

Turning Things Around

Peter Suchin

Down with the Fences!: Battles for the Commons in South London – no author given, Past Tense, 2004

Nine Days in May: The General Strike in Southwark – Jordan Brown and others, Past tense, 2005

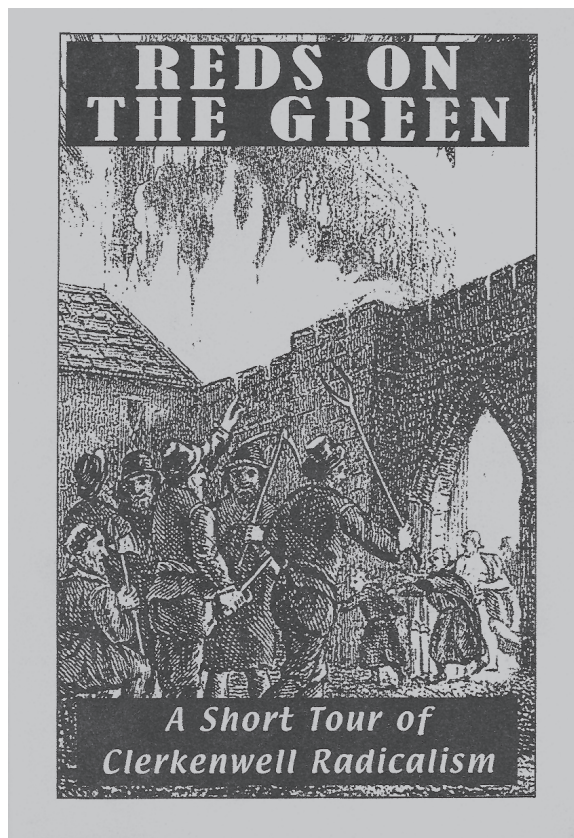
Poor Man's Heaven – The Land of Cokaygne: A 14th Century Utopian Vision – Omasius Gorgut, Past Tense, 2005

Reds on the Green: A Short Tour of Clerkenwell Radicalism – Fagin, Past Tense, 2005

These four pamphlets have been published in connection with the South London Radical History Group, which describes itself on the inside cover of *Down with the Fences* as a “self-organised, anti-hierarchical open forum”. As such they might be regarded as essentially polemical – or at the very least didactic – in intent. Being in part the revised texts of talks given by the SLRHG, and partly written especially for a non-specialist audience, the range of topics itself suggests the necessity of a critique of the contemporary political scene in the UK. One's impression is of an attempt to retain the memory of, or otherwise bring into circulation various historical moments, themes and ideas. Three of the publications focus upon London, the fourth, *Poor Man's Heaven*, looks at the geographically (and historically) wide-ranging desire for a utopia that is the sole province of the poor and the enslaved, an anti-Christian “land of plenty” as expressed in numerous poems, stories and songs.

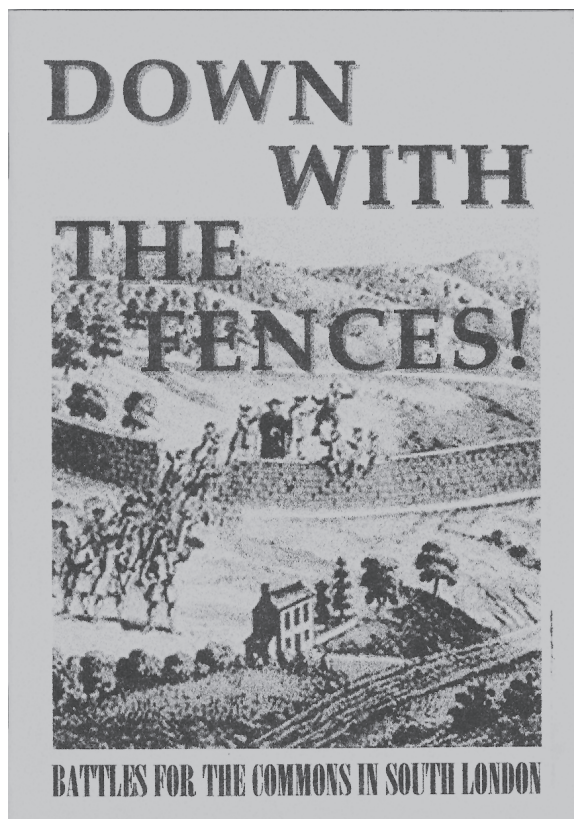
If London is, however, the place to which most attention is given within these works, much of what's discussed here is at least potentially transferable to other territories. An account of attacks upon the Enclosure movement in South London will in all likelihood hold some correspondence with disruptive action that occurred in other quarters. But there will also be, since the booklets aim to provide geographically specific histories, substantial differences. Not only will the particularities of the locales under discussion need to be attended to but London's specificity, as capital city, seat of government, and full-to-bursting metropolis will require consideration too. It would be churlish to point out that a series of publications whose titles clearly indicate the area under examination are in a sense rather restricted or misleading, though at least one of this quartet, in its account of the General Strike of 1926, is precisely the latter, insofar as an otherwise uninformed reader would hardly, I suspect, recognise from their imbibing of this text that the General Strike was a national – and not a merely “London located” – affair.

Although the authors do not always deem to give us their names – raising in the present reader questions pertaining to authorial responsibility rather than communal anti-individualistic, pseudo-democratic research – although the names aren't always supplied, the tone of each text is quite distinct. *Reds on the Green* and *Poor Man's Heaven* are the most scholarly of the group, though source material is, particularly in the case of *Reds...*, not always supplied. *Poor Man's Heaven*, in contrast, appears to cite the majority of its author's sources, also providing a short bibliography for further reading. *Nine Days in May* is in fact a reprint of a work first published in 1976, consisting of an 18 page survey of the main events of the Strike, followed by passages by several people who were actually involved in organising resistance against the government and its supporters fifty years before. *Down with the Fences!*, directly based on a talk presented in March 2003, is the weakest of the four volumes. It's more or less an annotated list of occurrences given in chronological order,



and as such is too condensed and fragmented to do the job it seems its author – or authors – are apparently striving towards: the mapping out of a tradition of revolt against the enclosing and consolidating of land by the rich, to the detriment of the poor and the person of “ordinary” means.

As I have noted, these booklets do not purport to what would in any case be a false neutrality or zero-degree tone. They are engaged and educative tools designed to aid those opposed to the nether world of advertising and consumption that is today so uncritically accepted as merely the normal order of things, the way society is and must be. In their best passages these texts are convincing and clear, informative without being over-technical or avidly academic; at their worst they are woolly and sarcastic, lefty rantings rather than exercises in the intelligent conveying of occasionally complicated information. Finding the



most pertinent pitch of exposition can't be easy, but its important to remember that an audience that has probably not attended university need not necessarily be lacking in intellect or the ability to process complex nuggets of information. One might in any case claim that today university attendance does not guarantee that those who occupy such institutions emerge from the experience mentally more perceptive than when he or she first entered into it. But then perhaps it never did.

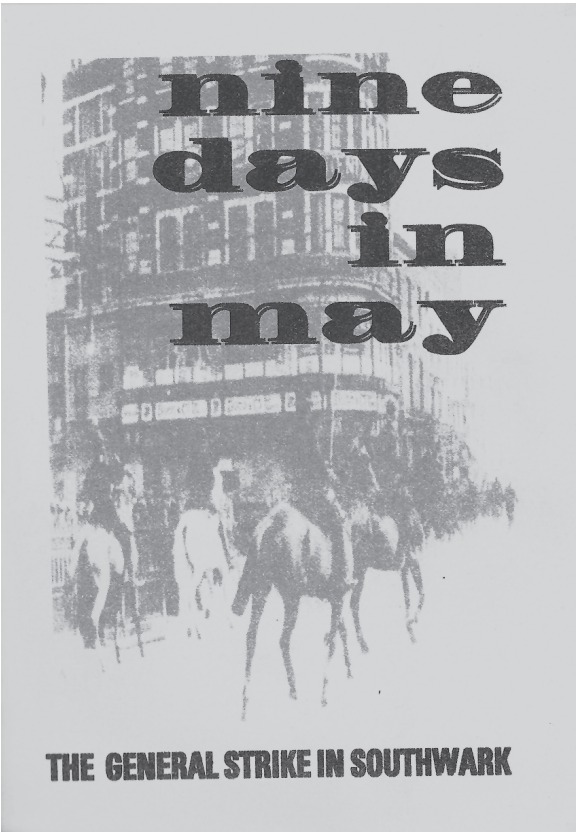
At just over 70 pages in length *Reds on the Green* is long enough to grant the elusive Fagin space to touch upon a wide range of material in a way that allows an elaborate series of internecine actions and passionately-held views – the “Radicalism” to which the pamphlet's subtitle refers – to get a good airing, the length of the text allowing Fagin to go into detail where appropriate, and to situate these moments of dissent within a broader context. Clerkenwell, a place once plentifully supplied with wells, rivers and streams, takes its name from the phrase “clerk's well”, so-called because clerks once gathered in this part of the city on public holidays to perform plays comprised of Biblical scenes. “It has been said”, writes Fagin, “that the history of Clerkenwell is a microcosm of the larger history of London. It's certainly true that whenever there has been major social change and/or unrest in London it has been reflected by events in Clerkenwell, and the unrest often manifested and organised itself here throughout its long history as a radical centre.” (Pp. 5-6) The first instance of insurrection cited is the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, an uprising largely stimulated by the imposition of a poll tax being imposed on all people over 14 years of age. Fagin follows this with a section on the Plague (1665) and the Great Fire of London (1666), the latter disaster having led to a vast influx of tradesmen into the city, their skilled labour necessary for the immense task of its rebuilding once the flames had finally died down. Many of these craftsmen settled in Clerkenwell, laying the basis for its eventual development as an area closely associated with the production of luxury goods for the rich. Such workers operated in cramped conditions and lived on low wages, despite the highly skilled work they carried out. Clerkenwell had plenty of open spaces where workers might meet to hold protests against their poverty and their “containment” within the slum areas in which many of them spent their lives. Access to printing technology (one of the borough's major trades) meant that material critical of the existing order might be reproduced and distributed – this too was a key factor in Clerkenwell's development as an area known for its history of dissatisfaction and dissent.

Following on from the passages on great disasters *Reds on the Green* considers “The Conquest of Measured Time and Space”, wherein Fagin points out that the products made by Clerkenwell's skilled workers were not always to their own advantage. The eventual expansion within the borough of the clock and watch trade, and of the making of sophisticated locks and keys, might well be considered an example of workers constructing the devices of their own oppression. The development of reliable clocks and navigational devices greatly aided the expansion of the British Empire while such clocks were also used as a means of marking out and controlling workers' time. The possession of sophisticated locks and keys (also produced by Clerkenwell employees) controlled access to gateways, doors, cupboards and boxes, dividing up property and space in a manner paralleling that of

the division of time. “Clerkenwell’s watchmaking and locksmithing trades were the motor for the conquest and privatisation of time and space”, Fagin observes, “the technology that defined and measured the new social relationships of capitalism.” (P. 15)

Later sections of the booklet consider in some detail the area’s labyrinthine slums (known as “The Rookeries”), subsequently covering famous local criminals such as Jack Sheppard, Bridewell house of correction, instances of Irish political activity within Clerkenwell, the Chartists, and the resident mavericks Dan Chatterton and Guy Aldred. The concluding section is an attack on the area’s recent gentrification and upon overly fashion-conscious people “who appear to take pride in defining themselves only by how they look, where they are seen, how they make their money and how they spend it.” (P. 65) Such deviations away from factual reporting are not always welcome, even if conveying valid points. It’s as if the writer feels s/he must keep reminding the reader of their author’s radical disposition. There’s a brief dig at Peter Ackroyd’s over-romanticising of London and then a couple of pubs are recommended to the reader – as though these are the last authentic “drinking holes” in England. It’s a rather silly note on which to end after having explained at length just how historically significant a place Clerkenwell once was.

Mysteriously lacking in pagination, *Down with the Fences!* is in fact 32 pages long. It starts off well, with a fair amount of information packed into it, but the writing weakens as one progresses through the text. Jokes and would-be-clever or smug asides replace rigorous research. The unnamed writer’s comments on the Spencer family’s link with the enclosing (i.e. stealing) of erstwhile public or common land is followed by a rather pathetic piece of “wit”: “A concrete pillar celebrating these struggles against the Spencer family was later erected in a tunnel in Paris.” There doesn’t appear to be any reason for this oblique reference to the death of lady Diana Spencer except as an attempt at comic



effect. But the *actual* effect is one of rendering other parts of the text unconvincing, making the overall narrative, insofar as one can find one here, look rather thin. Duff comic assertions are no substitute for clarity of exposition or relevant deviations, by which I mean the expansion of the issue at hand, not pointless mockery that tells us nothing new. Wouldn’t the reader be better served by the supplying of coherently-displayed information than by signifiers of solidarity with the imagined anti-royalist audience of this fairly disappointing piece of prose?

I like the “horse’s mouth” approach utilised in *Nine days in May*. The balance between the survey section and that comprised of recorded remarks from people involved in organising the Councils of Action – there were 131 in operation in 1926 – is good. One gets a lively but, one feels, non-fictitious outline of the central events of the Strike, including descriptions of police violence, the bringing in of tanks and troops, and the generally chaotic relations between the strikers and the powers that be. As with the other pamphlets here discussed, this one is little more than an introduction to the subject at hand, but one that is quite successful within its stated area of concern.

One of the themes included in Omasius Gorgut’s *Poor Man’s Heaven* is “the world turned upside down”, an all too often temporary situation in which what is mainly achieved is the letting off of steam, the relieving of tensions that might



otherwise bubble over into concentrated dissent, in time perhaps becoming a sustained reversal of power.¹ The 1926 General Strike was an unplanned moment of interruption, a proto-revolutionary point of conflict that turned into one more failed battle against the bosses. But the moments of overturning cited by Gorgut are in the main of a different order insofar as they are an intrinsic part of the system that they purport to refute. Gorgut – a Rabelasian name if ever there was one – goes into the matter in some depth, carefully distinguishing between near-universal accounts of a land wherein the poor shall live like royalty unrestrained, and the Christian myth of a glorious afterlife populated only by those who ‘behaved themselves’ (whether rich or poor) whilst on Earth. The imaginary land of Cokaygne is open only to the poor – no rich person may enter therein. Gorgut tracks the Cokaygne legend through its various mutations and modifications, beginning with a version from the fourteenth century and ending with the twentieth-century American song “The Big Rock Candy Mountains”. On the way he delves into Thomas More, Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare, amongst others. The contradictions of the Catholic Church are emphasised, especially its attempts at suppressing itinerant preachers who travelled the country encouraging a reading of the Bible that clashed rather uncomfortably with official accounts. “After the thirteenth century, under the influence of St Thomas Aquinas,” Gorgut notes, “theologians and philosophers increasingly began to argue that private property and class divisions were the natural order of human society.” (P. 21) The unofficial preachers opposed this, directing their listeners to those parts of the Bible wherein the message was not a defence of hierarchy and power but of equality before God.² *Poor Man’s Heaven* concludes on an optimistic note, its author realising that although stories of the land of Cokaygne are inherently idealistic, they also sustain and provoke a desire for the radical transformation of everyday life.

Notes

1. For extended discussion of this and related issues see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, 1984, and also Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Penguin, 1975.
2. See the section on “Religious Wayfarers” in J. J. Jusserand, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, T. Fisher Unwin, 1889.