Winstanley and the Diggers, 1649–1999
Edited by ANDREW BRADSTOCK
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The publication of a volume of essays on Winstanley and the Diggers leads me to some reflections on its contribution, which does not go very far in connecting the Diggers with the revolution of which they were a part; and to some observations on the role of Winstanley in the revolutionary trends of the period, in particular the question of ‘revolution from below’ or ‘revolution from above’.

James Holstun’s ‘Communism, George Hill and the Mir: Was Marx a Nineteenth-century Winstanleyan?’ provides a broad context: ‘Marx and many of his followers chronically underestimated the importance of religion as a revolutionary ideology’ (p. 137) and ‘The peasant rebellion – the most globally widespread and important form of social revolution in both the modern and the pre-modern world’ is ‘almost always fired by religious ideology’ (p. 141). This could have provided a useful theme for the volume as a whole, but, unfortunately, it does not.

The Rising of the Diggers, was a peasant revolt, albeit a small one, inspired by religion. Leaving aside David Taylor’s belief, expressed in his essay on ‘Gerrard Winstanley at Cobham’, that God did actually speak to Winstanley because God does speak to ‘ordinary men and women in their time’ (p. 41), Christopher Rowland, in his contribution on ‘The Common People and the Bible: Winstanley, Blake and Liberation Theology’, shows how radical and revolutionary opinions do derive from the Bible:

The experience of poverty and oppression is as important a text as the text of Scripture itself and remains in dialogue with it. . . . The God who identified with slaves in Egypt and promised that he would be found among the poor, sick and suffering reveals in everyday life of ordinary people that there is another ‘text’ to be read as well as that contained between the covers of the Bible or of the teaching of the church. (pp. 156–7.)

There is a dialogue between the poor’s experience of oppression and injustice and the stories in the Bible.

Questions about whether the Diggers were anarchists, and whether Winstanley moved from advocating revolution from below to accepting revolution from above,
are not considered in this book. George Woodcock characterises the Diggers as the ‘anarchistic wing of the English revolutionary movements in the seventeenth century’.\(^1\) W. Schenck and Christopher Hill support the view that, originally, Winstanley was an anarchist, although they distinguished between his stance at the beginning of the Digger movement and his position after it collapsed: ‘Of his earlier anarchism there can be no doubt’\(^2\) writes Schenck; and Hill says that in his early pamphlets ‘Winstanley seems to be advocating an anarchist form of communist society, without state, army or law’.\(^3\)

This is evidenced in the vision which Winstanley had on the eve of setting up the first Digger commune on St. George’s Hill, between Cobham and Kingston upon Thames, on 1 April 1649:

None shall desire to have more than another, or to be lord over other, or to lay claim to anything as his; this phrase of ‘Mine and Thine’ shall be swallowed up in the law of righteous actions one to another, for they shall all live as brethren. . . . There shall be no need of lawyers, prisons, or engines of punishment one over another.\(^4\)

Winstanley told Lord Fairfax, the commander-in-chief of the army, in defence of the Diggers:

We were not against any that would have magistrates and laws to govern, as the nations of the world are governed, but as for our parts we shall need neither the one nor the other in that nature of government; for as our land is common, so our cattle is to be common, and our corn and fruits of the earth common, and are not to be bought and sold among us, but to remain a standing portion of livelihood to us and our children. . . . And then, what need have we of imprisoning, whipping or hanging laws, to bring one another into bondage?\(^5\)

People that have no land have been forced by poverty to rob and steal, but, in the Digger commune, they will all have a sufficient subsistence:

If any do steal, what will they do with it? . . . None shall buy or sell, and all the while that everyone shall have meat, and drink, and clothes, what need have they to steal?\(^6\)

J.C. Davis, while agreeing that ‘Winstanley made a number of statements which appear at first sight to have anarchist implications’, maintains that he ‘was never an anarchist

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2 Schenck 1948, p. 104.
4 Sabine 1965, p. 183.
6 Sabine 1965, pp. 198, 201.