireland was the first) is being recast as an 'oppressed nation', requiring 'liberation from the imperialist European project'. Our British corner of the world seemed to be turning in on itself, when – while our attention was elsewhere – the whole world turned upside down as the Coronavirus pandemic hit. People got sick and some died; but the roads emptied and the skies fell silent, greenhouse gases diminished, carbon in the atmosphere went into reverse; many people were cared for and provided for, and community ties were strengthened. Suddenly a different answer to the most serious questions of our time seemed plausible. When this is all over, could there be a *genuinely* 'new normal'?

After the immense upheaval of civil war – and the death and destruction – despite the wild experimentation and the great ferment of ideas, the 'Republic of Heaven' did not arrive. For the vast majority of people, and for the land, very little changed. A different 'elite' – the new moneyed – had hijacked the agenda; and for those with few resources – the lower-middling and the poor – the 'new normal' looked remarkably similar to the 'old normal'. For many who had backed or fought for Parliament's cause, it must have felt like a far-from-heroic failure, as if defeat had been snatched from the jaws of victory. Christopher Hill explores this phenomenon in his later book *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (Faber & Faber, 1984).

When this pandemic recedes, will there be *More Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and everywhere else, or will the opportunity to create a genuinely 'new normal' be missed?

'O power where art thou,  
that must mend things amiss?  
Come change the heart of man,  
and make him truth to kiss.'

Gerrard Winstanley,  
*The Law of Freedom as a Platform*, 1652.

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