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A Thousand Landless Years

Chris Wood

Names like Gerrard Winstanley and Robert Kett¹ have left a living legacy in the land. Many of these heroes seemed to fail in their campaigns - and died for the cause. But their causes are not lost - their spirits live on in the campaigns and successes of today's activists. And behind the popular support these activists enjoy, there is a mythic stream, continually renewed, dating back nearly a thousand years to the Norman conquest.

Blood in August

In 1549, there was injustice and unrest in the land. Wealthy landowners were enclosing common land for grazing, forcing ordinary people out of their homes and livelihoods. There were peasant demonstrations across Southern England and the King was an inexperienced boy, whose decisions were taken for him by a 'Protector', himself not happy with the enclosures, but more concerned with law and order.

That July, in the Norfolk market town of Wymondham², people took the law into their own hands and started tearing down enclosers' fences. When they came to those of Robert Kett, he was convinced by their arguments and joined them in pulling down his own fences. Kett was a contented yeoman farmer, tanner and, with his brother William, was responsible for the saving of what remains of Wymondham Abbey from destruction following the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In his fifties, Kett had everything going for him, but he elected to lead the popular movement in a march on Norwich - then England's second city - to press their demands for fairness. This was no socialist revolution, merely a call for justice within the traditional social framework - indeed, Kett and his following remained loyal to the King at all times. The march assembled at what is known as Kett's Oak, outside Wymondham, on 9th July.

Refused entry to Norwich on the West, Kett skirted the city via Bowthorpe and Drayton, before setting up camp to the East, on Mousehold Heath, on the 12th of July. Then, Mousehold stretched much further south than does the modern remnant,

and one centre of Kett's camp was at the abandoned St. Michael's chapel, of which a ruined wall still remains, on a steep hillside today called Kett's Heights overlooking the city to the North East, and once known as Kett's Castle (*right*).

The camp of thousands of people (men, women and children) was organised on a just basis and criminality was controlled, even when the fighting began, with grievances aired and justice dispensed at 'the Oak of Reformation'. Kett's people sought the co-operation of the City, but the gates (at Bishop's Bridge) were closed to them, so the rebels took them by force. A royal army sent against them was defeated, despite the inclusion of mercenaries from as far away as Italy.



However, a subsequent Government force pushed Kett out of the city. Realising the tide was turning, Kett's host moved off Mousehold to a place, probably to the North of the city, known as Dussindale, where an old prophecy said that there would be a great victory. Unfortunately, and predictably, the victory belonged to the Government forces and 3000 Norfolk people were slain on 27th August. No-one is sure where they are buried - possibly in a mass grave to rival those in Kosovo. Robert and his brother were taken to London and tried for treason. On 7th December, William was hung, with bitter irony, from Wymondham Abbey, and Robert from Norwich Castle, in chains.

Kett's fight for justice could be seen as doomed from the start, but, along with other events, it sowed a seed. Who knows if we would have the degree of freedom and democracy we have today if it had not been for Kett? Indeed, local historian, John Pound, sees the perceived threat of a repeat rising of the poor in Norfolk as significant in the establishment of the first Poor Law.

The story of Kett's Rebellion carries with it other echoes too. His vision of justice and livelihood for the ordinary people, the sacrifice of so many lives in August - at harvest time - and the significance of the oak tree ties in uncannily with aspects of the festival of Lammas.

At this time, the spirit of the grain, John Barleycorn or the Corn King if you will, is cut down in his prime to provide sustenance for the people, with a seed sown for new life next year. It is a time of sacrifice, of tension, of fretting about whether to leave the crop a few more days for the grain to swell some more, and risk its destruction in a sudden storm, symbolised by the dark symbol of Lammastide, the blasted oak. The oak appears elsewhere in myth and legend, being sacred to the Anglo-Saxon Thunder God, Thunor, who also concerns Himself with the livelihood of the common folk, and to Robin Hood, archetypal spirit of the wildwood and friend to the poor.

What's more, there are patterns in the land. One thinks of the story of William Rufus, who, in 1100, died in an oak tree in a hunting accident. About 1500 years before Kett, Queen Boudicca of the Iceni took a stand against injustice and for the people and the land, leaving the crops standing in the fields - and met a fate similar to that of Kett.

Both they and their people made the sacrifice necessary to provide hope for the future.

There are many subtle parallels between the stories of Kett and Boudicca. Kett's in comparison was the more successful, save that it is not a comparison. As T.H. White gave as Merlyn's final lesson to King Arthur, immediately prior to his fateful final battle with Mordred's forces and apparent fruitless demise³:

"You will fail because it is the nature of man to slay, in ignorance if not in wrath. But failure builds success and nature changes. A good man's example always does instruct the ignorant and lessens their rage, little by little through the ages, until the spirit of the waters is content..."

It took a long time for Kett's image to be rehabilitated. His branding was traitor until the twentieth century. Norwich City Council at last admitted the designation 'hero' in 1949, 400 years after its predecessors at first connived with Kett, then relievedly put themselves under the Earl of Warwick's protection. A commemorative stone was placed in the wall of the Castle, Robert Kett's site of execution.

In 1999, Norfolk people celebrated the 450th anniversary of Kett's Rebellion, with a moving free play in parks and schools, a festival in the Kett's home-town of Wymondham, a commemorative ale brewed by Norfolk's Woodforde's Brewery and the honour of commemoration in the 1999 logo of the annual CAMRA Norwich Beer Festival. But the City Council, perhaps still afraid for its decorum, remained silent. Six people laid a wreath, spoke and sang at the Castle plaque on the date of the execution.



As well as remembering Kett, people are still striving for access to land. The land-rights campaign, The Land Is Ours marked the 450th anniversary of Kett's rebellion by setting up camp at the former David Rice Hospital in Drayton, to the North-West of Norwich, drawing attention to the plight of the site and to the parlous state of the neglected and vandalised buildings there (*below*). They were evicted, but managed to stimulate local people to carry on the campaign to try to safeguard public access to the grounds (although unfortunately it petered out before achieving very much).



Direct action successes today

The Land Is Ours is perhaps best known for its occupation of the derelict Gargoyle Wharf in Wandsworth, London, four years ago, which was a key factor in the stimulation of local action to attempt to gain development of the site of benefit to the community⁴.

T.L.I.O.⁵ supported activities marking another important anniversary in 1999, that of the Diggers, who occupied land to cultivate it in 1649. The organisation also campaigns for changing planning attitudes towards people living on and cultivating the land in a sustainable, low-impact fashion, something of which both Kett and Winstanley would have approved, co-ordinated through T.L.I.O.'s planning office, Chapter 7⁶.

Sometimes occupations, linked crucially to more conventional campaigning, succeed in saving sites from destruction or being taken from local people, sometimes they don't, but they do usually succeed in raising public awareness - it is direct action that the media likes, because it makes a good picture. The local Evening News was very supportive of the Drayton occupation, for instance. As with Boudicca, Kett and White's Arthur, even losing the war can be a success.

Perhaps the classic recent example of this is the way that non-violent direct action at the sites of road construction, such as Twyford Down, Newbury, Batheaston and Wanstead built on the vital efforts of conventional campaigns and affected popular opinion so much that, when Treasury cuts bit, the then Government felt it politically safe to cut drastically the road-building programme⁷.

Outlaws of Merrie England's Greenwood

This popular support for direct action campaigners is worthy of further inquiry, for it is part of a modern cultural trend, in Britain at any rate. The modern diggers of tunnels in the woods, under the course of roads and runways, being pulled out by the local Sheriff's men at Fairmile Camp, in front of the massed cameras of the media, left many thinking of other outlaws in another forest battling against another Sheriff. And they are already celebrated in folk song⁸.

Outlaws hold a particular fascination. Whatever their real crimes, they have adopted a lifestyle that at once challenges and inspires ordinary, law-abiding people, as they go about their nine-to-five round. But also, the old motif of outlaws hiding and living in the forest has taken on a new meaning in the modern age.

After the industrial revolution and clearances the cultured image of the countryside changed to one of a rustic idyll in comparison with the smoke-laden, expanding industrial city, and the 'pre-industrial' rural landscape became 'Merrie England'. This was part of the powerful cultural stream that has led to such apparently diverse movements as twentieth-century Pagan Witchcraft and the Greens.

It is interesting to note the rôle of religion in this development. Poets such as Keats and Wordsworth put pen to a pantheist, neo-pagan impulse. Marion Shoard⁹ notes

Wordsworth's influence on freedom-to-roam campaigners. Hutton¹⁰ charts the rise of modern Paganism as a self-aware religion in part from this cultural genre. The right-to-roam campaign has been part of the Green movement, which itself has produced something that is between philosophy and religion in the form of Deep Ecology and the spiritual clothing attached to James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis. Yet the Bible played a key rôle in the development.

It was the English translations of the Christian scripture which inspired the seventeenth century Diggers, now at last aware of what the New Testament message actually was. Similar revelations inspired Scottish anti-clearance protests in the nineteenth century, when the Bible was translated into Gaelic. The realisation that all men were equal before God and that the land was everyone's equal property meant conventional land-ownership and the treatment of tenant farmers and other low-status people had to be questioned. This belated discovery of the real Christianity clearly had a powerful effect, just as a new pantheist, Pagan spirit was arising.

But, whatever the label, a modern mythic landscape has developed, with its Dreamtime Other World in the form of the Greenwood, or Wildwood. And the outlaw who reigns supreme in this world is, of course, Robin Hood.

The last two hundred years has been a real melting-pot of mythic themes. Wholly new concepts have emerged and been moulded onto older symbols. Lady Raglan may have been mistaken in her association of foliate heads on medieval church roof bosses with Green Men of folk performance and with ancient vegetation spirits, but she gave us (or perhaps was a channel for) a new symbolism that is valid for today. Many street processions and ceremonies may be relatively modern inventions or recreations, but they speak to us of other ways, and are themselves dynamic expressions of a living creative stream.

This after all is what matters in myth: whilst it can be instructive and grounding to tease out where different motifs came from and when they arose, it is the way they speak to the modern mind which counts. Today Robin Hood is the "Green Lord of the Wildwood", as John Matthews puts it¹¹, today his Greenwood consort is Maid Marian, and today (to many) he is the growth of Spring, with the tension of that season in his bow, the Lord of the light half of the year, who transmutes in the darker half into the horned Lord of the Wild, even Herne the Hunter, as so powerfully portrayed in the 1980s T.V. series *Robin of Sherwood*.

To see history in the light of modern cultural preoccupations is not necessarily to apply *post hoc* reasoning or extrapolate from a mental construct. Cultural streams, new mythical and spiritual metaphors do not arise simply from the human mind. They are filtered by that mind, but they come from a deeper source, as mythic structures appropriate to today's needs. The patterns are there in history, even if not perceived at the time. The desire to link the stories of Robert Kett, for instance, with the legend of Robin Hood is not just a modern whim: they have patterns in common, shared archetypes.



Likewise, it is surely no accident that T.H. White introduced Robin Hood into the Greenwood in his version of the Arthurian legend¹². As well as the mythic forest being the scene of the quests of Arthur's knights, there is a common pattern in the two legends.

Running through the grail legends is the figure of the Wounded King, whose suffering is reflected in that of the land, become Waste Land¹³. Arthur is the Wounded King, as he cannot relate properly to Guenevere, his wife, Queen and, indeed, Sovereignty (representing both his rulership of his own self and his partnership with the land). He even sends Lancelot to collect her for their wedding, rather than go himself. Guenevere turns to Lancelot, who fulfils part of the kingly responsibilities to her. Similarly, in the legend of Robin Hood, the King is 'wounded', in that he is unable to relate properly to his land. Indeed, 'the King' himself is divided, in one of two forms.

On the one hand, there is the legendary dichotomy of the good King Richard, held captive in a distant land, and the despotic and uncaring Prince John, in whose charge the land rests (actually a reversal of their historical characters). On the other, is the underlying tension in the ballads between the cruel Norman overlord (whether Sheriff or Bishop) and the English people and their land. Robin brings the missing qualities of kingship from the Greenwood. He is the outlaw consort to Sovereignty, legitimised by Marian as is Lancelot by Guenevere.

And so it is with the story of Robert Kett. King Edward VI is a minor, unable to take on the full rulership of the land. Power is exercised for him by a Council of supposedly equal nobles, but led (against the late King Henry VIII's wishes) by a 'Protector', Lord Somerset, who is later deposed by Kett's vanquisher, Earl Warwick.

The 'King', that is the power in the land, is 'wounded' in the Arthurian sense. Socially, there is a Wasteland, as people are thrown off land and conditions worsen as the positive side of feudal society disappears along with the negative, as that society itself decays under the encroachment of the new capitalism. The King cannot do anything; his 'Protector' appears to vacillate, and is in any case rivalled in the Council.

In one small, but politically significant part of the land, where national machinations have left the ruling nobility (the local representative of the King) either in the Tower or preoccupied, one of the many popular risings which occurred across the southern half of England that summer of 1549 begins to stand out amongst them, and even come in some ways to eclipse the Cornish rising of the Spring. Kett brings the missing kingship to a part of Norfolk. He sets up a new form of fair government on the Heath, under the Oak of Reformation in Thorpe Wood, subject to the King, but doing the work of the King in his political absence - a model late-feudal state, the nearest thing to democracy then imaginable.

Another figure walking the forest paths of the modern mythic landscape is Ellis Peters' twelfth-century Benedictine monk, Brother Cadfael. The pattern is here too. Popular fiction is as important to long-term cultural streams as is 'high' culture - indeed both the T.V. redactions of Robin Hood and the mediæval ballads are popular media.

Cadfael is an amateur - and highly successful - detective, a herbalist and discreet, understanding confidante, and one who sees the hidden currents in the confusing

activities going on around him. He is an archetypal wise-man in a safely Christian context, quietly bringing justice to a world where political power is disputed between King Stephen and Empress Maud, from his workshop and gardens not only outside the jurisdiction of the secular authorities, but also a step removed from the abbey - a cottage on the edge of the woods, as it were.

He is of course 'married' to the Church, and 'she' takes on the rôle of Sovereignty, legitimising the influence of the good brother in the affairs of a divided and dangerous kingdom, if at a local level. Within that, there is Cadfael's particular devotion to 'his' saint, Winifred, as well as his relationship with two human female characters.

With these popular rôle models¹⁴, peopling the Greenwood of the modern mind, it is not surprising that direct-action campaigners have been able to seize the popular imagination and swing the community behind them. The projects they oppose are imposed from above, often considered essential to the national economy, and in fact carried out to benefit the expansion of the global market. Our politicians pander to multinational corporations. Interest rates are set according to flows of virtual money, whilst mortgage-holders cannot know from month to month whether they can afford to pay. We are beguiled into giving up our sovereignty to a continent-wide bureaucracy; to footloose foreign companies for jobs, instead of creating our own; to the false gods of technical progress, rather than ensuring healthy food and a healthy land.

Our society is out of touch with the land - any land - and our rulership is quintessentially wounded. The outlaws of the threatened forest, water meadows or urban wasteland are bringing us our lost kingship.

Can we heal our Wounded King?

Notes and References

- 1 A good reference for the story of Kett's Rebellion is Adrian Hoare (1999) *An Unlikely Rebel: Robert Kett and the Norfolk Rising, 1549*, published by Geo. R. Reeve Ltd., 9-11 Town Green, Wymondham, Norfolk NR18 0BD, at £3.95 (I.S.B.N. 0-900616-55-5).
- 2 Pronounced 'Wyndham'.
- 3 In his intended conclusion to *The Once and Future King* (1958), published later and separately as *The Book of Merlyn* (1977, Collins), pp. 127-8.
- 4 See 'Pure Genius Loci?' *Place* 4 (Autumn 1997).
- 5 The Land Is Ours: www.tlio.org.uk.
- 6 Chapter 7, the planning office of The Land is Ours.
- 7 See Chris Wood's and Philippe Blancher's article in this edition of *Place*.
- 8 For instance 'Digging Down', by Show of Hands, and 'Cold Heart of England', by Steve Knightley.
- 9 Marion Shoard (1999) *A Right to Roam* O.U.P.
- 10 Ronald Hutton (1999) *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* O.U.P.

- 11 John Matthews (1993) *Robin Hood: Green Lord of the Wildwood Gothic Image*.
- 12 *The Once and Future King (op. cit.)*.
- 13 See John Matthews (1997) *Healing The Wounded King: Soul Work and the Quest for the Grail Element*.
- 14 Note that myths and fairy tales are not to be interpreted literally on the level of the individual. Robin Hood, Arthur, Lancelot and Cadfael are all men, and Marian and Guenevere are women, certainly, but they represent respectively masculine and feminine aspects of ourselves, so that we can indeed should) identify with both Robin and Marian, whether we are men or women.

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