

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLT

Like any great event in history, the Peasants' Rising of 1381 has come to represent more than simply the sequence of events that make up the story. It has become a lodestone of political sympathies – for the people or for the state, for freedoms or for restraint, for the worker or for the boss. At decisive moments in British history, the memory of the rebels of 1381 has been invoked and fought over.

The way in which the story has been told has always reflected the political antagonisms of the time. Indeed, this is even true of the early chronicles. The chronicles written during Richard's reign, for example, such as the Anglo-French *Anonimale Chronicle*, portray him in a heroic light. Similarly, Jean Froissart in his *Chronicles of England, France, Spain and the Adjoining Countries* (1326–1400) is sympathetic to the English king. An exception to this can be found in the pro-Gaunt sentiments of the author of *Knighton's Chronicon*, whose abbey at Leicester had benefited from Gaunt's patronage. The accounts largely written following the Lancastrian inheritance of the crown – in the line of John of Gaunt – after 1399, however, such as those by Thomas Walsingham (the *Historia Anglicana* and the *Ypodigma Neastriae* (*Demonstrations of Events in Normandy*)) and Thomas Otterbourne's *Chronica Regum Anglæ*, whilst in no way sympathetic to the rebels, portray Richard in a negative and cowardly light.

The general lack of sympathy for the peasants is easy to understand when one considers that many of the chronicles of this era were written by monks at St Alban's Abbey or, as in the case of the *Historia Vitae et Regni Ricardi II* written by the Monk of Evesham, closely followed the accounts given by them.¹ Other accounts written some years after the events of 1381 drew on chronicles written in London. An example is the *Chronicon Westmonasteriense* (*The Westminster Chronicle*), which exonerates the London population, portraying the Kentish and Essex armies as a drunken rabble purely intent on destruction.

In the seventeenth century, the more radical elements of Protestantism identified strongly with the revolt. For them it represented a heroic attempt to restore the freedoms of a mythologized pre-Norman England. The Royalist camp, of course, saw the rising differently. When Charles I refused parliamentary rule in 1642, he invoked the memory of the rising as having been a time when the Commons had brought a 'chaos of confusion' upon England. The playwright John Cleveland, in *The Idol of the Clownes* of 1654, depicted the revolt as an early example of the same kind of subversion that was bedeviling the English nation in his own time.²

By the eighteenth century, the stories of Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, John Ball and the peasants of Kent and Essex were a part of popular culture. Their memories were celebrated in popular songs and derided in events such as the City of London's 'Annual Triumphal Show'. The revolutionary legacy of the Peasants' Revolt was again debated under the impact of the 1789 revolution in France. Edmund Burke, in his vitriolic condemnation of the revolution, referred to the time of the rising of 1381 as a 'dark age'. In his response to Burke in *The Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine vigorously defended the revolt and its captain:

*Tyler appears to have been an intrepid, disinterested man, with respect to himself. All his proposals made to Richard, were on a more just and public ground than those which had been made to John by the barons; and not withstanding the sycophancy of the historians, and men like Mr Burke, who seek to gloss over a base action of the court by traducing Tyler, his fame will outlive their falsehood.*³

Histories of the rising in the modern era have also reproduced the same polarization of interpretations. The most hostile is that written by Charles Oman, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1906. It would be hard to find a better example of a historian resenting their subject matter in the way Oman does. His comments on Wat Tyler speak volumes:

It is probable that he was an adventurer of unknown antecedents, and we may believe the Kentishman who declared that he was a well known rogue and highwayman . . . But

*whatever may have been Tyler's antecedents, we know that he was a quick-witted, self-reliant, ambitious fellow, with an insolent tongue, and the gift of magniloquence, which a mob orator needs. That he was anything more than a bold and ready demagogue there is no proof whatever.*⁴

For Oman the revolt was a scurrilous affair from start to finish, an episode that should never have occurred. To Oman and historians like him, revolt and revolutions are interruptions in the 'normal' flow of history, irrational outbursts that frustrate the patient work of 'good' men and sometimes even the occasional 'good' woman — a queen perhaps — in the general improvement of society. Oman's argument is that changes in English society, such as the manumissions of the serfs, were already occurring and would have continued without the revolt having happened at all.

A moment's reflection reveals the ahistorical notions behind such approaches to history. It is as though history were a thing in itself, a process that is in some sense independent of what human beings do. But 'history', as Marx said, is nothing. It is the conscious actions of men and women that make history the thing that it is. An episode like the revolt of 1381 may take a long time in coming. Slow cumulative economic and political changes are necessary to produce the conditions that eventually explode in rebellion. Indeed, we have seen the thirty-year period over which frustrations and political resentment built up to produce the revolt. We have seen how the impact of the Black Death produced a demographic crisis in England in the middle of the fourteenth century, and how this put the villeins in a position to bargain with their lords over wages to work demesne land. We have also seen how this coincided with the ideological crisis of the Church, the political crisis in the conflict between the Good Parliament and John of Gaunt, and the strain of war. Finally, we have seen the attempt at a feudal reaction as a section of the ruling elite tried to reassert the power of the fragmenting manorial system, which had held the bailiff's rod over the back of the bondsman. A slow process, yes, but one which finally erupted in the revolt of the villein. Slow, quantitative change eventually becomes sudden, qualitative change. The two are inseparable and together make up the totality of the historical process.

In fact the revolt did play a decisive role in putting an end to

villeinage and to the economic basis of feudalism itself. Although there was an initial reaction which was intent on reasserting the power of the manor and which did suppress the peasants for a time, this did not last. The effect of the revolt had been too profound for that. Even the establishment historian G. M. Trevelyan, despite his Whiggish prejudices, acknowledges as much:

The demand for freedom, which had been the chief cause of the revolt, was for the moment crushed . . . The Rising had failed . . . But the memory of this terrible year must certainly have acted in another way besides. The landlord had learned to fear his serf, and fear is no less a powerful motive for concession than love. The peasantry were not tamed by the terrors of royal justice. Unions of villains continued to assert their freedom as before.⁵

The rulers of England had seen what their vassals were capable of. They had stared revolution in the face and they did not like it. The peasants also now saw themselves differently. They had struck hard at the foundations of the feudal order, they had stood before their oppressors as equals and they had negotiated with the king. The relationships and mentalities forming the glue that held society together had changed forever. Also, revolt did not suddenly and completely disappear. Indeed, an attempt at a second rising was made the following year and reports of local revolts and disturbances pepper the history of subsequent decades.

A permanent shift in the national consciousness had occurred. Lords were now more inclined to concede freedom to their villeins when challenged. The number of manumissions granted by the manorial, shire and royal courts increased by the year. Within 50 years villeinage had disappeared from England, at least a century before any other part of Europe.

Another feature of the revolt which was to have profound and lasting consequences was the deep sense of anti-clerical feeling that had been manifested in the attacks on the abbeys and in the execution of Sudbury. The revolt had been permeated with a powerful Christian fundamentalism and a hostility to the wealth and ostentation of Rome. This anti-Papalism was to develop over the next three centuries to find its ultimate expression in the beheading

of the Catholic king Charles I. There is a sense in which, in terms of the economic dislocation and the quickening pace of social change and ideological shift, the seventeenth century could not have happened without the fourteenth. When this longer-term and deeper historical significance of the revolt is appreciated, the narrowness of Oman's judgements stands clearly exposed.

In the twentieth century, a handful of excellent histories of the rising were written by historians associated with the Marxist tradition. Hyman Fagan's book, *Nine Days That Shook England*, published in 1938 by the Left Book Club, was associated with the British Communist Party. The Trotskyism of Reg Groves, co-author with Philip Lindsay of *The Peasants' Revolt 1381*, marks that book also as clearly belonging to the lineage of left socialist writings on the events of 1381. What these books share is an unapologetic celebration of the actions of the peasants and an unambiguous identification with their social experience and with their cause. We should include here also the more analytical Marxist writings of Rodney Hilton. In each case the story of the rising has been marshalled to a particular end. In the case of Fagan it was the ideological struggle against the rise of fascism in Europe. In the case of Lindsay and Groves it was about establishing a non-Stalinist tradition of English revolutionary history writing. For Hilton it was about developing the 'history from below' perspectives associated with the British Marxist Historians group and identifying with the radical movements of the 1960s.

We can see, then, that again and again Tyler's revolt has captured the imaginations of historians and has served as a metaphor for feelings, aspirations and antagonisms of the times in which they have written. This has been true despite the vast social and political changes that have occurred from the time of the rebellion to the present day. It is testament to the power of the story of the revolt that it can inspire each generation in ways that resonate with their own social and historical experience.

In 1381 the peasants of England made a leap of consciousness marking the beginning of a wave of revolt that was to sweep eastwards into central Europe. Crucial to this new way of thinking was the idea of freedom. The manorial system had been breaking up for thirty years before the revolt and with it the particular relation between the lord and his serfs. The labour shortage created by

plague, the escaping of the serfs and the increasing importance of money and waged labour meant that the individual peasant was no longer beholden to an individual lord. The feudal system was breaking down, though the capitalist system that was to follow had not yet really begun. These changes spelt the end of the old relations of patronage and personal duties and obligations. This in turn created the objective potential for a more generalized consciousness of opposition between wealthy rulers and those 'who are more like us'.

All of this had taken the fetters off the imagination of the peasant. Whereas previously they had been unable to look beyond the boundaries of the manor, now they looked far beyond them. The highest expression of this new consciousness was found in the idealism of John Ball and his closest followers. The radicalism of Ball's vision of freedom and of the new society was breathtaking for the age. This was a vision rooted in the *experience* of class, if not yet in the *theorization* of class that the proletarian politics of a very different period was to make possible. It is best described, perhaps, as a radical Christian democracy and a desire to sweep away the power of the lords, cleanse society of corruption and establish a federation of communes.

It is probably too optimistic to suggest that all or even most of the rebels of 1381 were thinking in quite such terms. We can, perhaps, say that at the highest points of the rebellion – on the morning of Ball's sermon at Blackheath and the taking of London, for example – a sense of the potential for really very radical change must have been a part of the excitement of the events. But for most of the rebels, the point of the rising was the abolition of the power of the manor and a concern with personal and economic liberty. In this issue of personal liberty there was a desire for both the freedom to live as one pleased – to marry as one wished without interference from the lord, for example – and the freedom to hire out one's labour to the highest bidder.

We see here for the first time the beginning of a separation – an alienation – of labourers from their labour power. In bondage there was no distinction between the serf as a person and the serf's ability to do work. The serf was there to do the lord's bidding and to work as the lord dictated. But now, with the rise of wage labour, labour power – the capacity to work – had become a thing apart, a

commodity owned by the labourer to be sold on a labour market. Now labourers could see themselves as individuals in a very different sense. Their identity was not one with their ability to work. There was a distinction between the two which made it possible, for the first time in the modern sense, to conceive of personal life with all the inchoate desires for rights and freedoms that went with this.

In all of this we see the double meaning of freedom in history. Freedom is both the absence of necessity and a social relationship. From the moment human societies could produce enough wealth for people to be able to lift their heads and minds beyond the tasks of immediate survival, they had been able to conceive of freedom and leisure. But from that same moment those surpluses had become appropriated and controlled by leisured elites. The first glimmer of the possibility of freedom had become associated with the fact of non-freedom as a result of this social relationship. The desire for freedom was from the outset a political thing.

The peasants had felt the easing of compulsion in their lives as their bargaining position had improved. Now they aspired to freedom in its political aspect. Many were the peasants who had already broken out of the particularity of their relationship with an individual lord. They had a sense of a more general relationship with society. They could, after all, work for any lord. They insisted on a right to their opinion about society and their right to criticize whomsoever they pleased. But in the vision of John Ball this notion of freedom was taken to its most radical conclusion. The lowest peasant was as good as, indeed better than, the highest lord. In Ball's conception of freedom, the relationship is not between the individual peasant and this or that individual lord confined within the manor. It is rather a relationship between the individual and the whole of society and is measured in terms of equality and justice. It was in this sense that the rebels raised the banner of *Piers Plowman* in 1381.

There are the first notions here, perhaps we should say sentiments, of equality, freedom and justice in their political aspects. Those peasants who had already experienced the economic dislocation of the fourteenth century were also those who were the most receptive to the most radical and inspired ideas of the age. It is no coincidence that Ball found his most enthusiastic support amongst the Kentish rebels where villeinage was already a hated

memory. It is also no coincidence that it was mainly the Kentish army that stayed after the granting of the Mile End charters to push the revolution further.

What freedom means, of course, changes from one historical period to the next. The demands and aspirations of social movements and revolutions have a social content that is particular to their time. For the peasants of 1381, freedom meant the right to sell their labour power, the right to sell their surplus and the right to move about without harassment from the sheriff. This was the social content of the demands at Mile End and Smithfield. But we are inspired today by this revolt of more than six centuries ago because of the desire for freedom in a more transhistorical sense. The peasants demanded that their relationship with society be one based on complete equality. It is a desire, often suppressed but sometimes apparent, which spans the whole of human history and which we recognize in ourselves. This is the reason why the peasant revolution of 1381 – really the first revolution – has been important for the revolutionary tradition ever since.

In the end, the rebels of 1381 were not so very different from ourselves. Of course, their social experience was very different. But as human beings they yearned for lives that were radically freer and more equal than the ones they had. They were able to make that leap of imagination from 'things as they are' to 'things as they might be'. They wanted lives of free association and free expression, as do we. In our own age – an age of growing rebellion against exploitation, against injustice and against war – there is a new generation who will find that the voices of the peasants, on that 'bright day of summer', speak to them with an eloquence that they will find exhilarating. To discover that you are not the first is a source of both pride and humility.

It is in this spirit that we should never allow the memory and the stories of Wat Tyler, John Ball and the peasant armies of 1381 to fade.

NOTES

Chapter 1 The Medieval Scene

1. Quoted by J. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, Longman, 1907, p. 12.
2. For a fascinating insight into the trials and tribulations of daily life in the medieval village, see R. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, Verso, 1990, pp. 19–40, and also R. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, Routledge, 1993, p. 31.
3. See C. Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, Hambledon, 1994, pp. 133–65.
4. C. Coulton, *Social Life in Britain from the Conquest to the Reformation*, Cambridge, 1918, p. 308.
5. Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, p. 87.
6. See Coulton, *Social Life in Britain*, pp. 301–6.
7. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, p. 35.
8. For a fuller account of the social divisions of labour and of wealth in the society of this period, see S. Waugh, *England in the Reign of Edward III*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 25–8.
9. Quoted in B. Wilkinson, *The Later Middle Ages in England*, Longman, 1969, p. 202.
10. C. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, Cambridge, 1938, p. 76.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 76–7.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
13. Quoted by Coulton, *Social Life in Britain*, p. 251.
14. Quoted by Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, pp. 21–3.
15. Quoted by Waugh, *England in the Reign of Edward III*, p. 24.
16. For a useful description of the impact of trade on the 'borough economy', see C. Platt, *The English Mediaeval Town*, Paladin, 1979, pp. 93–114.
17. In Coventry the town authorities became so exasperated that they turned to sorcery. They hired the services of John of Nottingham, a worker of spells, to fashion wax figures of the local prior and of the king and then to pierce them with the point of a feather.

Chapter 2 The Making of the Revolt

1. Quoted by M. Prestwich, *The Three Edwards: War and State in England 1272–1377*, Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1980, p. 255.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
3. Quoted from a chronicle known as the Brut, by Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 260.

4. H. Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, Gollancz, 1938, pp. 62–3.
5. Quoted by R. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, Macmillan, 1970, p. 64.
6. J. Ramsey, *Genesis of Lancaster*, Vol. 1, Clarendon, 1913, p. 375.
7. Today this antiquated term has a litigious connotation. Here we can assume it to have meant one who was given to complaint regarding their treatment and conditions.
8. Quoted by Helen Jewell in 'Piers Plowman – a poem of crisis', in W. Childs and J. Taylor (eds), *Politics and Crisis in Fourteenth Century England*, Sutton, 1990, p. 67.
9. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, p. 76.
10. A. Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, Longman, 1992, p. 400.
11. D. Seward, *The Hundred Years War: The English in France 1337–1453*, Atheneum, 1978, p. 113.
12. Quoted by W. Ormrod, *The Reign of Edward III*, Yale University Press, 1990, p. 36.
13. See the account given by G. Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy*, Thames and Hudson, 1968, pp. 140–85.
14. G. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, Longman, 1915, p. 80.
15. Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 285.
16. This picture of Ball is given to us by the contemporary chronicler Jean Froissart. Quoted by Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, p. 197.

Chapter 3 The Revolt Begins

1. C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, Oxford, 1906, p. 27.
2. E. Fryde, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, The Historical Association, 1981, p. 15.
3. For an illuminating explanation of the symbolism of these late-fourteenth-century popular verses, see R. Hilton and H. Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1950, pp. 81–9.
4. Quoted by H. Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, Gollancz, 1938, p. 107.
5. This portrayal of events was given by the Elizabethan historian John Stow. Quoted by P. Lindsay and R. Groves, *The Peasants' Revolt 1381*, Hutchinson, 1950, p. 82.
6. This passage can be found in the medieval script known as the *Anonimale Chronicle*. Quoted by M. Collis, *The Hurling Time*, Faber and Faber, 1958, p. 245.
7. John Shepe is an assumed name. The reference to St Mary's parish of York and to the city of Colchester makes it clear that Ball is referring to himself.
8. Hob the Robber was the popular name for Robert Hales, who had become the king's treasurer six months before the rising. He was a hated figure.
9. This is a reference to Langland's poem, *Piers Plowman*. In the poem Piers

Plowman goes in search of those who are pure in spirit and meets 'Do Well', who protects those who live by their own labour, and 'Do Better', who helps those who are in need.

10. This explanation of what Stow referred to as the 'dark riddles' of these verses is given by R. Hilton and H. Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1950, pp. 100–3.

Chapter 4 The Taking of London

1. It was Bolingbroke who would later overthrow and execute Richard, recently returned from his plunder in Ireland, in a violent coup. This became known as the Revolution of 1399.
2. N. Saul, *Richard II*, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 63.
3. From Stow's translation of the *Chronicon Angliæ* quoted by R. Hilton and H. Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1950, pp. 111–12.
4. Quoted by Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, p. 113.
5. Quoted by P. Lindsay and R. Groves, *The Peasants' Revolt 1381*, Hutchinson, 1950, p. 102.
6. See the account of these tensions given by R. Webber, *The Peasants' Revolt*, Dalton, 1980, pp. 62–3.
7. The *Anonimale Chronicle* suggests the probably exaggerated figure of 100,000 peasants in London on 13 June.
8. The Knights of St John had been founded in the twelfth century and had provided hospitals for the treatment of pilgrims who had fallen ill on their journeys to the Holy Land. Along with the Knights Templar, the order had risen to a powerful position in society by virtue of its involvement in the pilgrimages and murderous crusades of that era. The prominence of the Knights was reflected in the fact that their prior, Robert Hales, had been recently appointed as the king's treasurer. Following the suppression of the rising, the Knights had to be forced to return by a royal edict after they had abandoned their uniforms and fled in fear of their lives.
9. Quoted by H. Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, Gollancz, 1938, p. 175.
10. Quoted from Charles Oman's translation of the Anglo-French *Anonimale Chronicle of St Mary's*, York, in C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, Oxford University Press, 1906, p. 195.
11. Quoted by M. Collis, *The Hurling Time*, Faber and Faber, 1958, p. 268.
12. From the *Dictionary of National Biography*, quoted by Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, p. 168.
13. From the *Anonimale Chronicle*, quoted by Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, p. 189.
14. Quoted from the chronicles by M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century 1307–1399*, Oxford, 1988, p. 411.
15. From the *Anonimale Chronicle of St Mary's*, York, in Oman, *The Great Revolt*, p. 198.

16. 'Total peace': in other words, complete acceptance of this new order. Quoted by Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, p. 195.
17. From the *Anonimalle Chronicle of St Mary's*, York, in Oman, *The Great Revolt*, p. 198.
18. Quoted by Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, p. 227.
19. Lindsay and Groves, *The Peasants' Revolt 1381*, p. 128.

Chapter 5 Repression and Continuing Revolt

1. Mousehold Heath was to serve as the mustering site of another English people's rising when Robert Kett gathered his forces there in 1549.
2. E. Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381*, Cambridge, 1896, p. 53.
3. C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, Oxford University Press, 1906, p. 127.
4. Quoted from the *Chronicon Angliæ* in Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, p. 82.
5. Quoted from Stow's account by H. Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, Gollancz, 1938, p. 252.
6. Quoted in L. Cowie, *The Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt*, Wayland, 1972, p. 114.
7. It is sad to have to note a single exception to this otherwise truly impressive aspect of the revolt. John Wraw, leader of the East Anglian rebellion, turned king's evidence and betrayed his lieutenants. As is so often the case, he did not in so doing earn the respect of his captors and he too went to his death at the hand of William Ufford.
8. Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, p. 256.
9. This story is well told by P. Lindsay and R. Groves, *The Peasants' Revolt 1381*, Hutchinson, 1950. The account given here leans heavily on their narrative.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
11. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 147.
12. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 148.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
15. W. Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1977, pp. 110–11.

Chapter 6 Reflections on the Revolt

1. For an authoritative account of the political motives behind the early chronicles, see L. Duls, *Richard II in the Early Chronicles*, Mouton, 1975.
2. See the fascinating account of the political use of the legacy of the rising in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries given by A. Dunn, *The Great Rising of 1381*, Tempus, 2002, pp. 149–52.
3. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 151.

4. C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, Oxford University Press, 1906, pp. 36–7.

5. G. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, Longman, 1915, p. 254.

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The aim of this book is a modest one. It is to tell the story of one of the most extraordinary episodes in English history in a manner that is, hopefully, accessible, exciting and enjoyable to the reader.

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From the Preface

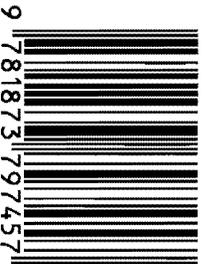
When Adam Delved and Eve Span is a new introductory history of the inspirational English peasant rising of 1381. Against the backdrop of fourteenth-century England – including the daily struggle of peasants for food and justice, and the devastation wrought by the Black Death – the book recounts the events of the Peasants' Revolt, both in London and in the regions, conveying their breathtaking speed and bringing rebel leaders such as Wat Tyler and John Ball to life. Combining a well-grounded historical setting with an account of the events that deliberately stresses the excitement of the rising, this short history is both a good, accessible 'read' and an appetizer for deeper study.

Mark O'Brien is a research associate in social policy at the University of Liverpool. A lifelong socialist and trade unionist, he has stood twice as a Socialist Alliance candidate in Liverpool. His previous publications include *Perish the Privileged Orders: A Socialist History of the Chartist Movement*.

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