

JUBILATING; OR, HOW THE ATLANTIC WORKING CLASS USED THE BIBLICAL JUBILEE AGAINST CAPITALISM, WITH SOME SUCCESS

by Peter Linebaugh

1: JUBILEE. Etymologically, jubilee comes from *yobel*, a Hebrew word meaning "ram's horn." Ever since, it's been associated with music, a horn, a cornet, a trumpet, and later with singing. The cornet descends from the shepherd's *cornu*; the trumpet and bugle from the Roman soldier's *buccina*; these horns are instruments of gathering and militance. In the West Indies and the South Sea Islands the spiral conch emits a very large sound. It was used by the Tritons of ancient mythology, and by the Haitian slaves on 21 August 1791 as a call to the war of liberation in the first successful slave revolt of modern history. The first thing about the jubilee, then, is that it is heard.

You shall send the ram's horn around. You shall send it through all your land to sound a blast, and so you shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberation in the land for all its inhabitants. Leviticus 25:9-10.

The second thing about jubilee is that it is old. You can find it explained in the Old Testament, mainly in Leviticus 25 but elsewhere too. It comprises seven ideas. First, it happens every fifty years. Second it promises the restitution of the land ("it shall then revert to the original owner," 25:28). Third jubilee calls for the cancellation of debts. Fourth it frees slaves and bond-servants ("when your brother is reduced to poverty and sells himself to you, you shall not use him to work for you as a slave," 25:39). Fifth, jubilee is a year of fallow ("it shall be a year of sacred rest for the land," 25:5). Sixth, it is a year of no work ("you shall not sow, and you shall not harvest the self-sown crop, nor shall you gather in the grapes from the unpruned vines, because it is a jubilee, to be kept holy by you"). Seventh, and for want of a

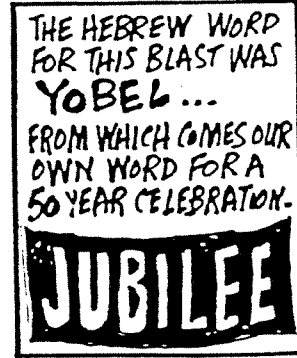
better expression, jubilee expresses divine sovereignty ("the land is mine, and you are coming into it as aliens and settlers," 25:23).

A prevailing view is that jubilee was an anti-accumulation device, similar to the potlatch or the carnival, that actually preserved accumulation. In placing restrictions upon debt, slavery, and landownership, jubilee strengthened a social system based upon money, credit, and exploitation. It was the brake that kept the motor running. Westbrook writing in the *Israel Law Review* says jubilee summarized the release law, the redemption law, and the fallow law common to the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians as well as the Israelites. It was a normal legal and agrarian safety-valve of ancient times.

This reduces justice to the opinion of judges. The liberating righteousness that is the essence of jubilee becomes the pre-tidigitating legalism José Miranda, the Mexican liberation theologian, warned against when analyzing the meaning of the Hebrew word, *mispat*, which signified justice or righteousness. Miranda would understand the critique of the American prisoners who say "in the halls of justice the only justice is in the halls." The theophany of the Old Testament arises only and exclusively from *mispat*, which itself arises from the cry of the oppressed, or *sa' aq/za' aq*, a far cry from the "just us" of ruling cliques.

Jubilee has a revolutionary meaning in our struggle today, especially in the base communities of the world. This is suggested by two examples, Central America and Palestine. Many of the base communities in Central and South America follow liberation theology. One of its theologians, Gustavo Gutiérrez, in *A Theory of Liberation* (1971) wrote, "poverty contradicts the very meaning of the Mosaic religion. Moses led his people out of slavery, exploitation, and alienation of Egypt." A liberation

Word for Word



theologian from Palestine, Naim Stifan Ateek, writes in *Justice and Only Justice* (1989), "the land of Canaan really belongs to God" not to the Israelis. He explains further, "In Leviticus 25:23, the divine claim to the land is so strongly emphasized that the Israelites are regarded as strangers and foreigners themselves."

2: JUBILEE. To evaluate the Jubilee biblical text we need to know something of ancient Hebrew history. However before delving into that, let's sing a song. In England the suggested tune is "God Save the King," in America it is called "America."

HARK! how the trumpet's sound
Proclaims the land around
The Jubilee!
Tells all the poor oppress'd,
No more they shall be cess'd,
Nor landlords more molest
Their property.

Rents t'ourselves now we pay,
Dreading no quarter day,
Fraught with distress.
Welcome that day draws near,
For then our rents we share,
Earth's rightful lords we are
Ordain'd for this.

Now hath the oppressor ceas'd
And all the world releas'd
From misery!
The fir-trees all rejoice,
And cedars lift their voice,
Ceased now the FELLER'S noise,
Long rais'd by thee.

The sceptre now is broke,
Which with continual stroke
The nations smote!
Hell from beneath doth rise,
To meet thy lofty eyes,
From the most pompous size,
Now brought to nought!

Since then this Jubilee
Sets all at Liberty
Let us be glad.
Behold each man return
To his possession
No more like drones to mourn
By landlords sad!

The song is called "The Jubilee Hymn; Or, A Song to be sung at the Commencement of the Millenium, If Not Sooner." It was composed in 1782 by Thomas Spence, "the unfree'd advocate of the disinherited seed of Adam." The origins of the tune are obscure. It may have originated from the Elizabethan composer Dr. John Bull, or it may have been a German beer-drinking tune. It became the British national anthem in 1745, the year of conquest of Jacobite Scotland, and therefore combines the fear of

defeat with the fervor of conquest, emotions also expressed by its galliard rhythm.

The tune has appealed to both high and low. French, American, English, and German soldiers sang it into battle during World War I, each with different words of course. Handel used it, as did Beethoven. Weber used it too in his *Overture of Jubilation* (1818), composed for the fiftieth anniversary of the accession of the King of Saxony. It is doubtful he had heard Spence's song. In fact, I think we can discern three jubilee traditions in modern history, the aristocratic jubilee (in the Vatican there is a "jubilee door," monarchs if they last fifty years have a jubilee for themselves), a bourgeois jubilee (which we will consider by and by), and a proletarian jubilee (which I believe Spence started up in recent times). A few remarks are necessary to explain Spence's version. "Quarter Day" is rent day which used to be paid four times a year. The first stanza quotes Leviticus. The third stanza quotes Isaiah 14: 4-8. The Isaiah verses are beautiful, because the social and the natural themes, or the red and the green, are logically related, as Spence understood.

See how the oppressor has met his end and his frenzy
ceased!
The Lord has broken the rod of the wicked,
the sceptre of the ruler
who struck down peoples in his rage with unerring blows,
who crushed nations in anger
and persecuted them unceasingly.
The whole world has rest and is at peace;
it breaks into cries of joy.
The pines themselves and the cedars
of Lebanon exult over you:
Since you have been laid low, they say,
no man comes to fell us.

Tommy Spence was born in 1750 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the north-east coast of England. Close to Scotland, it's streets were full of the defeated of the '45 and those dispossessed by the expropriations of Scottish land known as the "Clearances." His mother kept a stocking stall, and bore nineteen children. His father was a netmaker. While working he listened to his son read from the Bible and then questioned him. Thus Tommy Spence learned to think for himself. Amid the proletarian life of Newcastle's keelmen and waterside chares, young Spence joined a Glassite congregation from whom he learned to take his religion in earnest, for John Glas (1695-1773), a Presbyterian schismatic, followed the primitive Christians as he understood them— no penal code, simplification of law, no accumulation of property, love feasts, Scotch broth, the gift of speech, and plenty of song.

3: JUBILEE. The jubilee story begins in the 13th century B.C. when, supposedly, Moses led the slaves out of Egypt. Three hundred years later Solomon and Saul formed the Israeli monarchy. Four hundred years after that, in 587, Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews entered the Babylonian captivity. They returned at the end of the 6th century which commences the period of the postexile when the priests tried to put the pieces together again by collecting, editing, and copying various songs, laws, cultic practises, traditions, and oral memories. The Torah,

or "Law of Moses," the first five books of the Old Testament, was the result.

They merged several authorial traditions ("J," "E," "D," and "P"). José Miranda distinguishes two political tendencies within these traditions: the exodic, libertarian or Kadesh tendency, and the legal, covenantal, or Sinaitic tendency. The former refers to the revolutionary time; the latter refers to the sociopolitical counter-revolution under the monarchy. As part of "P" or the Priestly Code, Leviticus was written during the postexilic age when Israel was under Persian domination. Leviticus stresses the uniqueness and antiquity of Israelic regulations and customs, and falls generally under the Sinaitic tendency. In 1877 Klostermann identified a separate "Holiness Code" (H) within "P." It begins with chapter 25, and it is part of the Kadesh tendency. The 25th chapter represents a memory not of the period of the monarchy but of the prior revolutionary period. Thus, Leviticus 25 is the condensed displacement into a law code of an egalitarian experience of five hundred years earlier. It may usefully be compared to the Bill of Rights which salvaged a little from the revolutionary times that otherwise were so completely extinguished by the U.S. Constitution of landlords, merchants, and slavocrats.

Under the Monarchy class differentiation took place. This was the period of prophetic denunciation, the wrath of Isaiah, the lamentations of Jeremiah, the scorn of Ezekiel. During this period the jubilee is expressed as part of a visionary poetics of denunciation when the prophets attempted to awaken the people from their numbness to the pride and idolatry of their rulers. Their denunciations were written in the eighth century, two or three centuries earlier than Leviticus, and therefore closer to the experience of the liberation of the 13th century. Isaiah denounces landlords and the agribusinessmen who depopulate the land:

Shame on you! you who add house to house
and joining field to field until not an acre remains,
and you are left to dwell alone in the land. (5:8)

Michah identifies with the landless and he refers to an assembly of land distribution:

Shame on those who lie in bed
planning evil and wicked deeds
and rise at daybreak to do them,
knowing that they have the power!
They covet land and take it by force;
if they want a house they seize it;
They rob a man of his house and steal
every man's inheritance. (2:1-2)

We are utterly despoiled: the land of the
Lord's people changes hands.
How shall a man have power to restore
our fields, now parcelled out? Therefore there
shall be no one to assign to you and portion
by lot in the Lord's assembly. (2:4-5)

How did a visionary poetics become a legislative code? A class deal of some sort was made, that is, a weakening of the class of priests and landlords relative to the dispossessed, the

debtors, and the slaves whose cooperation against Persian domination was purchased by the acceptance of the practical possibility of jubilee, at least by the priests and scribes who would have put the Bible together.

What was the earlier period like? It is important that we not think of it in ethnic terms; this is a salient and indubitable contribution of recent scholarship. The term "Hebrew" derives from 'apiru of the Egyptian language; it is a pejorative epithet for an outlaw, insubordinate, and opponent of Egyptian imperialism. The people survived by rain agriculture (grain, oil, wine) and a pastoral economy (bovine herds, sheep and goats). Iron implements in the highlands of Canaan, rock terracing, and slaked lime plaster for water cisterns were technological changes of the late 14th century which disturbed the social structures and land allotment systems. The productivity of the earth and preservation of the surplus permitted the indigenous development of classes and the formation of small city-states.

Scholars have proposed three models for the settlement of Canaan: 1) the invasion model which is the oldest and most familiar, 2) the model of immigration and infiltration which Alt suggested in 1925, and 3) the internal revolt model first proposed by Mendenhall in 1962. Norman Gottwald writes, "early Israel was an eclectic formation of marginal and depressed Canaanite people including 'feudalized' peasants, 'apiru' mercenaries and adventurers, transhumant pastoralists, tribally organized farmers



and pastoral nomads, and probably also itinerant craftsmen and disaffected priests." The usual suspects in other words. He concludes, "A class in itself, hitherto a congeries of separately struggling segments of the populace, has become a class for itself" — Israel. The early literature of Israel, therefore, gives voice to the revolutionary consciousness of the Canaanite underclasses. Indeed, the earliest literature of Israel was a "low" literature both in its origins and in its subject matter.

The point is a major one and effects everything to follow. Liberation theology requires a re-assessment of Christian and Jewish religion. José Miranda gives a concise example. The Hebrew word, *sedakah*, signifies "justice." Yet since the sixth century A.D., it has been translated as "alms-giving" or "charity." The difference between justice and charity is the difference between equality and oppression, because charity is a relationship between unequals while justice is a relationship between equals. Fourteen centuries have passed where a single word's mistranslation has helped perpetuate the condescending, hypocritical piety of ruling classes who steal your cigarettes and either help you look for them or advise you to quit.

4: JUBILEE. Jubilee language is neither legal insistence nor didactic proposal. It is "a linguistic act that continues to have dangerous power in all sorts of contexts that are neither legislative nor didactic," Sharon Ringe argues. Its meaning is explicated through the experiences and struggles of the oppressed. With

Jesus this immediately became clear. Her argument turns on Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and a day of the vengeance of our God
to comfort all who mourn. (61:1-2)

"The year of the Lord's favor," all commentators agree, is the jubilee. It is clear from this passage that jubilee is not a social-democratic deal of laws to preserve a system of commodity exchange against periodic revolt. Isaiah has enlarged jubilee's meaning from the ameliorist management of Leviticus to a day of vengeance on behalf of the afflicted, the bound, the broken-hearted, the captives, and the grieving. Isaiah speaks with a defeated class. The class no longer begs for reforms; it demands justice.

Isaiah's words were Jesus' first. When Jesus returned to Nazareth and began preaching, he opened the scroll in the synagogue to the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed the "acceptable year of the Lord." The Geneva Bible of 1560 noted in the margins to Jesus' first preaching, "He alludeth to the yere of Jubilee, which is mentioned in the Law, whereby this great deliverance was figured." Then he said "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is the key. It is not a question of interpretation, but a matter of action. The *eschaton* is not of the future; it is present. Now. It has been proclaimed. Jesus was the trumpet. That is why they tried to throw him over a cliff.

So we go from Law (Leviticus), to Poetics (Isaiah), to Fulfillment (Luke). The liberation of jubilee is retained: remission of debts, liberation of the bonded, no work, divine sovereignty. However one thing is missing in this progression: namely, the material base. Nothing is said about the land. Is this a cop-out? Does it represent a defeat, substituting the talk of pie-in-the-sky for the walk of land seizures? If so, is this a reflection of the urban basis of early Christianity which after centuries of city living didn't believe it had a prayer in getting their land back? Jesus knew about proletarian exploitation. "Thus will the last be first and the first last," concludes a parable about the scheduling of wage payment to agrarian workers. They are also the words Nat Turner used in the great Southampton County, Virginia, revolt of 1831: "I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons ... for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first."

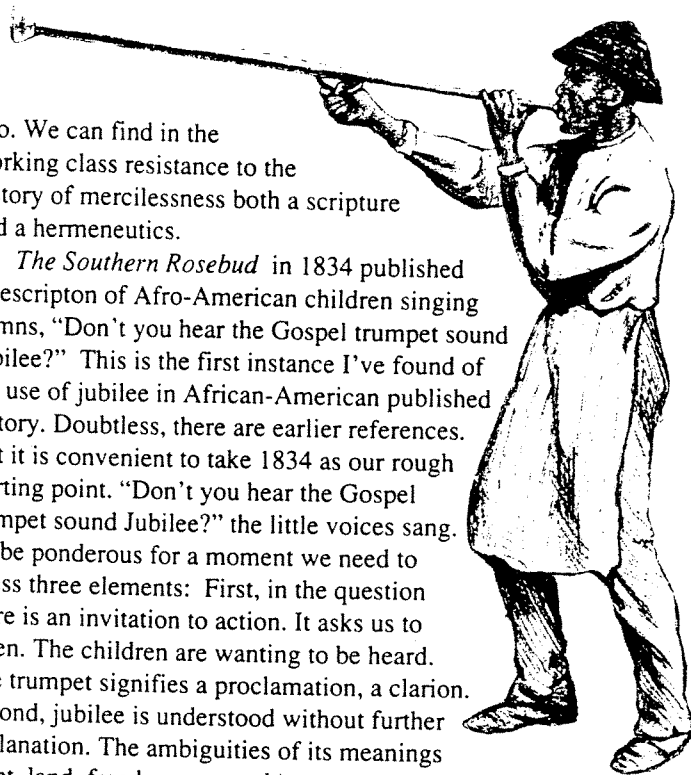
5: JUBILEE. "'Don't never worry about work,' says Jim Presley, the Florida homeboy whom Zora Neale Hurston listened to. 'There's more work in de world than there is anything else. God made de world and de white folks made work.'" The hermeneutics of jubilee is not restricted to antiquity. The working class experience with jubilee is closer to home than the words and deeds of an illegitimate carpenter's son upon the periphery of the Roman Empire one thousand nine hundred and ninety years

ago. We can find in the working class resistance to the history of mercilessness both a scripture and a hermeneutics.

The Southern Rosebud in 1834 published a description of Afro-American children singing hymns, "Don't you hear the Gospel trumpet sound Jubilee?" This is the first instance I've found of the use of jubilee in African-American published history. Doubtless, there are earlier references. Yet it is convenient to take 1834 as our rough starting point. "Don't you hear the Gospel trumpet sound Jubilee?" the little voices sang. To be ponderous for a moment we need to stress three elements: First, in the question there is an invitation to action. It asks us to listen. The children are wanting to be heard. The trumpet signifies a proclamation, a clarion. Second, jubilee is understood without further explanation. The ambiguities of its meanings (debt, land, freedom, no work) were necessary politically in the slave south during the immediate aftermath of the Nat Turner's rebellion. It is assumed that listeners knew what jubilee meant. Third, the "good news" proclaimed by the Gospel links the old and new testaments. The good news is proclaimed now. Now is the time. It is not a question of the time being ripe, or of objective circumstances being ready: the trumpet has sounded. It is the voice of Ezekiel (7:14): "The trumpet has sounded and all is ready, but no one goes out to war."

The songs arose from the camp meetings and evangelical revivalism of 1800-1820. Exhorters, obeah-men, and ministers taught the workers the call-and-response style of singing. Rhythmic complexity, gapped scales, body movements, extended repetition of short melodic phrases characterized this singing and these "shouts." Musicologists see in them the influence of African songs, work songs, and Indian dances. The practise of teaching the song and the scriptures by "lining out" assured a close relationship between leader and chorus. This contrasts with the singing of the overclass, whose hymnody was read rather than heard. This points to further contrasts between the religion of the oppressor and the religion of the oppressed: the former was of doctrine, the latter was of action; the former sat, the latter stood; the former were indoors, the latter outdoors. Leonardo Boff, the liberation theologian silenced by the Vatican, said "After 480 years of silence the oppressed and religious people have finally begun to speak and have broken the monopoly on speech that was once held by the experts in the church: the catechist, the priest, the bishop." He spoke of the 1980s; we hear the voices earlier. The theological problem is called *ecclesio-genesis*, how a church is born. It is a class question.

At the end of the 18th century, Black and white congregations of the south were not segregated. The 1780 Baltimore conference of Methodists declared that "slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature." Within five years it suspended this in practise, permitting slave holders to join the congregations. George Lisle, an African-American, went from Savannah to Kingston, Jamaica, in 1782 and formed its first Baptist church



two years later. "Preaching took very good effect with the poorer sort, especially the slaves," he wrote. By the turn of the century Baptist congregations were segregated.

In 1800 Gabriel Prosser led a revolt of African-Americans around Richmond, Virginia. News of the successes in Haiti reached the slaves through sailors from Martinique. They were assisted by United Irishmen and by Jacobin sympathizers from Pennsylvania. Mingo, a preacher and exhorter, read the stories of Moses and Joshua. "You remember about the chillun of Israel, don't you? Well, this here is the very same thing perzactly," is how Arna Bontemps imagined it. Prosser was also a student of the Bible. He was fond of Judges 15. Sampson "smote them hip and thigh with great slaughter." "With the jaw-bone of an ass I have slain a thousand men." A storm ruined the attempt. Thirty-five were hanged. As a result the religious congregations were further segregated; laws were passed forbidding prayer meetings between sundown and sunup. Yet still African-American Christianity remained a religion of action — shouting, dancing, singing, weeping, jerking, speaking in tongues. The sabbath and the jubilee remained its theological essence.

6: JUBILEE. Of course jubilee is realistic, and of course the ruling class at all periods assert otherwise. *The Interpreter's Bible* (1953) for instance finds "it almost impossible to believe that the [jubilee] laws ... were ever strictly kept or ever could be kept. We have a custom re-edited in the light of an ideal." The archivists of utopias must deny all alternatives. Yet, individual, private property in land is a recent phenomenon. The fences, the hedges, the split-rails, the stone walls, the barbed wire, the "No Trespassing" and "Keep Off" signboards are capitalist innovations of *meum et tuum*. Before them agriculture was conducted in open fields and the poorest held common rights.

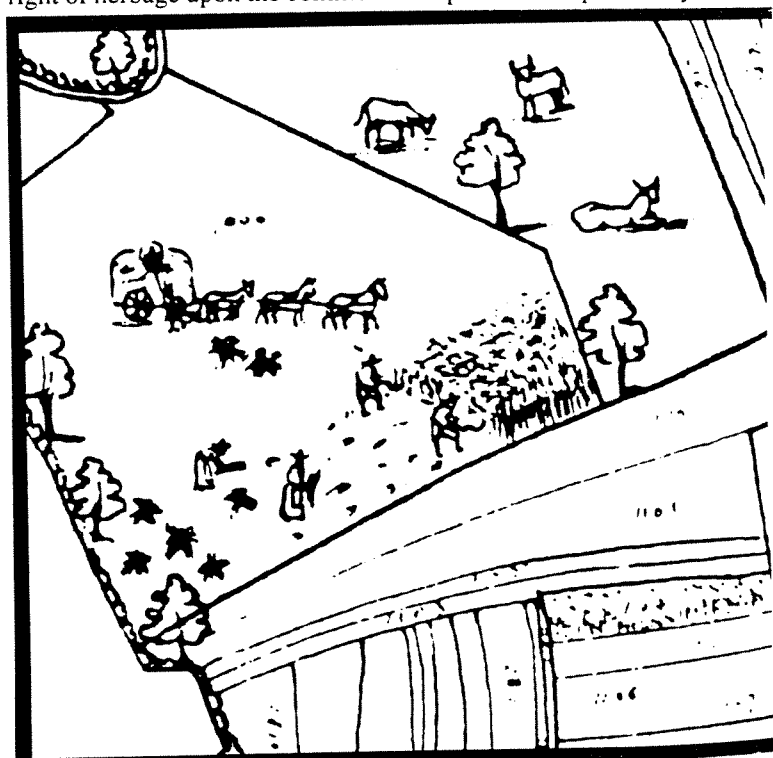
An Englishman writing for the *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly* in 1894 explained how the system of farming worked in Palestine. The Ottoman Turks introduced taxes, an imperial and a municipal tax. To collect it the tax man needed to know whose land was whose. To the eye of the Ottoman tax collector the land all looked the same. The people of the villages organized themselves by who owned a plough. At the first rains in October they divvied up the land. First, groups formed of ten ploughs each. Second the land was divided into lots. Each lot contained several sections, or strips, so that no single lot contained just the best land, or the worst. Third, the *immam* put pebbles in a sack. A boy chose a pebble. This was the lottery. Once the lots had been divided among the groups of ten ploughs, the process was repeated within each group for the individual teams. A furrow of double width separated one allotment from another. A boulder, a pronounced declivity, an obstinate root, or suchlike other features of the terrain marked the boundaries among the strips. The system is ancient. The *Illiad* refers to wrangling "over the boundaries in a common field." We read in Deuteronomy 27:17, "a curse upon him who moves his neighbors boundary stone."

The English investigator of Palestine agriculture compared their system to the Irish *rundale* and the Scottish *runrig*. He might as easily have compared it to the ridge-and-furrow agriculture of own country. In the 17th century the parish of Laxton in the county of Nottinghamshire, for example, contained 3,853 acres divided in 3,333 strips which themselves were consolidated in four fields for purposes of crop rotation. Despite

considerable differentiation in ownership (half the strips were held by the Lord of the Manor), the lands nevertheless were farmed in common, and no matter how small the holding, common rights of stintage, herbage and estovers protected the commoner from pauperization. In Palestine until 1863 most lands were commonable, as were the threshing barns. Capitalist farming insinuated itself as usurers loaned money to those whose yield could not find a market sufficient to pay the taxes levied by the Ottoman Turks. Mortgages encumbered the villagers who, if they defaulted, lost their lands and homes becoming *sharik-el-hawa*, or "partners of the wind."

7: JUBILEE. The original accumulation of capital in England was the result of the enclosure of land and imperial trade and conquest. The former turns common lands into private property by the erection of fences or hedges. "The Parliamentary form of the robbery is that of Acts for enclosure of Commons, in other words, decrees by which the landlords grant themselves the people's land as private property, decrees of expropriation of the people." Imperialism, plunders peoples of other countries and turns them into wage-slaves or slave-slaves. Furthermore, those who used to live upon the commons, being expropriated by enclosure, are forced to become partners of the wind and to sell themselves as wage workers to the bosses of factory and field. Tommy Spence was familiar with both of these tendencies.

The Newcastle Town Moor Dispute of 1771 taught him that it was possible to succeed in the struggle against enclosure. The bourgeoisie sought to sell or lease 89 acres of the Town Common. Tommy Spence's friend, Thomas Bewick, whose engravings continue to charm readers with their depictions of life on the rural common, had received his education thanks to his aunt's right of herbage upon the common. So Spence knew personally,

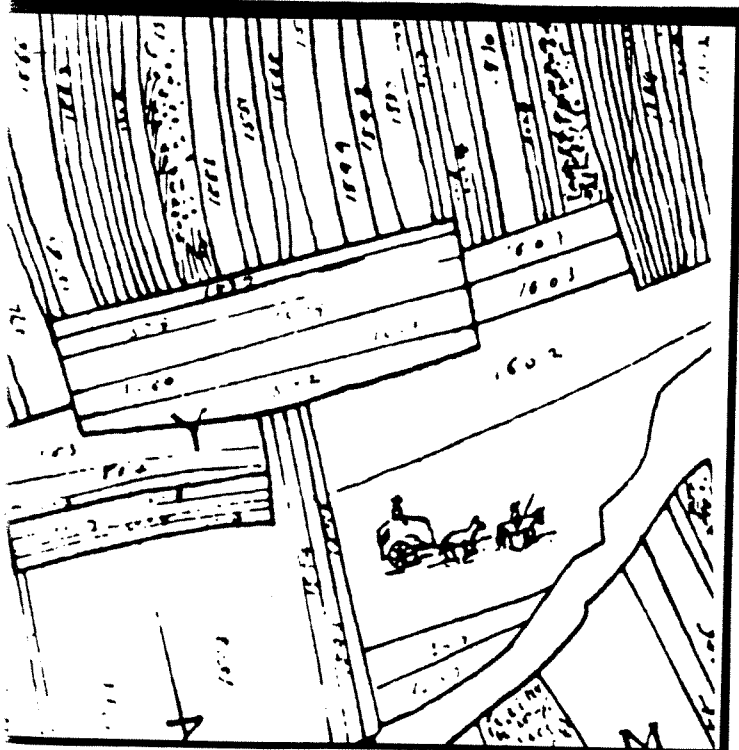


A portion of the terrier of Laxton (1632), and social labor process of mixed arable

from Bewick and many others, the importance of common land. People pulled down the leasee's house and fences and drove the cattle away. The commoners won, and herbage was renewed for resident freemen and widows. As a result of this experience Tommy Spence wrote and delivered his famous lecture in 1775 to the Newcastle Philosophical Society wherein he proposed the abolition of private property: "the country of any people ... is properly their common," he wrote. "The first landholders [were] usurpers and tyrants," he continued. They still are. Everyone else has become a stranger to the land of their birth. He advised appointing a day when the inhabitants of each parish meet "to take their long-lost rights into possession."

Within a few years Spence termed this appointed day "jubilee." The term had been around in England. A teenager, guilty of stealing two gold rings, went to his hanging in May 1750 with the "Ease and Unconcern as a Man would do that was going to his Jubilee," it was observed. But it was Spence who gave it revolutionary meaning in the era of industrial capitalism. Meanwhile, the liberal philosophers of Newcastle expelled him from their Society, not because of his ideas and not because he published his ideas, but because he published them in halfpenny tracts and hawked them in the streets and taverns. This was more galling than even his ideas, because it struck at the pretensions of the Philosophical Society which regarded philosophy as a closed discussion. What made Spence dangerous to the bourgeoisie was not that he was a proletarian nor that he had ideas opposed to private property but that he was both. He brought the ideas to the Newcastle proletariat, a coal mining and ocean sailing proletariat, whose power had already been exerted in the 1740 general strike when among other things they raided the banks.

He wished to be understood. That is why he developed a system of phonetic spelling, and published the transcript of one



illustrating the strips of appropriation and pastoral farming.

of his trials in it, *Dh'e Imp'ort'ant Tri'al óv T'om'is Sp'ens F'or a P'ol'it'ik'al P'amflet 'entitld "Dhé Réstorr of Sosiéte tw its náteúrál Stat.* That is why he expressed his ideas in wall chalkings; by 1802 the Prime Minister of England was informed that there was scarcely a wall in London that did not have chalked upon it the slogan, "Spence's Plan and Full Bellies!" That is why he expressed his ideas in song, so they could become part of the life blood of the tavern and the free 'n' easy: "Can Tyrants hinder People from singing at their work, or in their Families? Sing and meet and meet and sing, and your chains will drop off like burnt thread."

Thrown out of Newcastle, Spence sailed to London, the hub of the English empire. He began to write about imperialism, the second main prop of capitalism. He understood that world trade brought useful things to people, and he also understood that it was work. That is why *The Marine Republic*, which he published in 1794, is important; it shows that his so-called "agrarian communism" was really a communism that included all capital — the mines, the pit-heads, the canals, the ships, the machines. The pamphlet tells a story of a sea captain who gives his sons a ship, "I do not give it to one, or two, or a select few, but to you all, and as many of your posterity as shall sail therein, as a COMMON PROPERTY. You shall all be EQUAL OWNERS, and shall share the profits of every voyage equally among you." They elect their own officers; wages were equal; they wrote a constitution of their "marine republic."

Two years later in 1796 he published *The Reign of Felicity*, a dialogue among a clergyman, a courtier, an esquire, and a farmer. The clergyman advises civilizing the American Indians with religion. The courtier agrees this will make them "submissive subjects," but adds that only conquest and expropriation of land can truly lead to civilization. The esquire remarks that they are the "only freemen remaining on the face of the earth," and recommends that the landlords of the Indians be chosen by lot. The farmer believes that this will introduce vassalage and slavery even though it sounds better than conquest or religion. He believes that the American Indians, unlike European workers, are "unwarped by slavish custom," and he warns them against the imposters of Europe even when styling themselves gentlemen, "Beware of them, for where they once get a footing, there is no rooting them out again." Spence believed that as a communist vanguard the American Indians would attract the slaves and disenfranchised laborers created by European imperialism.

There was truth to this, particularly among the Seminole of Florida and the Cherokee of the Smoky Mountains, both of whom provided tri-racial isolate communities, as the anthropologists say. Otherwise, the truth was mixed. For example, Nathan Barlow, the New England mystic, led the squatters of Kennebec country in Maine during the 1790s against the sheriffs and land agents of the out-of-state proprietors in small bands of armed "white Indians." He wrote "every man to his right and privileges and liberty, the same as our indian nation injoys." They burned barns, rescued prisoners, upset courts, and destroyed writs into "attoms." Barlow was known as the "Indian King." However, it is doubtful that the squatters of Maine effectively allied with its red Indians.

Samuel Ely was imprisoned (and rescued) in Massachusetts and thrown out of Vermont, before joining the squatters of Maine in the "Insurrection Business." In defending the squatters,

lumbermen, and "Savages" he referred to the land laws of the ancient "Hebrew Divines." In 1797 he wrote his *Last Petition of an innocent Man, a Plaintive worm, involved in one Continual Round of Distress, Miseries, and Torture, or a Man persecuted in the Bowels of a Free Republic By a Systematic Junto of Luxurious Sons, Patentee Land Jobbers, and Voluptuous Joles*. He probably was familiar with jubilee, though he did not seek to ally, much less join, the long-fallow agriculturalists of Maine's Indians. Herman Husband, or "Tuscape Death," was known along the length and breadth of the Appalachian Mountains as a prophet against the coastal landlords, merchants, and bankers. The "Allegheny Philosopher" supported the insurgencies of the North Carolina Regulators in the 1760s and the Pennsylvania Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. He prophesized "a New Jerusalem" and regarded the squatters along the "frontier" as "the people of Israel." He illustrates the strength and weakness of this kind of jubilee: Indians and African-Americans were to have no part in it, on the one hand, and on the other, he summarized that green and "Don't Tread On Me" spirit of the mountains that continues to thrive.

8: JUBILEE. 1854 William Goodell began publishing *The American Jubilee*. It proposed a proclamation of "liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof." It "demands of the American Government, and the American People, the immediate and unconditional abolition of American slavery." "It makes this demand on behalf of three millions of Americans already enslaved, on behalf of twenty millions more in process of becoming enslaved...."

The U.S. Navy occupied Port Royal in November 1861. Teachers and missionaries from the north, "Gideon's Band" as they were known, came to assist the Sea Island African-Americans in making the transition to freedom, or wage labor. Boston textile merchants were already buying the expropriated plantations. Charlotte Forten Grimké, a free African-American from Salem, Massachusetts, was among "Gideon's Band."

In 1863 she was teaching in the Sea Islands on the South Carolina Georgia coast. On Monday, 6 July, she wrote in her



Saint-Gaudens statue of the 54th Regiment on Boston Common

journal, "Were just in time to see the Dress Parade. 'Tis a splendid looking regiment. An honor to the race. Then we went with Col. Shaw to tea. Afterward sat outside the tent and listened to some very fine singing from some of the privates. Their voices blended beautifully. 'Jubilo' is one of the best things I've heard lately. I am more than ever charmed with the noble little Colonel." Colonel Shaw led the 54th Regiment, the first free, Afro-American regiment in the Union Army. Within a fortnight he led six hundred men of the 54th in the attack on Fort Wagner during the Battle of Charlestown.

The bombardment of Fort Wagner commenced at 11:00 AM and continued all afternoon. "An hour before sunset, Gen. Gilmore (who had been most of the time on the observatory) came down and asked Gen. Seymour (who was lying on the ground) if he thought the fort could be taken by assault." "I can run right over it," he said. "How do you intend to organize your command?" General Seymour answered, "Well, I guess we will ... put those d—d niggers from Massachusetts in the advance; we may as well get rid of them, one time as another." There were 250 casualties. Col. Shaw was slain on the parapet, leading the vanguard. We see in this battle the historic contradiction between a war of liberation and genocidal population management. Murder awaited at the door to freedom. This dialectic was understood:

We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
for the Year of Jubilee.

Every round goes higher, higher,
Every round goes higher, higher,
Every round goes higher, higher,
for the Year of Jubilee.

Do you think I'll make a soldier,
Do you think I'll make a soldier,
Do you think I'll make a soldier,
for the Year of Jubilee.

9: JUBILEE. Dr. James Murray was a minister from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, most well-known for his *Sermons To Asses*. "Every inch of ground was claimed by some engrosser, and the cautious surveyer marked out every common, which formerly was as free as the light of the sun and the air..." he wrote. He supported the American War of Independence. When Tommy Spence was expelled from the Newcastle Philosophical Society and subsequently harrassed out of town (or did he think London contained greener pastures?), Murray came to his defense. He wrote some "queries" to the Philosophical Society including these three:

"Do people ever act contrary to any divine law, when they resume their rights, and recover their property out of the hands of those who have unnaturally invaded it?"

"Was the jewish jubilee a levelling scheme?"

"Would it be inconvenient to the Philosophical Society to read the 25th chapter of Leviticus?"

While Murray defended Spence, his political stance was

quite different from Spence's. We see this in the form of his defense, the ironic and the academic query presented to the radical bourgeoisie of the Philosophical Society. The query is a form of criticism that is within the framework of those being criticized: it may be sour or stick on the way down but still it is medicine, offered for the health of those criticized. In contrast, Spence having delivered his lecture broke with the Society.

Thomas Spence favored insurrection; he was a revolutionist who had given thought evidently to the practicalities of the overthrow of the English government. Certainly, the government thought so; in the 1790s it arrested him four times as "a Dangerous Nuisance" and as the author of seditious publications. Despite experiences in court and prison, despite the insults and death threats from members of the Association for the Preserving of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, he persisted in hawking his pamphlets, selling saloop (a hot drink of milk, sugar, and saffron), and turning out his tokens. He struck one of these to commemorate the death of Lord George Gordon, the insurrectionist of 1780. In *The End of Oppression; Or, a Quartern Loaf for Two-Pence; being a Dialogue between an Old Mechanic and a Young One* he wrote that revolution could be accomplished by "a few thousand of hearty determined fellows well armed..." a thought that would have been impossible without the experience of the Gordon Riots when a few thousand, led by African Americans, opened the prisons of London and released the captives.

Spence was fully aware of the contradictions within the young English proletariat. In 1795 he published *A Letter from Ralph Hodge, to His Cousin Thomas Bull*. It is worth quoting at length, because its tone needs to be felt to understand its politics:

Dear cousin,

I am informed by some of our neighbours, who have been at town lately, that you are terribly afraid of losing your situation.... They did not indeed tell me what kind of a situation it was that you were in, whether it was in one of the police-offices as a runner; in some of the prisons or gaols as a turnkey; in some of the churches as a beadle or grave-digger; or whether you were a door-keeper or ticket-porter about the treasury; or some other of the public offices.

Well then, you know Tom, you were a poor blacksmith and worked early and late to support a wife and a large family of children. This you used to do cheerfully enough and was able to make ends meet, keep a little stock of iron, and could spend a social penny, either at wake, fair or market, like another man, before our rich neighbours took it into their heads to inclose our common. Then it was that you and I and many more poor people found a great alteration. We could neither keep cow, nor sheep, nor geese as before. Every thing now depended on the ready penny and to crown our misery every opportunity was taken to raise our rents and lower our wages. You know Tom, there was an universal murmuring and discontent through the parish and you complained as loud as any. The end of the matter was, you know, that the people rose one night, pulled down the fences, and committed some other outrages. You and some others were taken; you turned informer and every spirited man in the village was transported. You could no longer remain in the country and the esquire in regard of your services procured you your present situation.

The irony is muted because Spence needs to both reproach the many working class "Thomas Bulls" for their treacheries and to understand their problems which do not disappear simply

because they found a "situation." While it is true "they rivet the chains of mankind," it is just as true that Thomas Bull lives with new cares — he must live with the anxiety of being followed, and with the knowledge that his children are bound for the army or the factory. The new problems are bound with the old. Spence explained that the high taxes, the inflation, and the national debt are as much a part of the oppression by the lordly overclass as the enclosures. "Thus all situations hang together."



Cease then dear Thomas to be longer the tool of those in higher situations and do not bother or tease your poor brother John with any more letters about religion or government or French or politics. ... I hope those who have got situations of six-pence, eight-pence or even a shilling a day, will not think themselves so far elevated above their countrymen as to think their interests separated. ... Thomas, I conclude in wishing heartily, with all your old neighbours in the country, for a speedy reform in parliament and a repossession of our former common.

As a post-script "Ralph Hodge" recommends that his cousin check out the story of Balaam's Ass (Numbers 23).

10: JUBILEE. The first generation of Spenceans were full of contradictions, sometimes atheist sometimes devout, sometimes small masters sometimes pauperized, sometimes free-thinking sometimes religious, now drunk or now sober, and in this they followed their master who, despite his free-thinking lecture in Newcastle, was as capable of wielding scriptural authority as a Harvard divine. They lived through a period of massive theft: between 1801 and 1831 3,511,770 acres of common land was stolen from the agricultural population.

Thomas Evans was Secretary of the London Corresponding Society in 1798. He was imprisoned for three years, sixteen months in Newgate. After Spence's death in 1813, he formed the Society of Spencean Philanthropists making himself its "librarian." "I have lived long enough to witness the effect of enclosure after enclosure, and tax after tax; expelling the cottager from gleaning the open fields, from his right to the common, from his cottage, his hovel, once his own; robbing him of his little store, his pig, his fowls, his fuel; thereby reducing him to a pauper, a slave."

His system of history was organized around three saviors: Moses, Jesus, and King Alfred. "When Moses established his agrarian republic," he wrote in *Christian Policy, the Salvation of the Empire* (1816), "they were to live on a footing of equality, every one under his own vine, and under his own fig-tree." "The Christain epoch was ushered into the world on the broadest republican principles." In deifying Jesus, the Greeks, he believed, perverted the Mosaic republic, but Alfred the Great restored "the agrarian commonwealth." "The territory of a nation," he wrote in a phrase that became a slogan of the Chartists of the 1830s, "is the people's farm provided for them by their great Creator."

Maurice Margarot, a radical Jacobin, was transported to Australia in 1793 aboard *H.M.S. Surprise* with 83 convicts. He



plotted with the Irish prisoners. In 1810 he returned to London. Before dying he wrote, *Proposal for a Grand National Jubilee: Restoring to Every Man his Own and thereby Extinguishing both Want and War*. He calculated that every person in England could have five acres. Twenty years later Allen Davenport calculated that if the English land were divided equally each man, woman, and child would have seven acres. Because the population had increased substantially over this twenty years the discrepancy between their allotment estimates is hard to explain. Maybe Davenport did not exclude Ireland from his calculation, or maybe Margarot included only adult males in his calculation.

In London in 1804 a fellow cobbler gave Allen Davenport,

the poor veteran and Methodist, a Spence pamphlet. "I read the book, and immediately became an out and out Spencean. I preached the doctrine to my shopmates and to every body else...." As a trade unionist (he was leader of the shoemakers' strike of 1813) and as an inveterate opponent of the legal system ("If you pluck a berry, do you not violate a law? If you carry off one single grain of sand, do you not commit a larceny?"), he walked the Spencean bridge between the radical Jacobinism of the 1790s and Chartism of the 1830s which is to say he helped to expand jubilee from the agrarian to the wage struggles. He was an advocate of "bread wages," or payment in loaves of bread, "as it in some measure shows the mischievous working of the monetary system; and the manner in which the working man was robbed of his wages." (The average wage expressed in pints of wheat in 1770 was 90, and in 1808 it was 60).



William Davidson was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1786. "I am a stranger to England by birth; but I was educated and brought up in England; my father was an Englishman, my grandfather was a Scotchman." He was three years at sea, he became a cabinet maker ("There was nothing worse than being a small master"), he taught in a Wesleyan Sunday School, he read Tom Paine, he was secretary to the shoemakers' trade union. Almost six foot he was admired for his courage and his strength. At a demonstration he protected the black flag with skull and cross bones, "Let us die like Men and not be sold like Slaves," the flag said.

On May Day 1820 he was hanged and decapitated as one of the Cato Street conspirators. The idea of "the West End job" was to attack the cabinet at dinner and assassinate its members, the Lord Chancellor, the Lord of the Treasury, the Secretary of War, Castlereagh at the Home Department, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Master of the Mint, the President of the India Board, and the Duke of Wellington. This was to spark attacks elsewhere in London at the Mansion House and Bank of England where a Provisional Government would be immediately established. Cannon were to be seized from the Artillery Ground. It was proposed to plunder the Bank of England, but "the Books should not be destroyed; as they would then know who had property there." Insurrections in the north of England were anticipated. Davidson in London acted as liaison with the Irish, and he was active in stockpiling arms. At the gallows he walked "with a firm and steady step." "Like Isaiah it might be said of him, 'He was persecuted, yet he opened not his mouth.'" By 1820 jubilee had become international, even pan-ethnic; it was part of the self-activity of the working-class; it was associated with insurrectionary prophecy and insurrectionary deeds.



William Davidson

11: JUBILEE. Robert Wedderburn was born in Jamaica in 1762 or 1763. His father was a planter. His mother, Rosanna, was an African-American slave on the estate of Lady Douglas. His father sold his mother while she was pregnant with Robert. He was raised by "Talkee Amy" his grandmother, a Kingston merchant, smuggler, and conjure woman. At the age of 11 he saw her flogged by a white man who fancied she had bewitched his uncle's ship causing it to be captured. In 1778 Wedderburn came to England. He learned gunnery; he enlisted on a privateer. He was present at the Gordon Riots, and was familiar with its Afro-American leadership. He was a jobbing tailor. In 1813 he met Thomas Spence, and doubtless influenced him. In the following year, before he died, Spence published in *The Giant-Killer*, lines indicating that influence, because they put the revolutionary vanguard among the West Indian workers:

For who can tell but the Millenium
May take its rise from my poor Cranium?
And who knows but it God may please
It should come by the West Indies?

If Spence learned about slavery from Wedderburn, Wedderburn learned about jubilee from Spence. Robert Wedderburn joined the Society of Spencean Philanthropists which an Act of Parliament in 1817 was designed to suppress. He was a licensed preacher. He led a discussion meeting at the Hopkins Street Chapel where the scriptures were ridiculed. He summarized Christ's teaching in three commands: "acknowledge no king; - acknowledge no priest; - acknowledge no father." He called the Wesleyan missionaries vipers. He was a free thinker.

Wedderburn, like many of the post-war Spenceans, was a poor proletarian. This means: a) he had little money, and b) he obtained money by any means necessary. In October 1813 he had "a near miss on a charge of theft." Again "an unsuccessful action against him in 1817 for stealing from a government-contracted master tailor" was charged against him. Finally in the winter of 1830 he was sentenced to two years at hard labour for keeping a bawdy house. These charges require different evalu-

ations. The charge of bawdy-house keeping indicates the Jamaican's refusal to accept the crushing Malthusian attempt to control sexuality and organize that repressive, reproductive policy characteristic of the Victorian Poor Laws.

The struggle to preserve the commons, it must be emphasized, was not restricted to the common rights of field, wood, and copse, but belonged also to workshop, mine, and wharf; that is to say, the struggle was not merely rural and agrarian but also urban and proletarian. This provides us with the material basis to understand Wedderburn's political relations in the first two decades. A pair of couplets summarizes the relation between enclosure and criminalization:

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But lets the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.



Many of the radicals — we might call them artisanal radicals — accepted capitalist redefinitions of property. They accepted the wage relationship, the nub of capitalism. Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* was the most eloquent manifesto of the artisans' position. It was answered by Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Rights of Women*, and by Tommy Spence, *The Rights of Infants; Or, the Imprescriptable Right of MOTHER'S to such a Share of the Elements as is Sufficient to Enable them to Suckle and Bring up their Young* (1796). It contains a detailed attack on Paine. It shows Spence's appreciation of the pusillanimity of the men of the English proletariat: "we have found our husbands, to their indelible shame, woefully negligent and deficient about their own rights, as well as those of their wives and infants, we women, mean to take up the business ourselves."

Spence's powers were not expressed with greater force than in this pamphlet written in a year of starvation, war, enclosure, and Thomas Malthus. "Have not the foxes holes, and the birds of the air nests, and shall the children of men have not where to lay their heads? Have brute mothers a right to eat grass, and the food they like best, to engender milk in their dugs, for the nourishment of their young, and shall the mothers of infants be denied such a right? Is not this earth our common also, as well as it is the common of brutes? May we not eat herbs, berries, or nuts as well as other creatures? Have we not a right to hunt and prowl for prey with she-wolves? And have we not a right to fish with she-otters? Or may we not dig coals or cut wood for fuel? Nay, does nature provide a luxuriant and abundant feast for all her numerous tribes of animals except us? As if sorrow were our portion alone, and as if we and our helpless babes came into their world only to weep over each other?" These are not the words of

the proud artisan, but the cry of the oppressed — urban, unwaged, young, female, and enslaved.

In 1817 Robert Wedderburn wrote *The Axe Laid to the Root; Or, a Fatal Blow to Oppressors, being an Address to the Planters and Negroes of the Island of Jamaica* in which he opposed capital punishment, suggested annual strikes, warned against petitioning, and advised taking “warning by the sufferings of the European poor, and never give up your lands.” It caused consternation in the planters assembly of Jamaica. He introduced Spencean ideas into Jamaica. After Peterloo he called for the arming of the English proletariat parts of which were ready, like the Halifax weavers who carried a banner in 1819 saying “We groan, being burdened, waiting to be delivered, but we rejoice in hopes of a Jubilee.”

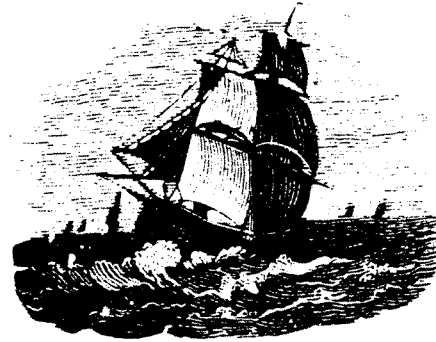
He was a pamphleteer, writing *High-Heel'd Shoes for Dwarfs in Holiness* and *Cast-Iron Parsons* where he told how he visited St. Paul's, Shadwell, on the London waterfront, and asked the parson whether the church was built of brick or stone, and was answered “neither but cast-iron, at which he overheard an apple woman saying “Would to God the Parsons were cast-iron too.” He thought this was a splendid idea. “Finding that the routine duty required of the Clergy of the legitimate Church was so completely mechanical, and that nothing was so much in vogue as the dispensing with human labour by the means of machinery, it struck me that it might one day be possible to substitute A CAST-IRON PARSON.” It could be oiled and kept fresh in a closet to be rolled out on Sundays. In fact he extended the idea to making a clock-work school master to teach the sciences, he called his invention a “TECHNICATHOLICAUTOMATOPPANTOPPIDON”. As a postscript he advised making a cast-iron King. He was jailed for blasphemy. Wedderburn enlarged jubilee's meaning besides extending it to Jamaica. It was proletarian; it rejected capitalist notions of thievery; it held no illusions about machinery.

12: JUBILEE. Denmark Vesey was born in 1767, probably in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands which was under Danish suzerainty at the time, hence the name of the man. As a young man he worshipped with the Moravians, he slaved for three months in St. Domingue, he was skilled as a fisherman, market-man, and carpenter. He spoke several languages. His master, the sea captain Vesey, tired of the slave trade and settled in Charlestown, South Carolina, during the turbulent decade of the 1790s. It is possible that Denmark Vesey heard Francis Asbury preach in Charlestown in that decade, because we know that he preached to Afro-Americans and we know that he preached there on the text of Isaiah 61.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the humble,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to captives and release to those in prison;
to proclaim a year of the Lord's favor and a day of vengeance of our God.

In 1800 Denmark Vesey won the lottery and bought his freedom. He became active in the free Black community and in

the Methodist conference which in 1815 was running ten to one in favor of African-American membership. In 1817 Vesey participated in the schism of the conference, and helped to form the African Association of Methodists. International events helped to deepen his Biblical hermeneutics, so to speak. The republic of freed African-Americans in Haiti was consolidated, and there is some evidence that one of Vesey's fellow conspirators, Monday Gell, corresponded with the president of the Haiti. While Haiti offered an example of hope, the destruction of Fort Negro, a native American and African American sanctuary led by a fugitive slave named Garson and a Choctaw chief on the Apalachicola River in Florida, by a devastating bombardment in July 1816, offered an example of renewed anger, as men, women, and children were blown to smithereens, and a caution that it was always necessary to estimate the range of the enemy's cannon.



During this time he was harassed and physically attacked. In 1809 the Negro steward of the ship *Minerva* introduced insurrectionary pamphlets into Charlestown. Vesey read these, and read them aloud. As he did the Bible. In 1820 the slavocracy passed a law against “incendiary publications.” He himself led an insurrection with thirty other conspirators. These included Jack Glenn, a painter, who read the Bible aloud also, and spoke of deliverance from bondage. Another was Monday, an Ibo from lower Niger. A third conspirator was “Gullah Jack,” a conjuror. A fourth, Peter Royas, a ship's carpenter, believed they'd get help from England.

Thus the revolt brought together a coalition of different workers, agrarian, artisan, and nautical. They were from different traditions - Nigerian, Methodist, and conjure, England, the West Indies, and America. The revolt expressed the power of trans-Atlantic pan-Africanism. It scared the shit out of the slavocrats. (Pardon my French, but I remember Dr. James Murray preaching about a similar mess produced by the King of Moab, “I should beg the reader's pardon ... but as it is the excrement of kings and great men, I hope I shall be excused.”) Thus frightened, the slavocrats passed the 1822 Negro Seaman Act which permitted the Sheriff to board any and every incoming vessel and to arrest and jail any and every Black sailor for the duration of the ship's stay in the port of Charleston.

Wedderburn had trusted his writings to sailors for their safe conveyance to Jamaica; he understood the prominence and strategic importance of the ship's cook in the transmission of struggle. David Walker, as well, used the underground post-offices manned by black sailors and slop-dealers, for they carried his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America* (1829), to the ports of the South. Walker's fulminations against

the avaricious oppressors, his refutations of the racism of Thomas Jefferson as well as the arguments of other apologists, his exposure of the hypocrisy of the Christian slave masters, above all, his call for an armed war of liberation made his Appeal the manifesto of African-American freedom. It's style and content is in the prophetic tradition of Ezekiel and Isaiah.

13: JUBILEE. By the third decade of the 19th century jubilee was present on both sides of the Atlantic, an idea and a practise common to workers of both the cotton plantation and the cotton factory. It possessed both prophetic leaders and an insurrectionary experience. In the decades to follow, despite the defeat of Vesey and of the Cato St. conspirators, the jubilee traditon grew. In America it concentrated on slavery and found victory in Civil War. In England it concentrated on land and found power among the Chartists.

"Do you think that the present state of the common lands in the neighbourhood of Nottingham has an effect upon the morals of the parties living there?" asked an investigator of the 1844 *Parliamentary Selected Committee on the Inclosure of Commons*. The response illustrates the contradictions of the bourgeoisie. "A very prejudicial effect certainly.... It occasions very great disrespect to the laws of the country generally; as an instance, I may say, that when the day upon which the lands become commonable arrives, which, with respect to a considerable portion is the 12th of August, the population issue out, destroy the fences, tear down the gates, and commit a great many other lawless acts which they certainly have a right to do, in respect of the right of common to which they are entitled."

"Prejudicial" ... "disrespect" ... "lawless": yet the people have a "right," they are "entitled". The exchange is interesting for another reason. Why the 12th of August? In 1839 the Chartist National Convention accepted 12 August as a holiday to commence a general strike. It appears, then, that the Nottingham commoners, in observing the 12 August as a day of levelling, were acting in conformance with the national Chartists. William Benbow, author of *The Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (1831), had recommended 12 August. Benbow's pamphlet noted that a miniscule five hundreth part of society had a monstrous power over the other 499. The 499 "create the state, [they] are its instruments upon all occasions, without whom it cannot go on for a single second, [they] dig deep, rise early, watch late, by whose sweat and toil the whole face of nature is beautified." By contrast the five hundreth "exist on disease and blood: crime and infamy are the breath of their nostrils."

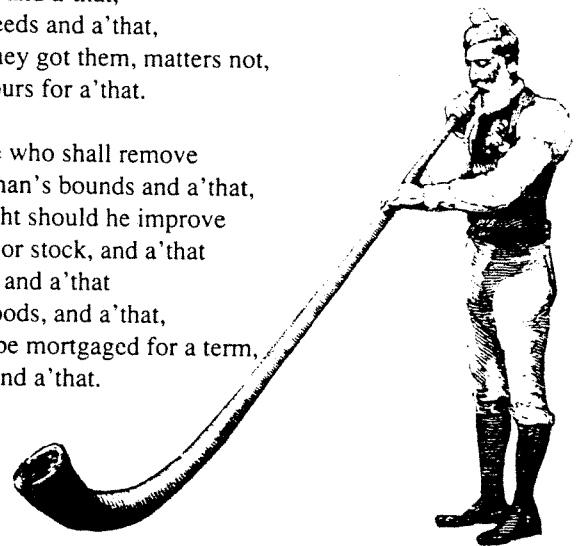
"When a grand national holiday, festival, or feast is proposed, let none of our readers imagine that the proposal is new. It was an established custom among the Hebrews." Benbow referred to the Jubilee, "the year of release was a continued-unceasing festival." He advocated a month long holiday to hold a congress of the productive classes, a month of universal discussions in every city, town, village, and parish. How were they to live? "By rendering unto the Lord that which is the Lords," he wrote. "Until the Lord's cattle be forthcoming." For a start he suggested going to the "mansion of some great liberal lord." "We must avoid all squeamishness." "We beg of the people to throw off all false delicacy." The sentiment is Ezekiel's exactly: "Behold the day! The doom is here, it has

burst upon them. Injustice buds, insolence blossoms, violence shoots up into injustice and wickedness. ... The trumpet has sounded and all is ready, but no one goes out to war." (7:10,14)

The plan was endorsed by the Chartist press. *The Glasgow Agitator* called for land nationalization. George Petrie in *Man* called for the abolition of private property, the "desolating, barbarous, and unnatural institution." Doherty in *The Poor Man's Advocate* fervently campaigned for the plan and the repudiation of the national debt. In 1849 Spence's *The Restorer* was reprinted in *The Northern Star*. First published in 1803 Spence praises Moses. "O Moses! What a generous plan didst thou form! ... Thou indulgently ordainest Holidays and Times of Rejoicing out of number. New Moons, and Sabbaths, and Jubilees, Feasts of Trumpets, Feast of Tabernacles, &c., and liberal Sacrifices which were Feasts of hospitality and Love..." Instead of holidays the Pharoah of England forces people to "make Bricks without straw." The Chartists sang (1840):

The rights of man then's in the soil
An equal share and a' that,
For landlords no one ought to toil-
'Tis imposition and a' that,
Yes, a'that and a'that,
Their title-deeds and a'that,
Howe'er they got them, matters not,
The land is ours for a'that.

Cursed be he who shall remove
The poor man's bounds and a'that,
Or covet aught should he improve
His house, or stock, and a'that
Yes, a'that and a'that
His cattle, goods, and a'that,
Could but be mortgaged for a term,
Till Jubilee and a'that.



14: JUBILEE. "He told us that all the country would be up, for the great jubilee was to come, and we must go with 'em." These were the words of a woebegone Kentish woman whose husband was imprisoned in Canterbury for his part in the disastrous Battle of Bossenden Wood in May 1838. At the time the agricultural workers of Kent were called "white slaves." Diphtheria was rampant among them; they lived in dwellings called "birdcages" — bedrooms measured 8' x 5' x 6'. Eight years earlier in the "Swing Riots" they attempted to prevent the introduction of steam-powered threshing machines. Mutinous discontent smouldered fiercely to awaken briefly in the 1838 jubilee.

Thirty or forty poor people of Kent — vagabonds, small-holders, farm laborers — led by the extraordinary Sir William Courtenay faced soldiers of the Royal Army amid the osier-beds of Bossenden Wood in a battle resulting in several casualties and utter, lamentable defeat for the Kentish rebels. The episode is treated as an example of pathetic derangement. It is true that Sir William Courtenay had been committed to a lunatic asylum and

that he was an impostor (he was born John Nichols the son of a Cornish inn-keeper). He was more than six foot. He had long black hair. He was immensely strong. In 1821 he visited London and secretly joined a Spencean Society.

In 1832 he disappeared from his wife and business, and reappeared on the other side of the country in outlandish dress posing as Sir William Courtenay, Knight of Malta, King of the Gypsies, King of Jerusalem. He became a darling of the Canterbury mob, he allied himself with the smuggling community of north Kent, he stood for Parliament, and edited a newspaper. He asserted the rights of the poor against the New Poor Law, against tithes, against flogging, against the Rich. Despite his crazed grandeur, flamboyant pretensions, and mental breaks, he appealed deeply to the Kentish peasantry who were willing to risk and lose their lives for this jubilee.



The Kentish rural proletariat though close to London was in many ways exceptional — it was godless and lawless in the sense that the Established Church had made few inroads and that its customary agrarian relations largely descended from the forest economy of ancient times rather than the “Improving” enclosed agriculture. Moreover, it was pious in strictly non-conformist meanings. Indeed, there was little singing at the parish church following the battle because most of the Hunhill Church choir was either dead or in jail. Spencean ideas “led to his hopeless attempt to overthrow the established order in Kent.” The defeat in battle of this jubilee was the last time that the English Army was used in combat against the English proletariat on English soil.

15: JUBILEE. Laurence Oliphant, a correspondent for the *London Times* toured the American South in 1854. He was born in Capetown of Evangelical parents. His father became the Chief Justice of Ceylon. Laurence worked for him; by age 22 he had tried 23 murder cases. Later he was “Superintendent of Indian Affairs” for the Governor-General of Canada. He was a typical Victorian imperialist adventurer — “Dancing, travelling, and political business filled up his time agreeably.” He joined Walker’s expedition to Nicaragua for “the fun of the thing.” In the American South he recorded,

Broders, don’t you hear the horn?
Yes, Lord, I hear the horn;
The horn sounds the jubilee.
Sisters, don’t you hear the horn?
Yes, Lord, I hear the horn;
The horn sounds from the door.
Mourners, don’t you hear the horn?
Yes, Lord, I hear the horn;
The horn sounds like broder Tony’s horn.

The English-American jubilee connection was complex. There was more to it than English proletarians going for the land, and American cotton proletarians going for liberation from slavery. Some of the English followers of Robert Owen, the factory owner and utopian socialist, introduced jubilee into Owenism, and Owenism found a place for itself on Davis Bend of the Mississippi where Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, and his brother had a big plantation. They introduced Owenite notions of labor management on the plantation. The workers, well-housed and well-fed, were slaves still. Nevertheless, to them “jubilee” or “jubilo” meant emancipation. Profesor Levine tells us that “throughout the south the newly freed slaves sang variants of the ubiquitous lines,”

Old master’s gone away and the darkies
stayed at home;
Must be now that the kingdom’s come
and the year for jubilee.

Joseph Greenleaf Whittier wrote in 1862,

Oh, praise an’ tanks! De Lord he come
To set de people free
An’ massa tink it day ob doom,
An’ we ob jubilee.

In 1862 the most popular song in the northern States was “Kingdom Coming,” composed by Henry Clay Work, the son of an Underground Railway militant. He worked with the Christy Minstrels. The song became a rallying cry. It’s chorus:

De massa run? ha, ha!
De darkey stay? ho, ho!
It mus’ be now de kingdom comin’
An’ de year ob Jubilo!

And Work composed “Marching Through Georgia,”

Hoo-rah, hoo-rah, we bring the Jubilee
Hoo-rah, hoo-rah, the flag that makes you free!
And so we sang the anthem from Atlanta to the sea,
As we were marching through Georgia!

The theme appeared in rock,

I have no time for stay at home
O rock o’ jubilee,
and I rock ‘em all about
O Lord, de rock o’ jubilee.

The theme appeared as lullaby (to the tune of “Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore”),

What is the matter the church won’t shout, O Lordy,
Somebody in there that ought to be out, My Lord, Jubilee.
Jubilee, Jubilee O Lordy
Jubilee, Jubilee, My Lord, Jubilee.

And the theme has appeared as country swing.

Sing and turn, jubilee
Live and learn, jubilee.

The theme appeared as a Sea Island "shout" with wake-up, dance-around rhythms as rendered by the McIntosh County Shouters,

Shout, my children, 'cause yo' free
My God brought you liberty
Jubilee, Jubilee, Jubilee in the Morning
Call me a Sunday Christian, Call me a Monday devil
Don' care what you call me so long Jesus love me
Jubilee, Jubilee, Jubilee, Jubilee.

The theme appeared as a stevedore's shanty useful for energy in stowing Alabama pine timbers aboard schooners bound for Europe and for notifying "the other fellow how to pull down with you."

I'm a noble soldier,
Soldier of the Jubilee. Hah!
I'm getting old and crippled in my knee
Soldier of the Cross. Hah!

On first of January 1863 Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. "In Rochester, Columbus, Philadelphia, and Chicago Negroes hailed Lincoln's signing of the proclamation as inaugurating the Year of Jubilee," to quote John Hope Franklin. Cannon fired, bells rung. The Reverend Henry Highland Garnet presided at New York's Shiloh Presbyterian Church's New Year's Eve Grand Emancipation Jubilee where at midnight the choir sang "Blow Ye Trumpets Blow, the Year of Jubilee has come."

Frederick Douglass, two of whose sons served in the 54th Regiment, called the First of January "the most memorable day in American Annals." "The fourth of July was great, but the first of January, when we consider it in all its relations and bearings, is incomparably greater." And it has been celebrated as such, with Juneteenth, by African-Americans, just as West Indians celebrate 1 August commemorating the emancipation of 1834. "Jubilee Pageants" with prominent roles for Nat Turner and George Lisle alike have been part of these celebrations, and for those celebrating Lee's surrender. In Athens, Georgia, blacks sang and danced around a liberty pole. In Charleston, South Carolina, William Lloyd Garrison, Robert Smalls, Martin Delany, and the son of Denmark Vesey participated with thousands of others in marches and speeches celebrating the victory over those who had hanged Denmark Vesey only thirty-three years earlier. These are the classic jubilee days: "Isn't I a free woman now! De Lord can make Heaven out of Hell any time, I do believe," as a Virginia woman said.

This is all very well. But, let us remember the planned massacre at Fort Wagner and the slogan of the people in Bahia during the centennial of Brazilian emancipation in 1988 - "One Hundred Years of Emancipation, One Hundred Years of Nothing." The "Day of Jubilo" was one part of the story; the other part was expressed with suspicion and reticence. "Dey didn'

know jus' zackly what it meant," a slave of Jefferson Davis said. "Whar we gwine eat an' sleep?" What about the patrollers and po' buckra?

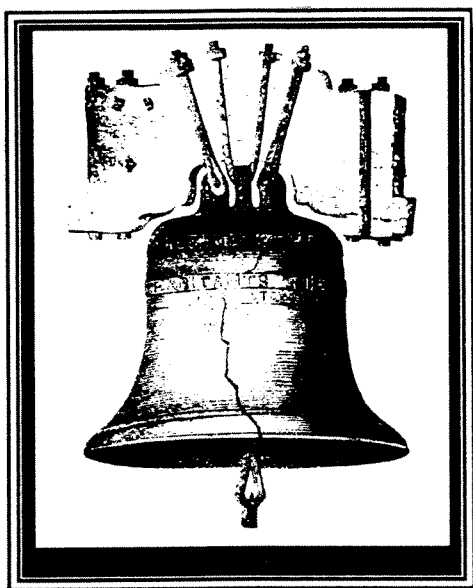
16: JUBILEE. Jubilee did not quite die in the second half of the 19th century, though it ceased to be the conch of revolution. Michael Davitt of the Irish Land League used it in the struggle against British imperial landlordship. "The Irishman, banished by sheep and ox, reappears on the other side of the ocean as a Fenian, and face to face with the old queen of the seas," wrote Marks, and the Irishman tossed jubilee in the face of English piety, he might have added, in the person of Edward McGlynn, the priest of St. Stephen's in Manhattan and ally of the Knights of Labor, who, in a sermon on St. Patrick's Day, 1887, compared the ancient Irish Breton laws with the Jubilee, and was excommunicated as a result. Henry George often invoked the idea and argued that jubilee was "absolutely fatal to the idea of private property in land." In noting that Charles Marks was influenced by some of the Chartist Spenceans, or that the pompous and chauvinist H.M. Hyndman compared *The Communist Manifesto* to Spence's jubilee we succumb to antiquarianism.

Jubilee expressed liberation against imperialism in the 13th century B.C. It opposed slavery, landlordship, credit-and-debt, the work ethic, pollution of the earth, and it advised revolution every fifty years. For several thousand years its meaning was distorted or ignored. With the advent of industrial capitalism the enclosed working class of England and the enslaved African-American working class rediscovered jubilee. They adopted jubilee to freedom and anti-capitalism; they expanded its meaning and gave it bite.

At the same time, the bourgeoisie, since jubilee could not be denied, developed a hermeneutics that disrobed jubilee of its liberating splendor turning it into "figurative language." The language of action becomes a language of adornment, a rhetoric, an allegory, or "just words." On the one hand this permits advances in textual and philological criticism, but on the other hand, it opens the door to pedantry and cynicism, taking the revolutionary tooth out of the scriptural mouth. At its base it is a reactionary, if not a blasphemous argument.

The "higher criticism" of 19th century bourgeois hermeneutics turned the living word into the dead hand of the past. Their interpretation of jubilee is reformist at best and reactionary at worst. To the extent that jubilee opposes work, they say it was an impossible ideal, if not immoral. The green, or ecological theme, like sabbatarianism, is ignored or reduced to backward technological conditions. The revolutionary liberation from slavery is absent or reduced to an archaic, if not barbaric, extension of ge'ulla, the duty of blood-revenge among feuding clans. The restitution of land and the remission of debts are treated as entirely impractical and utopian, or are allowed as perhaps a compromise a very long time ago to ease the transition to agrarian "civilization"!

The bourgeoisie has used jubilee on state occasions. The 1776 Philadelphia Liberty Bell is engraved with Leviticus 25 - "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land." It rings with a pathetic clunk. Why? because it is cracked. It cracked, according to African-American lore, when Abe Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.



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