REBEL FOOTPRINTS

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A Guide to Uncovering London's Radical History

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Foreword by Billy Bragg

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INTRODUCTION

On 13 May 1833 around 3,000 people gathered for a political rally in London's Coldbath Fields – an open space lying in the shadow of London's largest prison, the Middlesex House of Correction. That prison occupied the plot of land between Farringdon Road and Gray's Inn Road where Mount Pleasant Postal Sorting Office stood throughout the twentieth century. Until 1850 this prison housed men, women and children – some as young as six years old – usually serving short-term sentences. Its capacity rose from 600 in 1825 to 1,150 by 1832. Its inmates were typically described through their economic roles, 'beggars, tramps, thieves and debtors', though this prison occasionally held political radicals too. In 1820 it had temporarily housed the 'Cato Street conspirators' who had been accused of plotting to murder the Prime Minister and his entire Cabinet. Five of the conspirators were later hanged and beheaded at Newgate prison.

After 1850 the Middlesex House of Correction housed only male offenders over the age of 17. It became notorious for its widespread use of solitary confinement, its adoption of the 'silent system' which forbade conversation between prisoners, its use of leg-irons restricting prisoners' movements, its paltry bread and water diets, and its rigorous application of 'hard labour'. Some of these tasks were unproductive, making them especially humiliating for the prisoners. The poets Coleridge and Southey coined a verse:[1]

1 'The Devil's Thoughts', 1835 version published in Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London*, Vol. 2, 1878.

> As he went through Cold-Bath Fields, he saw
> a solitary cell;
> And the Devil was pleased, for it gave him a hint
> for improving his prisons in hell.

Barely a stone's throw away, stood another prison, Clerkenwell Bridewell House of Detention. Less than a mile further east was Whitecross Street debtor's prison.

Harsh and demeaning as the treatment was in these institutions – and Coldbath Fields certainly evoked the most fear – the rally in May 1833 was not about the treatment of prisoners or even about prisons at all. It was protesting about more mundane matters: rising prices, low pay and increasing unemployment, all compounded by the complete lack of political representation for the people suffering economic hardship. The much vaunted 'Great' Reform Act of 1832, passed by a Whig government, had got rid of some of the rotten boroughs, such as Amersham, represented by two MPs from one large-landowning family – the Drakes – on a tiny electorate from the 1600s. It created new constituencies in the larger cities that had grown up in the Industrial Revolution but the electorate was still tiny. Around one in six adult males now had the vote, all of them men of property. Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester gained their first MPs, but, in general, the newly emerging urban centres were still poorly represented.

The organisation that mobilised London's discontented people at that moment was the grandly named National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC). Its constitution proclaimed three key principles:

- to secure for every workingman the full value of his labour;
- to protect workingmen against the tyranny of masters and manufacturers;
- to bring about parliamentary reform (including suffrage for all adult males).

The government was in no mood to tolerate openly rebellious behaviour from the 'lower orders'. The Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, declared the gathering at Coldbath Fields illegal. The NUWC, convinced that its protest was justified, went ahead with the rally anyway. However, their numbers were soon more than matched by those of the police, who kettled the demonstrators. When the protesters were completely penned in, the police attacked them in order to break up the rally.

It was just four years since Sir Robert Peel's Act of Parliament had established the Metropolitan Police. The novice force had hardly any experience of handling demonstrations, though they would soon get more practice than they might have wished for. On that day the demonstrators fought back and three policemen were stabbed. Sergeant Brooks and PC Redwood later recovered from their knife wounds. PC Robert Culley stumbled into a nearby inn, announced that he wasn't feeling well, then collapsed and died.

An inquest was held with a jury comprising 17 men, most of them bakers from the nearby Gray's Inn district. The coroner set out the case and sent the jury to deliberate. He directed them to record a verdict of 'wilful murder'. They discussed the evidence for 30 minutes, then announced that they had a verdict

on which 16 of the 17 jurors were agreed. PC Culley's death, they declared, was not wilful murder but a case of 'justifiable homicide'. Describing the police behaviour as 'ferocious, brutal and unprovoked', their foreman reported: 'We are firmly of the opinion that if they [the police] had acted with moderation the deceased would not have been stabbed.'

The coroner might have seen this verdict as perverse but it was popular among ordinary people. So popular that cheering crowds carried the jurors through the local streets that night in a torch-lit procession. Their rebellious stand, defending the right to protest, won support beyond the working poor. Moneyed supporters laid on special treats for the jurors: a boat trip along the Thames to Twickenham and a free theatre visit to see 'A Rowland for Oliver'. Each juror also received a medallion inscribed 'in honour of the men who nobly withstood the dictation of a coroner ...'

This single incident reveals so much about London in the early 1830s. Economic divisions were widely acknowledged, though use of the term 'working classes' – plural – indicated that there was still a long way to travel before those exploited in different sectors would perceive their more profound commonality. Oppositional forces, though, had begun to use the tools of mobilisation and protest – leaflets, placards and posters – and could mobilise beyond an immediate locality. Public protest was on the agenda and activists acquainted themselves with suitable outdoor venues. They were not cowed by the threats of politicians, backed by an emergent police force ready to use violent means to quell protest, and courts freely dishing out severe sentences.

Over the next hundred years London was a great centre of agitation and protest. Assorted groups organised and campaigned for political and economic goals and fought for rights they

believed they were absolutely entitled to claim. Certain locations became especially associated with great protest rallies and platforms for free speech by political agitators: Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park (Speakers' Corner), and Parliament Square in central London; Kennington Common and Southwark Park in south London;[2] and Clerkenwell Green and Victoria Park, north of the river heading east. As more and more areas gave birth to their own significant individuals and campaigning organisations, these groups established local pitches from which to share their concerns and demands with their public. Politics moved from the austere, forbidding surroundings of the House of Commons in Westminster, to street corners, squares and public spaces.

This book tells stories of how defiant grassroots Londoners responded to their circumstances from the beginning of the 1830s until the end of the 1930s. It takes the reader into the heart of several localities where campaigning groups were born and developed; where they declared their agendas, captured the imagination of their wider public, mobilised for actions, took on powerful forces, suffered great setbacks but also won important victories.

The book explores these people's lives to find out what motivated and inspired them to act. It illuminates the methods they adopted and, with the aid of specially commissioned maps and suggested routes for each chapter, invites you to walk in their footsteps. The skyline of our city is rapidly changing. The traces of a rebellious history are being literally erased before our eyes. This book attempts to resist that process. It cannot put back the bricks and mortar of the buildings where momentous decisions

2 In 1854 the government enclosed Kennington Common, converted it into a park and banned political meetings.

were made or powerful words spoken but it can help to preserve our collective memory of these struggles for better lives for people in the capital.

Londoners today are not short of issues to protest about. And as we continue to march through the streets of our capital city, holding placards and banners, singing, blowing whistles, chanting slogans and voicing our demands, we are walking on well-trodden ground. But we are also elevated, as we stand on the shoulders of those rebels who came before us, who refused to accept the status quo, and who set out on the paths of protest.

This book honours and celebrates these rebels who dreamt of a better life and aims to ensure that their ideals continue to live in the hearts and minds of those who campaign for justice and equality in our metropolis today.

1

REBELLIOUS CITY

London from the 1830s to the 1930s

> *[A]gainst those who laud the present state of society, with its unjustly rich and its unjustly poor, with its palaces and its slums, its millionaires and its paupers, be it ours to proclaim that there is a higher ideal in life than that of being first in the race for wealth ... Be it ours to declare that health, comfort, leisure, culture, plenty for every individual are far more desirable than the breathless struggle for existence, furious trampling down of the weak by the strong, huge fortunes accumulated out of the toil of others, to be handed down to those who had done nothing to earn them.*
>
> Annie Besant, *Our Corner*

The writer and activist Annie Besant wrote these extraordinary lines in the mid-1880s, when she was living in the comfort of London's West End but becoming increasingly immersed, albeit transiently, in the struggles for better lives led by impoverished Eastenders. She depicts a city mired in conflict between the powerful and the marginalised, the exploiters and the exploited, and the brazen sense of entitlement by those who were ravaging the lives of an underclass. Her description reads just as hauntingly

today as the struggles for a more equal city that marked the decades after the Second World War have given rise to a widening gap between London's rich and poor. The wealthy classes are rampantly recolonising significant pockets of inner London, expanding the number of gated communities, installing exclusive boutiques, gyms, restaurants and luxury outlets, while pushing longstanding residents towards the city limits, where new pound shops open weekly.

But Besant was writing, speaking and acting in the middle of a remarkable era of campaigning and protest, in which significant numbers of London's citizens of all ages showed that they refused to accept injustice. Five decades earlier, the class-conscious Chartist movement placed the struggle for political rights firmly on the map, unimpressed by a 'Great Reform Act' that failed to live up to its title, offering crumbs to elements of a rising urban bourgeoisie. It adopted its People's Charter at the Crown and Anchor pub on the Strand and launched the first mass struggles for democratic rights in London. Fifty years *after* Besant's blast at inequality, the people of the East End and of Bermondsey built barricades on the streets to thwart the ambitions of Oswald Mosley, a true son of the aristocracy, who had focused his attention especially on the capital city. He had mesmerised segments of all London's classes including significant numbers of workers, and built a para-military movement, spreading hatred and promoting dictatorship.

In the intervening decades Londoners continually gave proof that this is indeed a rebellious city. The fear stalking London's elites in the late 1840s brought troops into the capital to guard strategic buildings, while Queen Victoria was spirited away from potential harm. In the 1860s protesters demanding political reform

unceremoniously removed the railings enclosing its most elegant park. The 1880s saw bloody battles for free speech in Trafalgar Square and an explosion of industrial struggles, spontaneously ignited by atrociously paid women workers in London's original and largest manufacturing area – the East End. During the 1900s and 1910s, women's economic struggles in London were temporarily overshadowed by political battles. Rebellious women were imprisoned for smashing windows of shops along London's showpiece thoroughfare of Oxford Street, attacking government property and randomly setting fire to pillar boxes, as they forced politicians to notice and respond to their agenda for change. Even behind bars they found ways to continue to challenge the authorities. In the 1920s, two London prisons – Brixton and Holloway – temporarily hosted elected councillors who refused to accede to demands on them that they considered an injustice and an outrage to the people who democratically elected them.

But rebellion has not always taken such sensational forms. Other dissenters adopted peaceful means to challenge and subvert the orthodoxies of the age, expose hypocrisies and pose questions and demands, using the power of the written word. They published radical newspapers, wrote incendiary pamphlets and generated mass petitions that simultaneously shook the powerful and gave heart and inspiration to those struggling for change.

This book shines a spotlight on a dramatic set of interlocking struggles that took place in London from the early nineteenth century to the eve of the Second World War. Rebellious Londoners spoke several different mother tongues but had a common campaigning language. They learned from each other's struggles and derived strength from each other's efforts and

victories. Many participants in these rebellious struggles had their eyes open to the wider world and were convinced internationalists. Some among them found creative ways to give solidarity to their counterparts in other countries and publicise their causes here, but their efforts were primarily focused on democracy, freedom and equality in the city where they lived and worked.

Who were these Londoners? In 1831 this was a city of 1.7 million people; a century later the population of inner London alone had reached 5 million, with another 3 million in the growing suburbs of outer London. The development of the railways from the 1850s and 1860s displaced several very poor communities, without any compensation, but also enabled a massive expansion of factories and workshops. This drew new communities to the capital and, in turn, provided a basis for large numbers of workers to come together to fight collectively for better pay and conditions within their workplaces. The trade union movement expanded, especially among men in skilled work. An all-London Trades Council was formed in 1860, and towards the end of the nineteenth century local trades councils emerged, enabling workers across industries to support each other's struggles. By the 1890s a 'new unionism' was adding swathes of low-skilled and unskilled workers to a bigger and more combative trade union movement in London.

At the time when Annie Besant was writing, one out of three Londoners had been born outside of the metropolis. Some had travelled to the capital from other towns and villages within Britain; others arrived as international migrants seeking opportunities for economic advancement. In many cases they also sought greater freedom, security and refuge from persecution and oppression. London had long been a city of migrants, but the