

## **GONE TO GLORY: JOHN MERRINGTON**

by Peter Linebaugh [1997]

JOHN MERRINGTON, father and son, husband, historian, communist, and guide, was born in Quetta, Baluchistan (Pakistan) on January 8, 1940, and died in Walthamstow, London (England) on October 26, 1996. He is survived by his wife, Janet, and their son, Anthony, as well as an older son, Luke, from a previous marriage, and by the rest of us, his mates, students, comrades.

William Hogarth also died on 26 October, and 1996 is the centenary of the death of William Morris who lived in Walthamstow. John did not place much weight on chronological coincidences; I mention them to introduce his love for Hogarth and Morris. On his wall hung Hogarth's wicked satire, 'Royalty, Episcopacy, and the Law,' in which the king's face is a gold guinea, the archbishop's is a Jew's harp, and the Lord Chief Justice's a wooden mallet. As for Morris, John loved the designer, admired the militant, emulated the communist, and partly owed his health to the man who saved Epping Forest from the developers, leaving some of its thick hornbeams as a wilderness for future walkers, including John. ('Ah, the grief of the early dead!' groaned William Morris in 'The Pilgrims of Hope' (1886), his poem about the Paris Commune.) These were bits of the English side to John. The Indian side is more remote, and while he began to explore it during the recent phase of his life, he alluded to it mostly with geographic detachment.

Quetta is five and a half thousand feet above sea-level, the southernmost point of a strategic system of roads, railways, and forts whose northern point is the Khyber Pass. Quetta overlooks the Bolan Pass, and provides a market centre for west Afghanistan, east Iran, central Asia to the routes across the Sind and to the port of Karachi. Towards the end of his life John reminisced about his father, an engineer who had built a railway bridge in these mountains. A violent earthquake destroyed 20,000 people in Quetta a few years before John was born. He was not old enough to have many direct memories of the Raj. During the Second World War John made the long sea voyage by steamer through the Red Sea and across the Mediterranean to England, an experience which left a memorable impression on the toddler. He left India behind in more senses than one, not to renew his interest until fifty years later as a scholar, shopper, and good neighbour in Walthamstow.

In August 1994 after a summer when we lived together, he gave me Arthur Waley's translation (1946) of classic Chinese poetry. As a message of friendship and farewell he recited one from the 9th century. An aging governor in a distant province thinks of the court and his friend in youth,

Suddenly I remembered the early levees at Court When you and I galloped to the Purple Yard. As we walked our horses up Dragon Tail Way We turned and gazed at the green of the Southern Hills.

We were not courtiers, governors, mandarins—we were pals. If this was our youth, it is symbolic rendering. Our Purple Yard was the historical project of writing the history of 'crime' during the 18th century. Our Dragon Tail Way was the Marx study group. And the green of our Southern Hills, surely, was the anti-capitalist project we endeavoured to define in the 1970s and the retrospective that was forced on us by the repression that came after. The galloping, walking, and gazing to the imperial levee are symbolic of our own impatience, stamina, and reflection about the anti-capitalist project. That he thought this happened in a far away, youthful time, that our efforts were over, expresses, I think, part of the historic defeat that John felt all around him, from the productivity slavishness of the universities, to the xenophobia of the Falklands War, from the Broadwater Farms police terror to the crushing defeat of the Miners Strike and the once mighty 'English working class.'

## The Purple Yard

John had been a student at Balliol, Oxford. His tutor was Christopher Hill. He finished there in the early 1960s. Ved Mehta, the Indian gossip and name-dropper, cashed in on the Balliol experience thus: 'the best minds in Britain and the world beyond had been gathered at Oxford and Cambridge by a process akin to natural selection.' Mehta says that since there weren't enough colonies to go around (and those that were, were stopping it!), the Balliol chaps had to take to drink, go insane, or commit suicide-for the tradition of the college was to produce colonial governors, etc., etc. What bullshit! Too busy with the nobs to notice the revolt of the Third World or the student movement, he could not observe such determinedly radical histories as John's. John went there from a public school, Bradfield, where he learned the military exercise and engaged in revolt exactly described, he said, in the film *If*. There was nothing at all natural in the selection; it was entirely a matter of class privilege which, to be sure, had trained him to thoroughbred levels of competition, and which John rejected root and branch.

We met in 1969. Edward Thompson introduced us as both about to embark on the study of 'crime' in 18th century London. John was a Londoner, a city that predates the nation or the state. He knew medieval history and was an admirer of Gwyn Williams' history of the London commune of the Middle Ages. John did not like most versions of England that he had heard and read about. He was prejudiced against people with Norman last names. He liked Irish, Jamaican, Indian British. He trod London pavements; he knew some of its nooks and crannies, and many of its imperial lies and secrets. He was both porter and guide for hundreds of visitors-pointing the way, explaining things, opening doors.

We worked together, and I followed his direction, as Izaak Walton says: 'My honest Scholar, it is now past five of the Clock, we will fish till nine, and then go to breakfast: Go you to yonder Sycamore tree, and hide your Bottle of drink under the hollow root of it .... And I give you direction for the making and using of your flies: and in the mean time, there is your Rod and Line, and my advice is, that you fish as you see me do, And let's try which can catch the first Fish.' We never did go fishing together; otherwise I ran to keep pace with him.

I always wondered why John didn't join us with an essay for Albion's Fatal Tree. We wanted him to, because he had a powerful contribution to make-a study of the origins of the London police in the obsessive, obscure figure of Patrick Colquhoun-whose significance seemed obvious. London was the capital of England, England the vanguard of industrial capitalism, capitalism the whole basis of imperialism, which we were fighting against. Q.E.D. (In May 1977 he wrote me about Bentham and Colquhoun 'more work is needed on those "weirdos"-the utopians of capitalist command.') Labouring at a table in Queen Anne's Gate Buildings in Westminster where the Middlesex Record Office used to be, he was developing statistical soundings of London indictments during the 1790s, the crucial decade in the formation of terror as part of the state apparatus.

He admired Braudel's Mediterranean, as well as Goubert on the Beauvaisie, Ladurie on Languedoc, and Chaunu on Seville: these were the olympian, statistical histories of 'everything' in a small area (*histoire totale*, they called it) that appealed to his competitive instincts as well as to his penchant for geography.

Could such techniques be applied to Colquhoun? French scholars developed the idea of 'la structure.' What were the hidden structures of the labour market in this London where Colquhoun and William Blake were contemporaries? During the 1930s Ernst Labrousse had developed notions of the cycle and applied them to the origins of the French Revolution: there is the *longue duree* (with its A phase and B phase), there is the decennial cycle (progenitor of the business cycle), and there is the seasonal crisis. Woe betide the forces of order when the depression of these three cycles correspond! Labrousse smartly defined it as the 'conjoncture economique.' What was the political and economic conjuncture of London in, say, 1801? John had a conception of this project that could not be realized, given the methods of

history-from-below, which he thought smacked of labourism, that we were practising at Warwick's Centre for the Study of Social History.

John assisted tours to France; he studied Althusser in the early 1960s. His life long love of Italy began too with an extended period of study in 1964 at the Gramsci Institute in Rome. His tutor at Balliol, Christopher Hill, had written on Gramsci in *The New Reasoner* (1958). John wrote 'Theory and Practise in Gramsci's Marxism,' for the *Socialist Register* 1968. Its scrupulous phrases in thirty pages, provided a comprehensive survey of the leading concepts in Gramsci's revolutionary thought. It helped to recuperate Marxism from the orthodoxies of the past for the burning needs of the present. Looking back on the piece, we can see that its references to 'western Marxism' and 'western society' made it difficult to appropriate Gramsci's experience to the municipal risings of 1967 when 'Burn, baby, burn!' and 'Two, three, many Vietnams!' were slogans of revolt against capitalism and imperialism, north, south, east or west. Yet, two themes were to remain with John: the first, from Gramsci, was the idea that 'every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher' which John actualized many times over in the study/intervention groups of the 1970s. The second concerned the two moments of coercion and consensus which Gramsci so carefully elaborated in his political theory. This theory of the state certainly posed a challenge to those of us who were contributing to the history of the English management of the class struggle. John admired Gramsci's view that analysis should be 'active' rather than 'descriptive,' and perhaps he admired it too much as it may have prevented him from publishing his work about the origins of police.

Gramsci had to see the working class of Turin in 1917-1920 as producers, not as the abstract labour-power of the Second International. Yet after the late sixties the revolt in the cities and factories was to refuse the entire productivist ethos. Gramsci soon enough found a role in the American Academy. John, in contrast, moved on to the critique of Gramsci. From Tronti and from Alquati John was forming notions of class composition which were utterly alien to the current forms of thinking in England at the time. Since these depended on a prior reading and assimilation of Marx's *Capital*, which was not even completely available in English at the time (much less part of anybody's curriculum), John had to, in a sense, create an audience which he began by forming a *Capital* reading group.

### **The Dragon Tail Way**

Our *Capital* study group met on Sunday afternoons in Islington, from wet November (1969) to chilly February, through the spring and into summer when he could bring out his long table into the garden and our disputes and explications would proceed under the blossoms. I look back to an extraordinary group of people, 'diverse' they'd say now, but then it was truly merely London. Fei-ling from China, Roger Murray recently returned from Tanzania and Ghana, Geoff Kaye an economist from Blackpool, Lizzie Merrington an artist from Tennessee, Beth Waterman an American designer, Clement Maharaj a jazz drummer from Trinidad and close associate of Nello as they called C.L.R. James, Selma James, Nello's estranged wife, Ian Macdonald, the radical immigration lawyer, Andrea Hopkinson, Bernadette a nurse at the Royal Holloway, Stefan Feuchtwang, the anthropologist. The idea was to read, line by line, Karl Marx's *Capital*, and we did, aloud.

There was a conjuncture. Internationally, it consisted of the American war against Vietnam, the after-shocks of the May Strikes in France and the Hot Autumn in Italy, the municipal rebellions in the United States, and the Third World movement against imperialism. In the 'United' Kingdom the civil rights movement had just begun in Ireland. In England, the history workshop movement started at Ruskin College, the Women's Liberation movement held its first conference in Manchester (1970) and C-R groups ('consciousness raising') seemed to appear in every neighbourhood, Big Flame was active at the Ford plants at Halewood (Liverpool) and Dagenham (London), and in Notting Hill the Special Branch had just picked off nine Black Power leaders at the Mangrove cafe. The Marxist orthodoxies were feeling the dragon's breath.

John could fiercely defend an interpretation of a passage in *Das Kapital*. His antagonist was often Geoff Kaye, whose confident lucidity could be a blessing or an irritation. What was at stake in these quarrels? To Geoff it seemed the entire process of economic development was at stake. He relied on Rosdolsky, Kalecki, and positioned himself vis-a-vis Andrew Gunder Frank and Wallerstein, those who were thinking about 'world systems.' John meanwhile was committed to the autonomous creativity of the working class, a creativity which, he argued, was prior to the 'law of value'. The workerists of the late 1940s sought interpretations of Capital in the PTA (paint, trim, and assembly) of the auto plants (one thinks of Marty Glaberman). More especially he sought the wisdom of the Italian intellectuals who learned the Venetian dialect so that they might have such theoretical discussions among the petroleum workers of Porto Marghera. Both sides of this debate had left the CP, the Labour Party, and the 'liberalism' of the CND far behind them. What we were doing was new, we assured ourselves, truly dialectical, neither economics nor labour history.

Another explosive debate concerned wages for housework. Selma James listened as the more experienced exegetes expounded before jumping in with those slight passages in chapter six ('The Buying and Selling of Labour Power') or chapter twenty-three ('Simple Reproduction') which held out a little hope to those who hold up half the sky and whose work is never done. Marx gives highly gendered accounts, but the invisible work can be detected in, for example, 'The value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this special article.' Or, on the next page, 'In contradistinction therefore to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of labour power a historical and moral element.' He is the 'special article,' she the 'moral element'! In chapter twentythree, 'This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the labourer, is the sine qua non of capitalist production.'

Were we going to redefine the working class? Were we going to say that generations had not understood Capital and that their marxism was all wrong? Yes, we were. Some of the understanding we attained was admirably expressed later in Harry Cleaver's book, *Reading Capital Politically* (University of Texas, 1979).

It could not last beyond the summer. We got through the first volume, and by June we are onto the second which is fundamental for understanding the velocity of the capitalist circuits, and the turnover time. This volume provided the clearest distinctions of the various types of capital, enabling the student to detect and name the errors of Adam Smith or David Ricardo. It was only a matter of time before we became correctors of errors. The keenest went on to the Grundrisse. We were beginning the many volumes of *Theories of Surplus Value* and by the time we started quarrelling about productive and unproductive labour, the fire of the dragon was extinguished, though we still clung to the whiplashing tail.

### **The Green of the Southern Hills**

John was a zeroworker. This was the name of a journal we edited in the USA with his help in 1975-6, Zerowork. We published two issues, and folded. Also there was a journal in Italy with that name, lavoro zero which John did not have anything to do with (that I know of). We chose this name as a provocation to those who believed Adam's curse that work was the only way to eat bread. It was open to other kinds of objections, for instance, that we expected other people to clean up after us. It wasn't what was meant, and anyway John did do the washing up. It was something else we were trying to draw attention to with a longer history. After the American Civil War in 1865 the head of the Freedman's Bureau, General Howard, the northerner, said to the newly emancipated slaves, 'Freedom means work.' The thought was similarly expressed in the slogan arching the gate at Auschwitz as well, 'Arbeit Macht Frei.'

Marx's son-in-law had written *The Right to be Lazy*. It was really beyond the pale of polite Marxist

discussion. Yet, the phrase always brought smiles. How did John zerowork then? Curiosity, idleness, dawdling, loafing, he understood. He liked to go on a caper. This meant anything from a boatripe on the Thames to a road trip to Belfast. The journey not the destination was the thing. At the end of the longest pier in the world, at Southend-on-Sea, at least he said it was the longest and it took donkey's years to walk its length, you could duck into a tent for Punch and Judy, or you could lean on the railing and gaze at the sail boats in the broad Nore, which is what John did, thinking of the naval mutiny there in 1798. Later, there was tea with Devon double-cream, strawberries, and waltzing at the pavilion. He could spend the better part of an afternoon finding coffee in Soho, or prosciutto. He favoured the shortening of the working day. I regret that we never had afternoon tea at the Cafe Royale, as he several times proposed that we do. On the other hand, there was rarely a pint jar that didn't need filling.

John wrote, 'Town and Country in the Transition to Capitalism,' *New Left Review*, No.93 (September-October 1975). He complained that it had to be compressed, and that it was too academic. 'But some sparks have managed to get into it, though they need amplification.' The German physician and historian, Karl Heinz Roth, saw the article though he was at the time imprisoned in the High Security Jail in Bochum, Germany, and wrote a detailed critique, linking it to the discussion of the moral economy and the social democratic organization of the social factory. 'You are a wonderfully encyclopedic scholar and representative of the neomarxist historiography,' he wrote to John. He referred to 'the nonwork underworld to working discipline and class consciousness' and to Thomas Munzer's 16th century struggle against the 'social wage freeze.' 'This was a solid underworld base for your discovery of the real relationship between town and country in the crisis centre of European feudalism. This was especially developed within the fringe-area of the classic westeast frontier, the forerunner of Germany.' As a result of this publication John renewed his conversation with Ralph Samuel in History Workshop who agreed, he wrote, that 'the whole area of original accumulation, labour-power, Irish labour, docks &c. needs a new interpretation. But of that-more anon.' That particular anon never came.

There is much in this period that began with the Yom Kippur War (1973) and ended with the 7 April arrests (1979) that remains, for me, too painful to see clearly. Twenty years later looking through John's correspondence it comes back to me, and I cannot form a balanced, or satisfactory, description, much less that 'active analysis' that we need. The historians call them the 'Years of Discontent.' After 1976 the IMF began to rule. Personally, it was an era of splits, of false starts, of brave beginnings, of whispered calumnies, of break-ups, of misplaced defiance, of failed initiatives, of insincere grandiosity. Yet, it was also a time of great value, despite the repression that put an end to it, and which still makes me sweat. Here are some notes.

Beginning in 1973 John participates in a Big Flame Ford base group. He joins collective work with Germans, Swiss, French, and Italians. In 1973 there is an international attempt to organize an anthology of political materials from Italy, 'a 'textbook' of the workers viewpoint,' as Mario Montano called it. 'In the UK there is no possibility of any independent opening through existing channels, reviews, &c.' John attempts to form a new publishing house. By the end of the year he writes that 'after a promising start it got bogged down in the typical London petty bourgeois bog-another casualty I am afraid of the total lack of any sense of political reality or responsibility in "certain circles".' 'Sorry that our first publishing project could not come off. Better luck next time!' In the same year he divorced Lizzie. He married Jenny Smith who gave birth to their son in December 1973. Early 1974 he got a job at the Middlesex Polytechnic. Course on 'Fascism and Anti-Fascism.' 'So at last my political, research and teaching interests can be brought into line. I was very lucky to get it....' Working on a booklet on 'Soviets and Workers Control'.

October 1975, 'the objective situation here, as far as concerns the prospects for *Zerowork* (both readership and contributors) is rapidly improving, under the impact of the crisis and the Labour-austerity measures: split of [Workers Revolutionary Party], two splits from [International Socialism], total confusion on the

Labour left-defeat of Benn, TU left, &c. Even the old-style 'intervention' politics of Big Flame has disintegrated. The main burning question of the day is the international crisis and redefinition of the perspectives of the struggle....' John was active in the discussion preceding publication of *Zerowork*. Of Mario Montano's grand piece, he wrote, 'it needs more concrete analysis of the Malthusian "creation of shortages" &c. and restructuring of the multinational cycle (food, oil, chemicals): more on the "running" of the crisis and role of unions-crucial for UK: and (a more general point) it should (as as an "aside") take issue more with other contending theories of the crisis (e.g. the Mandel-type analysis) since otherwise the polemical value of all this, while implicit, does not emerge clearly or hit hard enough.' John was active in the discussion following the publication of *Zerowork*. 'The time for "finished essays" is over!' 'If the questions are debatable, especially because they are new questions for most of us, they do not appear to be so in this issue.' That spring there was a confluence of *Primo Maggio*, *Zerowork*, and the Conference of Socialist Economists in London. Geoff Kay remembers: '... the credit for making English Marxists aware of developments in Italian theory was due to Johnny and that for a few years in the seventies this affected the whole tenor of debate. Characteristically, when the debate reached its height at the CSE conference John put himself on the margin as an almost detached observer who was surprised by what was going on.'

He separated from Jenny. By March his relations were 'totally cut off.' The politics of 'identity' had begun. Selma James led a policy of gender separatism, with nasty results. Politics was personalized, and odious calumnies were whispered against John. The corrector of errors was himself an error waiting to be corrected. The Toronto comrades accepted the 'autonomy of sectors' and began to speak of 'the white male sector.' John defended a different collective project, 'This does not mean we deny in any way the independent movement of blacks, women, &c. for their own needs, but that we must not let ourselves fall into fixed, sectarian and pre-established positions which close off any debate about the general situation we all are in.'

Meanwhile, he lived in a group home, a kind of commune. Here he cooked, especially root foods, food from underground, like carrots, potatoes, parsnips, and onions. They formed a money group' to research, write, and translate. By November 1976 he was writing me about their interest in Hilferding (preWorld War One, Austrian socialist) and the relationship between the banking sector and the state centralization of credit. To Hilferding, the working class is seen as an exogenous factor to the process of socialization of capital; any dysfunctions were blamed on non-productive sectors, the rentier class.

Repression, 7 April 1979 arrests in Italy. Toni Negri, Guido Bianchini, Luciano Ferrari Bravo, Alise Del Re, hundreds in prison, many thousands of others into exile, including our dear comrade, Ferruccio Gambino. Trial of ideas and writings. John is the contact man for the Italy '79 Committee in London which worked closely with the Committee Against Repression in Italy in New York which had produced the Dossier on Torture and Prison Conditions in Italy 1979-1983. To the shame of the British Left, the old orthodoxies (Hobsbawm was haughty, turning his back) as well as the Peace Movement (usually so eloquent, Thompson was rigidly silent) did nothing. Claire Sterling, Michael Ledeen, and Lyndon LaRouche, vicious American ideologues, helped to organize an international witch-hunt, as Thatcher and Reagan came to power. Italy, once the land of high revolutionary culture, had become political hell. Terror-Agony-Fear.

In this context the publication of the translation of Toni Negri's writings by Red Notes, with whom John found much cooperation and support, must be accounted a major and courageous achievement. *Revolution Retrieved: Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis, and New Social Subjects (1967-83)*, volume I of the Red Notes Italy Archive (Red Notes: London, 1988) whose introductory notes were written by John Merrington. At last, here was a theoretical statement of what had been called the 'workers' viewpoint.' The wonder is not the delay in publication, but publication at all. For me, this is the 'green of the southern hills,' a moment of retrospect, as John looked back, through and past, the terror:

‘These Negri essays provided a theoretical and critical reference point for ongoing debates in the development of this new class politics of communism, based on the liberation of needs and refusal of the capitalist system of work, from its origins in the "workerism" of the 1960s to the movement of "autonomy" in the 1970s.’

### **Jade Tinkling On Your Bridle-Straps**

In the 80s I didn’t hear much of John. He had joined the ‘long march through the institutions,’ and as the Middlesex Polytechnic became the Middlesex University, a combination of John’s own dilatory meandering—he was a great teacher if you were willing to stroll with him, if you were willing, as I said at the beginning, to ‘fish as you see me do.’ Combine his meandering, with the education policy of Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher which required a fast, uniform pace of march, with commands to toss explosives into the trout stream as the best way to get a dinner, and John’s person viscerally refused. Years earlier he had quoted Gramsci’s critique of the Idealists’ conception of education which lacked any ‘organic’ character: it ‘resembled the first contact between English merchants and negro Africans.’ John was unwilling and unable to perform the nefarious role of either slave to, or merchant of, Perfidious Albion. He sought retirement.

Our friendship was renewed in 1993 and especially in the following two summers. He had re-tooled himself as a registered, licensed, London Blue Badge guide. These were poignant summers. He was a survivor. Still, a bon vivant, he struggled with alcohol. No longer a corrector of errors, he told me, ‘the old theoretical moment is over; it’s now academicism.’ Our projects were unfinished, it is true, both the political ones and the historical ones. John had given a huge amount to both. Last summer I sent him a copy of an article about the social theory of Patrick Colquhoun published in 1954 in *The University of Ceylon Review*. More than one child of empire had focussed the microscope of scholarship on this interesting specimen about whom John expatiated so convincingly. Meanwhile, John, equally hopefully, had many valuable suggestions for my work. Nevertheless, I felt he had left the Purple Yard, the Dragon Tail Way, and the Green Hills behind, but not without humour. Quoth John: "I propose to ask myself a question," said the man at Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park, "And you’ll get a damn foolish answer!" a heckler observed.’

The poem he sent me off with in the summer of 1994 continued on after the Purple Yard, Dragon Tail Way, and Green Southern Hills. ‘Since we parted,’ it said,

Since we parted, both of us have been growing old; And our minds have been vexed by many anxious cares. Yet even now I fancy my ears are full Of the sound of jade tinkling on your bridle-straps.

He never went to America. I assumed it belonged to our future. Perhaps it would have entailed a similar voyage that he had made across the Mediterranean in the 1940s. Could an Atlantic crossing be so terrible? Yet, he wanted to give me something exotic, from far away. Hence, this poem, which has touched me so. He was conscious of aging. He took the death of Lizzie hard. Clem’s death, too, was a blow. They both had studied *Das Kapital* with us. We listened again to Jimmy Cliff, ‘Many Rivers to Cross.’

In the early 80s he had met a lovely woman, Janet Withers. They settled down together in Walthamstow. To me this period of his life was full of loveliness. His ability to make new friends was alive as ever, as he did with Michaela Brennan. They shopped in Walthamstow market, visited Queen Elizabeth I’s hunting lodge in Epping Forest, boated on the Lea, and listened to ‘Rigoletto’ together. Did he see himself as the deformed jester in a licentious, murderous court as he played the music to us over and over again stressing the history of proletarian love of opera as well as the great proletarian voices? A wistful song of longing, a popular Italian folk-song, about a Genoese sailor thinking of Columbus, expressed both history from below and the sadness of thousands of Italian political prisoners. He was wonderful with

Riley Ann our daughter, giving her free reign in his beautiful garden, telling her the names of the flowers. On the table was a gardenia with a heavenly scent.

Several times John recommended I read Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (Verso 1985). Its substantive essays relentlessly and desolately showed how English history was turned into an industry and an ideology. John looked at the development with his customary detachment. He couldn't share the nostalgia because he had not bought, to begin with, the Red culture of the CP or the PCI, nor the Forward March of Labour. Nor was he into 'the reimagined splendours of old defeats.' The historian might issue a jeremiad, as did Patrick Wright, or in the case of Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (1994), embrace the possibilities of the new National Heritage industries. John noted these responses but otherwise followed a path into the 17th century parallel to his teachers.

Christopher Hill wrote what seems like a trilogy on Milton (1977), John Bunyan called A Tinker and a Poor Man (1989), and on, more generally, The Experience of Defeat. Edward Thompson held his breath as he discovered the archives of Ludowick Muggleton, a seventeenth century plebeian and millenarian. If that generation of historians turned to the 17th century English revolution with renewed interest, they found in it the Puritanical revolutionary who coped with defeat by firming up doctrine, by rigorous recruitment of followers, and by the nurtured construction of earnest sects. What is the point in calling it the 'bourgeois revolution' when that only makes you forget the poor man, the tinker, the widow, the orphan, the mariner, the angler, digger? John turned to the period as well, but to Izaak Walton who in 1653 in the midst of revolutionary defeat, published *The Compleat Angler*. This became for John, perhaps, his vade mecum, what Pilgrim's Progress (with which it is often compared) was to Hill, or A Divine Looking-Glass or The Acts of the Witnesses of the Spirit were to Thompson as he sought William Blake's antinomian genealogy in Muggletonian writings.

In retirement there is a temptation to mope, hence one must concentrate to enjoy life. Furthermore, it does not come naturally in capitalist society. Therefore, his point of departure from the English Revolution was congenial, practical, unpuritanical, and without the work-ethic. These kind of books pop up now and then, without finding a place in the canon. Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is a false promise: the game is given away in the subtitle, *An Inquiry into Values*, because there is nothing of practical value about motorcycles. Pity. C.L.R. James, on the other hand, in *Beyond a Boundary* while praised far and wide by the politicians is also useful to the cricketer. John, by the way, was proud of the fact that he had engaged C.L.R. James in an extended discussion of their mutual technique in bowling the 'googli' which, as near as I can understand, is a ball which breaks in an unexpected direction from that which the cricket batsman anticipates from the bowler. Angling makes its claims on the subjectivity: a rest to the mind, a cheerer of the spirits, a diverter of sadness, a calmer of unquiet thoughts, a moderator of passions, a procurer of contentedness. Our Lord, says Izaak, prefers the angler to the scribe or the money-changer, a preference shared by John. In Morris' story of the commune, it is a Frenchman, fishing, who tells the English proletarian harvester, of the tale that never ends:

the battle of grief and hope with riches and folly and wrong.

What is it that we of *Midnight Notes* in 1996 might find from *The Compleat Angler*? Having observed the Gypsies in the coppice dividing up their fortune-telling loot, Izaak Walton strolls on a little ways to the bank of a stream near Waltham Cross. He hears the beggars disputing with the zeal of any schismatic or Das Kapital student, before they broke into song,

The world is ours, and ours alone,  
For we alone have world at will;  
We purchase not, all is our own,  
Both fields and streets we beggars fill:



Play bea play, play beggs play;  
Here's scraps enough to serve to day.

This, as it happens, is near to John and Janet's house, and he too listened to his neighbours. What is the history of these commons? Epping Forest! Waltham Forest! What is England seen from the point of view of the trout or the salmon? No sooner is the question asked than solidarity with the Greens and Ken Saro-Wiwa is expressed.

John aspired to an attitude he found expressed in Shelley. Shelley dedicates his long poem 'The Revolt of Islam' (1817) to Mary. The poem itself describes a slave revolt led by women. It is a story of adventure and passion designed to kindle within the breasts of its readers that virtuous enthusiasm to doctrines of liberty and justice 'which neither violence nor misrepresentation nor prejudice can ever totally extinguish among mankind.' His preface is interesting. Writing after the defeat of the French Revolution, his words certainly apply to our own time. 'Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair.' John did not take pleasure from gloom, and he had other similarities with Shelley-both students at Oxford, their love of Italy, their affinity to water especially the blue Mediterranean water. That autumn John sent me a postcard from Ithaca where he had been swimming in the Aegean. John's discovery of Shelley's revolutionary meekness astonished him and he wished to share it.

The stanzas describe a moment of childhood memory and the solemn renewal of a vow.

Thoughts of great deeds were mine, dear Friend, when first  
The clouds which wrap this world from youth did pass.  
I do remember well the hour which burst  
My spirit's sleep: a fresh May-dawn it was,  
When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,  
And wept, I knew not why; until there rose  
From the near schoolroom, voices, that, alas!  
Were but one echo from a world of woes  
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.

And then I clasped my hands and looked around –  
But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,  
Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground  
So, without shame, I spake: 'I will be wise,  
And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies  
Such power, for I grow weary to behold  
The selfish and the strong still tyrannise  
Without reproach or check.' I then controlled  
My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.

And bold. I felt I knew this audacity and what it meant. We could see it in others to admire, if not in ourselves. But to be meek? What could that mean? For me, it has always been ambiguous suggesting the willing slave who tamely submits to oppression or injury. For fear of it, I swaggered forth. But after John had read me this from Shelley, I went to the dictionary and found that it also meant-gentle, courteous, kind, merciful, free of haughtiness and self-will, unresentful.

In fact, the idea imbues the limpid prose of *The Art of Angling*. Sitting in a pleasant meadow whose owner's mirth is quite damped by the law suits of private property, the angler reflects that the owner

could not contentedly gather from the fields, its lilies, Lady Smocks, and cowslips `Blessed be the meek; for they shall possess the earth,' righteously remembers the fisherman.

Certainly, these passages may be read as the product defeat of the Diggers and the dashing of commonist hopes in 1653. Shelley's vows were written in exile following defeats of slaves and Luddites in Barbados and Yorkshire. Now in 1996 the structures and egemonia of the capitalist circuit (the worldwide revival of the death penalty in the two largest economic markets-the US and China, the Structural Adjustment Programs of starvation and austerity, the relocation of production, the feminization of poverty, the recurrence of migration and slavery, the traffic in body parts as planetary phenomena) have overcome the conjunctures which had brought together colonial liberation, Black Power, welfare rights, blue collar blues, and the counter-culture! Quietism is one response. Can we return to some of his original projects? Doubtful, at least not in their original form. But, there is another response to historic defeat besides quietism. Projects take wing: to Chiapas, to India, to Nigeria, to Indonesia.

John in Walthamstow watched the steel bands and the Rajasthan dancers join pride of place in the Walthamstow Village Summer Festival and where William Morris, whose centenary this year John had so wanted to celebrate with an international gathering, said,

Let us grieve then – and help every soul in our sorrow;  
Let us fear – and press forward where few dare to go;  
Let us falter in hope – and plan deeds for the morrow,  
The world crowned with freedom, the fall of the foe

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