

Experiments in Socialism: The Life and Importance of Gerrard Winstanley

The life and writings of Gerrard Winstanley have been characterized in a variety of ways since the seventeenth century ranging from fanatical anarchism to the wizened socialist. His writings have been analyzed and critiqued from a variety of perspectives beginning with the acknowledgment of his poetic and religious turn of phrase, the obvious Marxist critique, and more recently through the lens of modern and post-modern discourse analysis. He appears to have been both a man of his times and an iconoclast breaking with long held traditions. Beyond all of these characterizations, Gerrard Winstanley is notable for his humble experimentation with communism and its quiet failure. How then can we place him within the turbulent time of the English Civil War and its outcomes? How can we identify the complexities and paradoxes of this quiet English man? As he suggested many times in his writings, to talk is worthless unless a person acts upon those sentiments. Winstanley was notable among the many vociferous people of the middle seventeenth century for his attempts to truly carry out his visions and social dreams.

I. Early Life: The making of a Digger 1609-1648

Gerrard was born to the family of a Baptist textile merchant, Edward Winstanley, in Wigan, Lancashire in 1609. Though his birth went unrecorded parish records from the area note the baptism of a Gerrard Winstanley at this time. Little else is known about his very early family life. What has been established is that he began life in the merchant class and easily established himself among the Freeholder community through first his father's business connections and second through his marriage to the daughter of a wealthy London surgeon. These connections

maintained him well above the status the impoverished people he would later accompany to St. George's Hill in the 1649.

By 1630, at nineteen, Winstanley moved to London to pursue an apprenticeship in the textile trade. Eight years later, he had acquired a position within the Merchant Tailors' Company in London. This suggests that he was gaining status and wealth within the industry that aided his arranging a marriage with Susan King two years later. Her father, William King, became an even more influential advocate for the rising merchant in London society. By 1640, Winstanley had acquired a small amount of property both out of the marriage and through his financial successes, but things appear to have gone down hill precipitously after the beginning of the English Civil War in 1642.¹

The following year he filed for bankruptcy in London and disappears from the records. James Alsop and Robert Dalton have reconstructed much of the bankruptcy and the following years, though disagree on the long term affects of the filing in London. Dalton suggests that the standard suggestion that the filing pushed Winstanley over a social edge towards communism as a reaction to his poverty.² Alsop refutes this noting that Winstanley appears to maintain property and a cattle herding business in Cobham, Surrey, and that he did not become impoverished. Instead, Alsop feels that a blight on his herds pushed Winstanley over towards his mystic experiences and communistic writings.³ Something that both authors play down, but that Brailsford in *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (1961) focuses on, is the role of the

¹ George H. Sabine, *The Work of Gerrard Winstanley: With an Appendix of Documents Relating to the Digger Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1941), 6-8; T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger: A literary analysis of radical ideas in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 1-2; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), 90.

² R. J. Dalton, "Gerrard Winstanley: The Experience of Fraud 1641," *The Historical Journal*, 34 (4: Dec., 1991), 973-974.

³ J. D. Alsop, "Ethics in the Marketplace: Gerrard Winstanley's London Bankruptcy, 1643," *The Journal of British Studies*, 28 (2: Apr., 1989): 97-98.

protests to the enclosure movement by the Levellers.⁴ As Winstanley already appears to be connected through his father and his own preaching to Baptist and pseudo-Quaker doctrines, it seems reasonable to suggest that he was also amenable to the Leveller protests. This became apparent later in the 1650s in his writings, especially as the Diggers were the True Levellers. One final point to make here stems from his activities as a hired out herdsman. No matter the level of his success at this point, Winstanley was increasingly affected by the enclosure of the commons by local gentry. It is quite conceivable that this would have at least assisted his adoption of the communal doctrines he would write about in 1648 and 1649.

Economic strife aside, Winstanley appears to have overcome the dual obstacle of limited education by the late 1640s. In his early twenties, Winstanley asked unsuccessfully to attend college in London. His lack of strong gentry connections probably led to this denial but the lack of strong education did not hinder him in developing a sophisticated writing style. The other side of this limited education led to not only a belief in the development of a public and free school system, but also to the imaginative analysis of his religious beliefs. Had he attended university, it is likely that he would not have had the mental flexibility to question and reinterpret the Bible and his Baptist teachings. Unsurprisingly, by 1648, Gerrard Winstanley had moved from his Baptist roots and had become a Seeker, waiting for Gods word to reveal itself to him. Indicative of this spiritual shift, which was similar to many other radical thinkers of the mid-seventeenth century, were two pamphlets written at the close of the 1640s: *The breaking of the day of God* (1648) and *The mysterie of God* (1649).

He states his belief in the quickly approaching resurrection of Jesus and a holy reckoning in *The breaking of the day of God* and further suggests that the divine will show itself to each individual soon. Through this divine message, every one will know Gods will and be able to

⁴ H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (London: Cresset Press, 1961), 425-429.

perfect themselves to ready for the second coming. He reproaches established sects of Protestantism by attacking their leaders his heretical note that: “It is the misery of this age that men try to uphold a usurped ecclesiastical power.” He goes further by blaming the “main cause of national troubles” on “the discontent of men that wander after ecclesiastical power.”⁵ This heresy probably upset many of the people to whom he had recently preached Baptist doctrine, but it was the premise of *The mysterie of God* the following year the officially severed his ties to any established Christian sect in England or beyond.

For Winstanley, the “mysterie” had much more to do with human interpretation of God’s word, not so much the future deeds of the deity. Established churches, even liberal ones, worked upon a strong belief in the permanence of heaven and hell. Once a soul was cast into the depths of hell that was the final resting place of the soul. Whether by your actions or, in some sects, the predetermined decision of God, heaven and hell were permanent. Even the tolerant Quakers believed this basic tenet of faith, it promoted penitent and cooperative servants of God. Gerrard Winstanley’s *Mysterie* directly attacked this based on the loving and merciful nature of God. “As you desire that God should show love to you, be not offended to hear that He will show love even to those who have been lost.” Even more than loving the “lost” souls in hell, God will “at the day of judgment,” redeem them, “for even the lost, who were cast into the fire, shall receive mercy and the whole of mankind shall be delivered from the curse.”⁶

This blasphemy directly attacked the power of established churches on a multitude of levels. By removing any permanent punishments for “sin” (which Winstanley later will come to question even the presence of), how would one be impelled to do right? Winstanley answer to this, though circular, is keeping with his idealistic nature: once an individual comes to knows

⁵ Sabine, 87-92.

⁶ Sabine, 81-82.

God and the divine will, then all will be at peace and will do right. Removing the consequences also removes the need for absolution and religious ceremony that would necessitate a church institution in the first place. This may have been Winstanley's general point, as he would come to later verbalize this specifically in his *The New Law of Righteousness* (1649) and *The law of freedom in a platform* (1652).⁷

Despite arguments about the causation of his repudiation of wealth and property, one thing is clear from the sources: Gerrard Winstanley had grown from a youth attempting to make it the world his father had built for him into a intellect critical of the inequality of society and many established and hierarchical religious doctrines. His economic hardships introduced him to a world of hardship previously hidden and likewise provided ample inspiration for Gerrard Winstanley's radical ideas about society and the duty to the poor.

II. A leader of the poor: "Glory here, Diggers all!" 1649-1651

Where his early life is only sketchily recorded, there is a great deal from the three year period after Gerrard Winstanley's fortieth birthday. This period brought to him a following and placed his philosophical and religious writings into the national debate over the outcomes of the English Civil War. Despite his increased visibility during this short period, there is an acrimonious debate over the author's influence in his own movement. George Sabine, in the collection of Winstanley's writings, suggests that he "showed no evidence of possessing the practical political capacity" of the Leveller agitators found in the New Model Army. He also down plays the author's role in the establishment of other "digger" communities.⁸ Christopher Hill and John Gurney have both posed Winstanley as the embodiment of the reform movement

⁷ T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger: A literary analysis of radical ideas in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 20-23; Sabine, 7-8.

⁸ Sabine, 2.

of the English Civil War, for them “utopian” communism was the only true reform. Hill suggests that he was not as “vigorous, rudely boisterous and bellicose” as the Levellers.⁹ They also suggest that he gathered his following not through ambitious charisma but rather real spiritual conviction. To better understand this debate, we must look again at the author’s actions and how well they match to his writings.¹⁰

The course of Gerrard Winstanley’s religious development as a Seeker reached a whole new level of mysticism late in 1648 or early 1649. He had taken to meditating and going into trances to attempt to hear and understand the will of God. One of these trances brought the message that he had been seeking, and gave him a clear path to follow that he announced in *The New Law of Righteousness* in January of 1649. “Man-kinde was made to live in the freedom of the spirit, not under the bondage of the flesh, ... for every one was made to be a Lord over the Creation of the Earth, Cattle, Fish, Fowl, Grasse, Trees, not any one to be bond-slave and a beggar under the Creation of his own kinde.”¹¹ The freedom spoke of here was threatened if not possible in a world based on the inequality of wealth and accumulation of materials things. He further suggests that, “The rich doth lock up the treasures of the earth; and hardens their hearts against the poor.”¹² Winstanley laid out explicitly the tenet of his faith, that the free access to the earth and its produce was the only to level society. The poor, unable to access the lands, were doomed to suffer, and God deemed both to Winstanley and in the Bible that we all should take care of one another and have no poverty.

⁹ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), 94.

¹⁰ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 90-99, and *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (Oxford: The Past and Present Society, 1978), 1-2; John Gurney, “Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement in Walton and Cobham,” *The Historical Journal*, 37 (4: Dec., 1994), and *Brave community: the Digger movement in the English Revolution* (Manchester, NY: Manchester University Press and Palgrave, 2007).

¹¹ Sabine, 180.

¹² Sabine, 181.

The core of his belief in the necessity of free access to land, though, did not entail the complete and forcible removal of property rights. In fact, Winstanley suggests that eventually people will be brought to agree as they see their inner light. “When this universall law of equity rises up in every man and woman, then ... the blessing of the earth shall be common to all.”¹³ Here the author wrote his most famous line: “Work together. Eat bread together.”¹⁴ This was soon adopted as the motto of the Digger in general. This call for communal use of the common lands came with the peaceful recognition of the author that spreading this message and enacting its designs was his calling, he had sought, he had heard, he had written, and now he would act. To further snub his critics he acknowledges the radical nature of this pamphlet: “Some may be offended at it, if they be, I care not.”¹⁵

In April of 1649, only four months after publishing *The New Law of Righteousness*, Gerrard Winstanley, William Everard and a party of fellow villagers from Cobham and Walton-upon-Thames, Surrey, climbed St. George’s Hill entered the common lands and began to weed and till the soil. They were careful to not cut down trees, a sign of possession in English society, but the parsnips, carrots and beans were meant to feed to new community and seemingly harmless.¹⁶ To add further to this cause Gerrard Winstanley invited everyone who would work the land into his community openly, he even toured around the Cobham area and beyond speaking of his vision and new society of Diggers. The name diggers has obvious roots in the main action of these impoverished individuals, digging the land to prepare it for crops, though it

¹³ Sabine, 184.

¹⁴ Sabine, 190.

¹⁵ Sabine, 243.

¹⁶ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 105.

appears first as a negative term in the local accounts. Eventually, Winstanley himself would adopt the phrase with pride exclaiming, “Glory here, Diggers all!”¹⁷

The process of cultivating St. George’s Hill was slow going thanks to the constant interference of locals and the occasional attack from New Model Army soldiers. The latter became such a problem that Winstanley wrote of such an instance to Lord Fairfax seeking his intervention on their behalf to stop such attacks in his *A letter to the lord Fairfax, and his councill of war* towards the end of 1649. Some soldiers under a Captain Stravie, rushed upon an older man and young boy and beat each severely for no apparent reason. Winstanley sought to have instances like this against the supporters of the cause of the army and the Civil War but asked that the perpetrators not be punished. This fit well with Winstanley’s critique of the courts and lawyers as oppressors themselves but recognized their current power. Though he noted that the Diggers would answer any charge against them, the group would not file charges against any other individual as it was unchristian. This effective boycott of the courts meant that their only recourse for trying to solve this crisis was through the aid of powerful individuals whose property rights they were criticizing.

Much like the soldiers, the local gentry and their tenants did not see the quiet work of the diggers so innocently. They reacted quickly, angrily, and violently at this infringement on their personal and private land rights. Winstanley accounted such an attack around the same time as the attack of Stravie’s soldiers. William Star and John Taylor, both freeholders riding horses, “having at their heels some men in womens apparel on foot, with every one a staffe or club,” fell upon the first diggers they came across like irrational “beasts.”¹⁸ This was in the character that Winstanley perceived of those entrenched in the buying and selling of property, namely that the

¹⁷ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 120.

¹⁸ Sabine, 295.

seeking and acquisition of land and wealth made one brutish and irrationally violent. This, of course, pushed a person out of the realm of peaceful and merciful God and towards evil deeds. The attack left three severely bruised and a fourth man was unlikely to survive. *A declaration of the bloudie and unchristian acting of William Star, and John Taylor of Walton* presents the struggle on St. George's Hill as the battle between "Covetousnesse" and peace, with the local people attacking peace as if it was their enemy. The author's idealism comes across clearly in his underlying belief that the individual would accept the "pure" truth of his writing and find love for the common man with no repercussions for their former deeds against the diggers. This is the classic "turn the other cheek" argument.

The rising success of the commune at St. George's Hill reached its height by 1650 when roughly 50-60 people were living on the common lands and many other communes were popping up across the western and northern portions of England. Though, he was not directly active in the day-to-day running of these communities, he did travel to each and promoted their activities. He became a quiet leader of the poor, and an advocate for their issues abroad and in London. This same year, 1650, Winstanley appealed to the Parliament and New Model Army to remember the reason for the civil war. He warned the leaders of the army and Parliament about the problems of killing of the King:

"The way to cast out Kingly Power is not to cast it out by the Sword; for this doth but set him in more power, and removes him from a weaker to a stronger hand. The only way to cast him out is for the people to leave him to himself, to forsake fighting and all oppression and to live in love one towards another."¹⁹

In addition to this he questioned the removal of the King from power and the establishment of "kinglie" power among three branches: the House of Commons, the tithing priests, and the

¹⁹ Sabine, 374.

judges. These three powers effectively counteracted the laws that the 1649 act of Parliament removing the King and establishing a free commonwealth. If a truly free commonwealth was to be created then two things needed to happen. First, all common lands must be opened for commoners to farm. Secondly, to strengthen the common lands, all confiscated crown lands should become part of the public trust. Despite his idealistic belief that all lands would eventually become common lands, he reaffirmed his support for the maintenance of private property till the owners saw the wisdom of mutual aid and equality he espoused. As Parliament had acted in the previous year, Winstanley noted that they had “by denying us the Earth which is our Livelyhood, and thereby killing us by a lingering death.”²⁰

As Gerrard Winstanley wrote this entreaty to Parliament and the army, his commune was coming under attack by the very legal force he was railing against. In *An new-years gift for the Parliament and armie* mentioned above, he mentions that the diggers had been imprisoned at least twice in 1649 for trespassing, both times to be released back to their commune through the support of Lord Fairfax. This support, though, could not protect them from the lawsuits filed against the Diggers in 1650 and 1651. George Sabine and Paul Hardacre suggest that the lawsuit and its decision against the Diggers sealed the end for the community and they disbanded.²¹ The fate of the other communities seems to have been much the same and by 1652 the entire movement had dissipated. What had started quietly in April 1649 had barely had two growing seasons to mature and fall apart in the face of landed individuals threatened by their communist views. Despite the end of his experiment at Cobham, Gerrard Winstanley maintained his attempts to enact the change to English society dictated by his inner light.

²⁰ Sabine 364.

²¹ Sabine, 21; Paul H. Hardacre, “Gerrard Winstanley in 1650,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 22 (4: Aug., 1959).

III. The Post-Digger Movement, 1652-1676

Winstanley's outward expression of his belief that, "True freedom lies in the free enjoyment of the earth," persisted into 1652 but appears to have been dramatically tempered by 1660.²² By the time of his death in 1676, Gerrard Winstanley was nearly indistinguishable from other English freeholders. The end of his experiment, appears to have forced the author to accept the limitations to his idealistic and utopian society. How he came to return to the ways of his youth suggest that this man of conviction was forced to compromise his beliefs to stay true to the another basic tenet of Christian faith, that of a peaceful life. This process of change appears to have started in his much more mild expression of communism in *The law of freedom in a platform* (1652) that was addressed to Cromwell and his advisors. As Richard Vann suggests, the power of his communalistic ideas were tempered to fit the political and social reality of late seventeenth century.²³

Hoping to influence his one last chance for enacting the true reform of English society, Winstanley sent Oliver Cromwell an adjusted form of his work *The New Law of Righteousness*. Since Cromwell was similarly interested in social and religious reform, the author seemed inclined to believe his ideas would have a sympathetic audience. He clung the belief that property, as well as the church and many other unequal institutions, would no longer be needed after humanity had found its inner light, but "for others, who are not willing [to give up their property], let them stay in the way of buying and selling, which is the Law of the Conqueror, till they be willing." His long list of justifications for his communist program was packaged in the most refined, exacting and specific language Winstanley had yet produced. He concludes his

²² Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 106.

²³ J. D. Alsop, "Gerrard Winstanley's Later Life," *Past and Present*, 82 (Feb., 1979): 80; Richard T. Vann, "The Later Life of Gerrard Winstanley," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 26 (1: Jan. - Mar., 1965): 133.

letter with a hopeful and obsequious plea, “And so I leave this in your hand, humbly prostrating my self and it before you.”²⁴

After this point, Winstanley “moderate millenarianism” became untenable, this was especially true after Cromwell’s creation of the Protectorate in 1653. According to Christopher Hill, “The Revolution was over.” Therefore, T. Wilson Hayes suggests that, “from that point on the choice for people like Winstanley was either to support the champions of propertied society or join with the fanatical Fifth Monarchists in attempting to establish the millennium by violence.”²⁵ At this point Gerrard Winstanley receded somewhat from the public view.

According to Aslop and Vann, Winstanley attempted to regain his merchant status with relative success. By 1657, the Winstanley family had acquired some land from Susan’s father near to Cobham and his former commune. As he steadily regained social standing within the Cobham community he was elected to various positions of status and authority often having responsibility for the local poor. He had achieved enough status within Surrey that he was able to file a lawsuit in the Chancery. He does not seem to have suffered even after his first wife Susan died in 1664, as he remarried the next year.

The religious radicalism he exhibited during his forties and early fifties seems to have moderated as he neared sixty. He accepted a position as church warden of Cobham in 1667. His rise in society continued into the 1670s when he was elected Chief Constable of Elmbridge. Even as he neared his death, Gerrard Winstanley was actively suing for access to funds promised by a will. All of these details suggest a dramatic shift in his convictions as the political and social climate changed course and eventually returned largely to the pre-Civil War, king and all. But what seems apparent during this enigmatic period is that his beliefs may have placed him at

²⁴ Sabine, 513-514.

²⁵ Hill, and Hayes quotes both in Hayes, 219.

greater risk of persecution, possibly explaining the return to the state church. By his death on September 10, 1676, Gerrard Winstanley had come full circle socially and probably religiously.²⁶

IV. Winstanley's place in the Historiography

Despite his relatively mild influence on the eventual outcome of the English Civil War, Gerrard Winstanley, his experimental community, and his writings have continued to be analyzed as literary, political, religious, and social masterpieces. His limited importance during the seventeenth century, and even his later attempts at fitting in to the established social fabric of England, have only recently been incorporated into the deep historiography beginning in the 1890s. The late eighteenth century witnessed the rebirth of Winstanley's works in the historical literature of Firth's *The Clarke Papers* (1894) and Gooch *English Democratic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century* (1898). These embraced the literary value of his writings. Winstanley became then an expression of Quaker philosophy in the hands of Lewis Berens' *The Digger Movement in the Days of the Commonwealth in 1906* followed by David Petegorsky's characterization of the author as a "forgotten radical." George Sabine, even with limited background information available attempted the first systematic biography and analysis of Winstanley's writings. In fact, his collection of the author's works is still the most exhaustive and valuable resource.²⁷

The Gerrard Winstanley described above is largely the product of the research great number of historians working in the last fifty years. Since 1960, and the age of social turmoil it

²⁶ Alsop, "Gerrard Winstanley's Later Life;" Vann, "The Later Life of Gerrard Winstanley".

²⁷ Lewis H. Berens, *The Digger Movement in the Days of the Commonwealth* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, & Co., Ltd. 1906); David W. Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: A Study of the Social Philosophy of Gerrard Winstanley* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1940); George H. Sabine, *The Work of Gerrard Winstanley: With an Appendix of Documents Relating to the Digger Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1941).

has encompassed, authors like H. Brailsford, Christopher Hill, T. Wilson Hayes, and John Gurney have taken the literary analysis and cultural history of the English Civil War and developed a deeper understanding of Winstanley as both an individual and a product of the times of such radical philosophy.²⁸ Much of the current research is, namely Hill and Gurney have trouble explaining the later years of Gerrard Winstanley's life. While his place as a literary, political and religious thinker is solid within the historiography, the experimentation and eventual collapse of his beliefs remains an equally interesting enigma.

²⁸ H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (London: Cresset Press, 1961); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), and *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (Oxford: The Past and Present Society, 1978); T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger: A literary analysis of radical ideas in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); John Gurney, "Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement in Walton and Cobham," *The Historical Journal*, 37 (4: Dec., 1994), and *Brave community: the Digger movement in the English Revolution* (Manchester, NY: Manchester University Press and Palgrave, 2007).

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