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The Theatre of *The World Turned Upside Down*

Marcus Nevitt

When Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* was first published in 1972 it was an immediate popular success. Named as one of *The Guardian*'s books of the year, reviewers and critics hailed it as "vintage Hill", the best book he had written to date. Issued in paperback in 1975, it sold 46,000 copies in that single year; a decade later, it continued to sell 3000 per annum.[1] As astonishing as such sales figures are for a work of seventeenth-century history, they tell only part of the tale of the popularity of the book. In the mid-to-late 1970s it also became a touchstone for dramatists and theatre practitioners seeking to recover a sense of Britain's radical past, eager to examine the ways in which historic patterns of resistance, revolutionary politics and popular rebellion might speak to a later age of social unrest. The actors, directors and writers involved in these productions read *The World Turned Upside Down* as Second Wave feminism further exposed the foundations of patriarchal order, and as industrial strikes, growing ever-more intense and widespread, revealed the ideological chasm between successive governments and an increasingly powerful Trade Union Movement. The theatrical engagement with Hill began with Caryl Churchill's now-canonical experimental play, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), which opened at the Traverse Theatre Edinburgh before transferring to the Royal Court's studio space, the Theatre Upstairs.

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1 Barry Reay, '*The World Turned Upside Down*: A Retrospect', in Geoffrey Eley and William Hunt (eds.), *Reviving the English Revolution* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 56; *The Guardian*, 14 December 1972, p. 14.

The dramatisation of Hill's celebration of the topsy-turvy culminated two year's later with Keith Dewhurst's *The World Turned Upside Down*, an adaptation of the original book performed by the Cottesloe Company at the National Theatre for three weeks in November and December 1978**.** Although Dewhurst's play met with a mixed reception from its first reviewers, in this essay I suggest that his drama offers a sensitive and careful re-reading of Hill's book, acutely alert both to its shortcomings and its rejection of a severely economic-determinist model of Marxist historiography.

We best see Dewhurst's faithfulness to the variety of history-from-below offered by his source text if we compare it to Churchill's more celebrated play. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* is a two-act drama which recounts the civil-war experiences of individuals (some historical, some invented) associated with the New Model Army, the Diggers, the Levellers and the Ranters. [2] The play's most famous feature is a Brecht-inspired alienation effect whereby individual characters are performed by different actors in successive scenes. This inconsistent role assignment enabled Churchill to sunder the dominant actor-character identification on which much realist theatre relies, inhibiting the affective connection between audience and individual character in order to focus attention instead on the processes of theatre making and the political potential of collective experience. Whilst this technique was central to Brecht's Marxist critique of capitalism, raising audience awareness that history was much more than the force of individual circumstance or personality,

[2] Caryl Churchill, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* in *Plays: One* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 241.

Churchill primarily employed the strategy to explain the alienating and dislocating effects of war itself:

> The characters are not played by the same actors each time they appear. The audience should not have to worry exactly which character they are seeing. Each scene can be taken as a separate event rather than part of a story. This seems to reflect better the reality of large events like war and revolution where many people share the same kind of experience.[3]

This emphasis on process rather than personality was inextricably tied to Churchill's Marxist sense of the civil war as a bourgeois revolution. As she put it in an explanatory note to the play, "what [the civil war] ... established ... was an authoritarian parliament, the massacre of the Irish, the development of capitalism".[4] This reading of the revolution, if at odds with the methodology of the book which Churchill revealed had first turned her on to mid-seventeenth-century British history, Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (1956), actually bears a striking resemblance to Hill's own rationale for his *The World Turned Upside Down*.[5] Lamenting the "simple 'Cavaliers and Roundheads' history taught at school [which] hides the complexity of the aims and conflicts of those to the left of Parliament", Churchill reminded her readers of the blind spots in Whig accounts of the civil war: "We are told of a step forward to today's democracy but not of a revolution that didn't happen; we are told of Charles and Cromwell but not of the thousands of men and women who tried to change their lives".[6] That "revolution that didn't happen" is

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[3] Ibid., p. 184.

[4] Ibid., p. 183.

[5] Caryl Churchill, 'The Common Voice and the Individual Imagination', *New Theatre Quarterly* 4:13 (1988), 3-16 (p. 6).

[6] Churchill, *Plays: One*, p. 183.

a version of Hill's self-consciously reductive coinage in *The World Turned Upside Down* in which a Marxist account of the civil war as bourgeois revolution is expressed through the binary opposition of capitalism and its proto-communist other:

> There were, *we may oversimplify*, two revolutions in mid seventeenth-century England. The one which succeeded established the sacred rights of property ... gave political power to the propertied ... and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of men of property ... *There was, however, another revolution which never happened* ... This might have established communal property, far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.[7]

Such formulations may well have helped Churchill to arrive at the Brechtian dramaturgy of *Light Shining*. However, if Hill's knowingly oversimplified introductory remarks facilitated some of the alienating effects in Churchill's play, it is important to remember that they are hardly representative of the style of analysis on offer in the rest of the book. In fact the deliberately crude, economic-determinism behind this thumbnail sketch of the revolutionary decades fails utterly to convey the depth, colour and richness of the rest of Hill's account of the radical ideas and personalities which animated the period. This sacrificing of the individual to the collective is, actually, oddly uncharacteristic of *The World Turned Upside Down*, one of whose organising principles – for good or bad, historiographically speaking – is the personality sketch, potted biography or character portrait. For instance, the opening chapter, 'The Parchment and the Fire', in which we might reasonably anticipate a Marxist historian to establish a template for the class antagonism which propelled

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[7] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 15; emphasis added.

the three kingdoms towards their revolutionary moments, more compellingly demonstrates that it was "social tensions" provoked by anti-clerical groups such as Familists and Anabaptists which helped bring the revolution about. When something much more like hostility between rich and poor emerges, as in the quotation from Robert Wharton's *A Declaration to Great Britain and Ireland, shewing the downfall of their Princes* (1649) which contended that it was "the sufferings of poor apple-women and broom-men ... [which had lined] the king's coffers", Hill judiciously reminds us that it was "propaganda, not to be taken too literally".[8]

With broad class-based analysis only haltingly pursued when compared to earlier works such as *The English Revolution* (1940), the enduring value of *The World Turned Upside Down*, as Barry Reay has suggested, is as a work of people's history, as a "celebration" of the frequently occluded words and being of the humble, uneducated or low-born.[9] Recuperative work of this sort, the recovery of the lost or the half-silenced, necessitates, to some degree, an emphasis on the personality behind the utterance, the doer behind the deed, rather than a systematic interrogation of broader social processes. Thus a chapter on radical interpretations of the Bible, 'Samuel Fisher and the Bible', immediately comes alive as a study of one former Baptist and the need to make him better known "as a precursor of the English enlightenment" (and the easy move from the individual to the epochal there reveals

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[8] Ibid., p. 21.

[9] Reay, ''*World Turned Upside Down:* A Retrospect', p. 61.

Hill's fondness for biography as an explanatory mode).[10] Another chapter on legal reform, 'John Warr and the Law', is really a contextualised reading of Warr's *The Corruption and Deficiency of the Laws of England* (1649), an attempt to bring the "deeper and less well-known philosophy" of one man's life to a wider audience.[11] An important and well-known chapter on Seekers and Ranters very quickly switches from a broad discussion of forerunners and milieux to separate biographically-driven sections on the work of William Erbery, Abiezer Coppe, Lawrence Clarkson, Joseph Salmon, Jacob Bauthumley, Richard Coppin, George Foster, John Pordage, Thomas Tany and Thomas Webbe.[12] It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that a work which renders character and personality so vivid, should consistently prompt delegates at this conference and its wider readers to attempt to identify the "hero" of *The World Turned Upside Down* (and so consistently to identify him as the Digger, Gerrard Winstanley).[13]

This fascination with the personal in *The World Turned Upside Down* provided direct impetus for two further major works. Hill's biographies of John Milton, *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977) and *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628-1688* (1988) were, in effect, expansions of the contextualised readings of those authors in Appendix II 'Milton and Bunyan: Dialogue with the Radicals'. This double dedication to a Marxist view of history and

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10 Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 268.

11 Ibid., p. 272.

12 Ibid., pp. 184-230.

13 See Richard Schlatter's review of *The World Turned Upside Down* in *American Historical Review* 78:4 (1973), p. 1054.

literary biography is less strange than at first appears. Hill shared these commitments with another former member of the British Communist Party Historians' Group: E.P. Thompson.[14] In between writing his biographies of William Morris and William Blake, Thompson maintained that his interest in biography as a mode was partly a reaction to certain "mechanistic and teleological forms of historical presentation" that he found in different kinds of economic and political history, including that within a Marxist tradition.[15] In an interview in *Radical History Review*, Thompson lamented the "extrusion … of … imaginative passion" in "the theoretical vocabulary of mainstream Marxism" and noted that although "Marx … proposed revolutionary economic man ... also implicit, particularly in the early Marx, [is] that the injury is in defining man as economic at all".[16] Hill outstripped Thompson by also writing biographies of two major world leaders in addition to his studies of Milton and Bunyan: Oliver Cromwell in *God's Englishman* (1970) and, working with a title format he would exploit again in his Milton book, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (1947).

These biographical works by Hill attempt to restore, in Thompson's phrase, the "imaginative passion" of individuals to Marxist historiography. The Lenin book was written for a general readership as part of A.L. Rowse's "Men and their Times" series for the English Universities Press whose founding principle was that "the

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[14] See E.P. Thompson *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955); idem., *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[15] Doroth Thompson (ed.), *The Essential E.P. Thompson* (New York: the New Press, 2001), p. viii.

[16] Ibid., p ix.

most congenial, as well as the most concrete and practical approach to history is the biographical".[17] Hill's contribution eschewed the stock biographer's insights into Lenin's upbringing, family, neighbours, hometown or personal life to consider the ways in which as an individual he "symbolize[d] the Russian Revolution as a movement of the poor and oppressed of the earth who have successfully risen against the great and the powerful."[18] *God's Englishman* is infinitely richer in biographical detail than the Lenin book and is structured around recognisable phases in its subject's life. As with the Lenin study, however, Hill did not dwell upon the incidental details that rendered his textualisation of a life authentic, credible or life-like – even if it is all of those things – but presented Cromwell as a nodal point for a Marxist reading of an entire century:

> The seventeenth century is the decisive century in English history, the epoch in which the Middle Ages ended … the rise of capitalist relations within feudal society and a consequent regrouping of social classes … Within the seventeenth century the decisive decades are those between 1640 and 1660. In these decades the decisive figure is Oliver Cromwell. Any study of Cromwell is therefore not merely the personal biography of a great man. It must incorporate the major events of his lifetime which proved so crucial for the later development of England and its empire.[19]

Given this habit of analysing the epochal through the individual, it is telling that of all the insults levelled at him in J.H. Hexter's infamously caustic *TLS* review of *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (1975) – where Hill was derided as "a ruthless source-miner and a compulsive lumper" – it was Hexter's

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[17] Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the English Revolution* (London: English Universities Press, 1967), pp. vi-vii.

[18] Hill, *Lenin and the English Revolution*, p. 217.

[19] Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman*: *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), p. 13-14.

dismissal of Hill was an anti-humanist adherent to a deterministic Marxist theory of history which riled most. "People, individual persons from Moses to Lenin,", Hexter contended, "are the historical entities most resistant to [the] lumping [together of data to fit a pre-conceived theory]; but if they cannot be eradicated from ... history ... they can at least be shrunk to convenient and ... fitting size ... [M]ere people will never get in the way".[20] Hill's rejoinder demanded that Hexter take some account of his habit of presenting the personal as a vital means of getting to the political: "In attributing to me a desire to ensure that 'mere people will never get in the way' the professor appears to have missed my biographical study of Oliver Cromwell, and the sections on individuals in *Puritanism and Revolution*, *The World Turned Upside Down*, and the book he was reviewing".[21] This chimes with his reaction to later revisionist assaults upon *The World Turned Upside Down* in which it was argued that the Ranters were merely fanciful or fearful projections of hostile contemporaries or modern historians.[22] In response Hill articulated a version of history-from-below which was drawn to people rather than systems and drew its energy from a profoundly humane respect for the lived experiences of the dead, however obscure:

> If we can agree that Ranters were neither fantasies of the imagination of contemporaries, nor of later historians, and that they were not straw men and women invented in order to be shot down: then the historian owes them what he or she owes to all men and women studied in the past – sympathy and an attempt to understand.[23]

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20 J.H. Hexter, 'The Burden of Proof', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 October 1975, p. 1252.

21 Christopher Hill, *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 November 1975, p. 1333.

22 See J.C. Davis, *Fear Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

23 Christopher Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, Chicago and Melbourne: Bookmarks, 1993), pp. 204-5.

Despite its political affinities, then, Hill's emphasis on individual character as a means of analysing the occluded, the popular and the radical in *The World Turned Upside Down* actually puts him at some distance from the depersonalising, Brechtian theatre of Churchill's *Light Shining*. If, as a work of Marxist historiography, it lacks a certain systematic analytical rigour, it triumphs as a work of people's history because it places the personal, as much as the collective, at its centre. This is one of the great insights of Keith Dewhurst's 1978 adaptation of *The World Turned Upside Down* for the Cottesloe Company at the National Theatre. Insofar as historians have remarked on Dewhurst's play, they have presented it as evidence of Hill's rising popularity in England in the late 1970s, his increasing prominence as a public intellectual.[24] In the reading of the play that follows, I argue that the relationship between Dewhurst's adaptation and his source is more richly commensurate than has been appreciated. It is not merely that Hill was popular and hence produced at the National; it is rather that the Cottesloe Company, Dewhurst and Hill shared a view of the vitality and potential radicalism of British popular culture and politics which was founded on a commitment to recovering its heritage through an examination of individual lives and experiences. In attempting to render a work of people's history as popular theatre, they also found themselves at the centre of a controversy about ideas of the demotic, the elite and the national in late 1970s' Britain.

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[24] Reay '*The World Turned Upside Down*: A Retrospect', p. 56; Alastair MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 181-2.

This controversy centred on two related debates. On the one hand there was considerable disagreement amongst writers, theatre makers and practitioners about the possibilities for a theatre that was at once genuinely popular and politically radical. The growth of fringe theatre in the late 1960s and the emergence of alternative theatre companies in the early 70s (such as John McGrath's 7:84, David Edgar's The General Will, David Aukin, William Gaskill, David Hare and Max Stafford Clark's Joint Stock) meant that there was a growing conviction that traditional forms of repertory theatre in Britain were merely catering for middle-class audiences and ignoring vast swathes of the population.[25] Edgar and McGrath in particular clashed about the best way to counter this tendency, whether through community-rooted agit-prop or by dramatic experimentation with different forms of social realism.[26] There was also a very specific, intemperate version of these arguments played out with the opening of the National Theatre on London's South Bank complex under the directorship of Peter Hall in October 1976. Three years late, inordinately over-budget and still unfinished – initially only two of the three auditoria, the Olivier and the Lyttleton theatres, were ready for the public – the new National became for many a symbol of otherworldly elitism during a period of hardship and austerity. National newspapers regularly ran exposés about the prodigious over-expenditure on the venture, whether that was the £36,000 for the 1976 production of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, revelations about the building's heating and maintenance costs, or speculation as to the exact level of Peter

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[25] See Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980).

[26] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Methuen, 1981); David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988).

Hall's remuneration.[27] Alternative theatre companies also objected to the concentration of government arts funding in this one place in the capital and protested against the concomitant reductions in their own subsidies. Less than a month after the opening of the National, they demonstrated collectively under the banner "A National Theatre ... For whom? At what cost? At whose expense?"[28] In July 1978, the Arts Council of Great Britain, unable to ignore the mounting disquiet, launched the National Theatre Enquiry to examine the long-term viability of the project under such funding arrangements.[29]

The centrepiece of the National's response to these concerns was the Cottesloe Theatre, the complex's third auditorium which opened in March 1977.[30] A small, intimate studio theatre housing up to 400, where seats could not be reserved and ticket prices were kept extremely low (between £1.50 and £1.75), this was originally devised as a place to host visiting alternative theatre companies and as a base for an informal ensemble under the directorship of Bill Bryden. From the outset, this group, the Cottesloe Company, performed new and experimental works of theatre by playwrights such as John Arden, Edward Bond, Keith Dewhurst, David Mamet and Eugene O'Neill which were crafted to be popular and accessible,

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27 John Elsom and Nicholas Tomalin, *The History of the National Theatre* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), pp. 313, 324; Peter Lewis, *The National: A Dream Made Concrete* (London: Methuen, 1990); Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 268-273.

28 Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 268.

29 Ibid., p. 273.

30 See Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (eds.), *The Cottesloe at the National, "Infinite Riches in a Little Room"* (Stratford Upon Avon: Mulryne and Shewring Ltd, 1999).

appealing to audiences who also enjoyed cinema, football or television.[31] Dewhurst, who regularly wrote for the Cottesloe, best defined the company's popular aesthetic:

> Popular theatre is difficult ... Its subject matter may be yesterday but its soul is tomorrow. It is about the spark that is in everyone, the feeling that they do not know how to express. It is about what people will rise to, and not what they will accept. It challenges the apathy that is the other side of acceptance ... Popular theatre beats its brains out to be accessible without loss of integrity ... to combine what everyone can understand with the highest possible quality of writing, acting and production.[32]

Given this interest in communicating as widely as possible "what people will rise to", in jargon-free language, it is not surprising that the Cottesloe company were drawn to *The World Upside Down* nor that Hill should have been so interested in their stage translation of his work. Although he did not contribute fresh material to the script, Hill did attend rehearsals – where he behaved "with absolute modesty and tact" – discussing with actors the historical contexts and motivating factors behind some of the speeches and behaviour of their characters.[33] Soon after the play opened, the socialist newspaper *The Morning Star* ran interviews with Dewhurst and Hill in which both rejected the traditional characterisation of the period as a "Puritan revolution" and reflected upon the challenges involved in transferring a work of history to the stage.[34] Hill was particularly keen to point out that "the play avoids any direct contrasts and [takes] care to distinguish between a radical democratic tradition and Socialist views" and, in a remark that would have surprised J.H. Hexter,

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31 See Keith Dewhurst and Jack Shepherd, *Impossible Plays: Adventures with the Cottesloe Company* (London: Methuen, 2006).

32 Ibid., pp. 220-221.

33 Keith Dewhurst to Marcus Nevitt, 17 September 2012; Dewhurst Archive, University of Sheffield library.

34 *The Morning Star*, 9th November 1978; National Theatre Archive, RNT/PR/4/1/166

declared the shared vision of book and play as enabling "the people involved [in the English Revolution to] become human beings."[35] To further facilitate this, Hill gave a platform lecture on the English Revolution at the Lyttleton Theatre on December 1st just before a staged reading of the Putney Debates by several members of *The World Turned Upside Down* cast.[36]

The play itself, as the original programme and play text reveal, is "freely adapted from Christopher Hill's book" and was directed by Bill Bryden and Sebastian Graham-Jones with whom Dewhurst had long-standing relationships at the Royal Court and the National.[37] Whilst the original idea for the adaptation was Bryden's and also closely matched the needs of the National Theatre in its earliest years on London's South Bank complex, the text of the play emerged from a fragment of one of Dewhurst's earlier dramas, *Cromwell's Salvation*, which had never been performed.[38] Before turning to Hill, with eleven stage plays, half a dozen television dramas and, as one of the original writers of *Z Cars*, countless TV scripts behind him, Dewhurst had already met with considerable critical acclaim as a

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35 Ibid.

36 The text used at this reading is available as Jack Emery, *The Putney Debates* (Cambridge: The Rampant Lions Press, 1983). The play of *The World Turned Upside Down* was at the heart of a mini English Revolution season at the National Theatre in winter 1978-9. In addition to the events already mentioned, there were performances of a platform event in the Olivier theatre, directed by Michael Kustow, starring Daniel Massey, Robert Ralph and Kit Thacker, of *The Poets and the English Revolution* which played on 20, 21 and 29 December and 22-23 January.

37 Keith Dewhurst, *War Plays: The World Turned Upside Down, The Bomb in Brewery Street; Corunna!* (London: Oberon Books, 1996), p. 11; Dewhurst and Shepherd, *Impossible Plays*, pp. 9-21.

38 The manuscript of *Cromwell's Salvation* is in the Dewhurst Archive, University of Sheffield Library.

playwright at the National.[39] Having written *Luggage* (1977) for the Lyttleton theatre, he was commissioned to write the script for the Cottesloe Company's ground-breaking promenade performance of *Lark Rise* (1978). Nominated for 'Best Play' and 'Best Director' at that year's Olivier Awards, *Lark Rise* adapted Flora Thompson's late nineteenth-century novel of the same title, and rendered Thompson's intimate portraits of nineteenth-century rural life immediate and vivid by mingling audience with actors and musicians in an auditorium-turned-village stripped of raised stage and stalls seating.[40] This interest in recovering folk memory and scrutinising the relationship between the historical and the quotidian at least partly drove the Hill adaptation. When it opened on 2 November 1978, it placed watershed moments in seventeenth-century British history (such as the execution of Charles I outside Whitehall, or the execution of the Leveller mutineers at Burford) in dialogue with less familiar but equally arresting scenes of daily life in a revolutionary society: women washing clothes on common land; a widow trying to cope with the excesses of troops billeted in her cottage.

Originally 22 scenes long, the play begins with the regicide, and examines the interactions of various army grandees, soldiers, radicals with humbler members of

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39 Dewhurst saw the following stage plays into production before *The Word Turned Upside Down: The Bomb in Brewery Street* (Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, 1971); *Brecht in '26* (Royal Court, Theatre Upstairs, 1971); *Corunna!* (Royal Court, Theatre Upstairs, 1971); *Kidnapped* (Edinburgh Fringe, 1972); Lark *Rise* (Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre, 1978); *Luggage* (Lyttleton Theatre, National Theatre, 1977); *The Magic Island* (Birmingham Rep, 1974); *The Miser* (Edinburgh Fringe, 1975); *One Short* (Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, 1976); *Pirates* (Royal Court, Theatre Upstairs, 1971); *Rafferty's Chant* (Mermaid Theatre, 1967).

40 http://www.olivierawards.com/about/previous-winners/view/item98512/olivier-winners-1978/; accessed 17/12/2012.

the communities they encounter for the next 21 months.[41] During that period, there are military insurrections, executions, continual violence against a peaceful Digger commune, ecstatic sectarian visions of dragons and the apocalypse, and a Ranter orgy. Dewhurst's script was performed by a stellar cast of 18 actors playing 44 characters, some historical, some invented. Assorted parts, as well as music, were supplied by Ashleigh Hutchins, Maddy Prior and other members of the British folk-rock super group Steeleye Span. Brian Glover appeared as the regicide Colonel Francis Hacker (and called on his professional wrestling skills as a royalist hardman, Snapjoint); Gawn Graninger was both Charles I and the Ranter Jacob Bauthumley. Mark McManus starred as Gerrard Winstanley whilst Bob Hoskins played the Digger, William Everard (as well as the Ranter Richard Coppin, a particularly enthusiastic participant in the orgy scene). Even if the reviewer for the *Evening Standard* disapproved of "the orgy scene of the Ranters, requiring the cast to display and jiggle their private parts" dismissing it as "more an act of gratuitous pornography than a gesture of historical piety", the play text is acutely sensitive to the cadences and rhythms of seventeenth-century speech, quoting from and riffing upon passages from the countless pamphlets and speeches reprinted in Hill's book. Despite giving more prominence to Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Fairfax than the original text, Dewhurst was also at pains to preserve Hill's interest in excavating the popular roots and religious heritage of radical politics by punctuating the action in virtually every scene with folk songs and hymns from several centuries; the words and melody of Winstanley's 'Diggers' Song' are melded with Bunyan's 'To Be a

[41] Dewhurst cut the play to eighteen scenes, the length of the published text, after the performances by the Cottesloe Company; Dewhurst and Shepherd, *Impossible Plays*, p. 123.

Pilgrim' and folk standards from later periods such as 'Bright Morning Star' or 'Babylon is Fallen'. As deep as such roots go, the drama does not finish on a triumphal note. At the end of the play Gerrard Winstanley and fellow Diggers discuss the dissipation of radical hopes with the prophetess Lady Eleanor Davies, having been hired to gather the harvest on her estate at Pirton, Hertfordshire. Winstanley attempts to make the best of Lady Eleanor's awkward and doubtful silent judgment on the Diggers' plans by quoting words from his own proto-communist pamphlet *The New Law of Righteousness* (1649), proclaiming that he will await "the Lord's leisure with a calm silence" only to be interrupted in his meditations by the reprising of "a babel of songs" from earlier points in the drama.[42]

This concluding scene reveals much about Dewhurst's determination to place clearly defined, individuated character – rather than alienating economic forces or social processes – at the heart of his dramatisation of the revolution and in using Hill's book to recover the personalities which shaped and were shaped by the conflict. The scene was prompted by a brief reference in Hill's study to the Diggers' journey through Pirton in 1650 and a passing remark that Lady Eleanor was "an eccentric personality who ... deserves more space than she can be given here".[43] If Dewhurst followed Hill's prompt to imagine more of Davies's personality, he departed from his source in suggesting that the individuals he brought out of the

[42] Dewhurst, *War Plays,* p, 101. The Winstanley quotation is reprinted in Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 372.

[43] Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 127-8.

book were best seen through episodes arranged for the stage in chronological order.[44] Whilst Hill – in a striking reversal of the logic of a seventeenth-century heresiography – spotlighted radical groups or individual sectarians for celebratory purposes, in separate chapters which exhibit very little interest in how different movements developed in relation to each diachronically, Dewhurst presented a linear narrative about the changes which power and time might wreak upon the weak or the mighty. In this, his play has much in common with films like Ken Hughes's expensive Hollywood travesty *Cromwell* (1970) or Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo's low-budget *Winstanley* (1975), both watched by the Cottesloe cast at the start of rehearsals, the latter separately recommended by both Dewhurst and Hill.[45] The emphasis on character-as-personality, though at odds with Churchill's Brechtian dramaturgy in *Light Shining*, takes its cue, too, from a novel Dewhurst read before writing the play. Jack Lyndsey's *1649: A Novel of Year* (1938) painstakingly develops its cast of historical and invented characters month-by-month in this tumultuous year, contending that we best understand the failure of a revolutionary moment if we believe that the agents conducting the action were clearly-defined individuals with contradictory desires and plausible motivations.

Dewhurst's play also demonstrates a conviction that the subjectivity of those who left only partial traces in the historical record could be as meaningful as the

[44] Dewhurst, *War Plays*, pp. 98-102.

[45] Dewhurst was on the British Film Industry committee which granted the directors money for the film. Hill contributed a promotional endorsement of the film, calling it "very good history" after attending a pre-release screening; Dewhurst and Shepherd, *Impossible Plays*, p. 122; Kevin Brownlow, *Winstanley: Warts and All* (London: UKA Press, 2009), p. 230.

more familiar interior lives of the personalities that dominate accounts of the period. In the opening scene, therefore, Charles I's scaffold speech is continually interrupted by the voices of the illiterate and low-born who have suffered as a result of the war and his policies. Crucially, though, Dewhurst insists on giving those voices a history or a name and, using an appendix to Raymond Richards's *Old Cheshire Churches* (1947) as a route into parish records, fills one of the more notable gaps left by Hill's decision to ground a people's history almost exclusively in printed sources, and crafts a space for the unknown and unlettered to be heard.[46] The guile of the king's carefully rehearsed valedictory flourishes before a crowd at Whitehall are deftly balanced against the pathos of disembodied voices speaking simple lines by obscure parish clerks about other people's vanishing lives:

> CHARLES: So that, as to the guilt of those enormous crimes that are laid against me, I hope in God that God will clear me of it. I will not. I am in charity.
> VOICE: Christened: Roger, son of a poor woman brought to bed and delivered in a barn of Owen Goodman of Duckerton.
> CHARLES: [...] I have forgiven all the world and even those in particular that would have been the chief cause of my death.
> VOICE: Buried: a young woman, a stranger, found dead in a field near Otterspool.[47]

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[46] Hill was sensitive to this gap but was unable to answer a key rhetorical question prompted by his methodology: "The eloquence and power of the simple artisans who took part in these discussions is staggering ... We tend to take them for granted. But far more must have been lost, even of those men and women who left writings. And what of those who did not?"; Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 362.

[47] Dewhurst, *War Plays*, p. 21. The voices here come from Raymond Richards, *Old Cheshire Churches: A Survey of their History, Fabric and Furniture with Records of the Older Monuments* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1947), pp. 405, 409.

A further dimension to Dewhurst's aim of re-scripting people's history as popular theatre is his imagining of the quotidian contexts in which the ideological clashes of the civil war might be worked out. The most moving example of this presents divisions amongst the Digger camp in Cobham, Surrey, and contemplates the effects of antinomian theology (which, from a certain perspective, freed the elect, certain of salvation, from moral restraint) upon the egalitarian politics and redistributive agenda of radical puritan groups like the Diggers and the Levellers. In this scene, one disillusioned Digger, Mrs Maidley, returns from a disinhibited al-fresco sexual encounter with the Ranter Laurence Clarkson, to be greeted by her husband, Gerrard Winstanley and other members of the Cobham commune:

> MRS MAIDLEY: Here. Chestnuts. I found some late chestnuts. [*Maidley walks up to her and hits her*.] Oh! [...]
> MAIDLEY: Shut up! [*Maidley hits Mrs Maidley again. She falls down. He kicks her*.] [...]
> WINSTANLEY: Maidley. No more ...Truly tyranny in one is tyranny as well as in another. In a poor man lifted up by his valour as in a rich man lifted up by his lands.
> [*Maidley kicks Mrs Maidley again*][...]
> WINSTANLEY: I said no more.
> MAIDLEY: Oh you want Ranters do you? Are they the promised opportunity? ... I ask your pardon, brethren. I hope you'll pardon me for having been wronged. Now let her get my dinner.
> MRS MAIDLEY: No she will not get his dinner ... Turn the world upside down, will you? ... Await the opportunity? See Christ in other creatures? See him in me!
> [...]
> MAIDLEY. You're mad. She's gone mad. You're mad.
> MRS MAIDLEY: Aye. I want the world turned upside down.
> WINSTANLEY. That's not mad.
> MRS MAIDLEY: Then let me choose. Not men. Let me choose ... What are your rules, Winstanley?
> WINSTANLEY: We are peaceable, and decide by common consent.
> MRS MAIDLEY: What are your rules? What's your punishment for having struck a woman?
> [*Silence*]
> Turn the world upside down. Let me choose who I'll have

> [...]
> WINSTANLEY: Truly, your Saviour must be a power within you to deliver you from such bondage within.
> MRS MAIDLEY: Aye. Has he delivered you?[48]

It is striking that Winstanley has no answer to Mrs Maidley's accusation that he, along with her husband, has internalised the discipline of a seventeenth-century patriarchal society. With the political limits of both Digger and Ranter philosophy exposed – a traditional domestic economy is shown to be stubbornly and violently resistant to the disorderly potential of permissive sexuality and pacific egalitarianism – revolutionary slogans ("Turn the world upside down") begin to look "mad" or hopelessly deaf to the lives of housewives. Even though the scene is framed by quotations from two of Winstanley's most radical pamphlets – the first from *A New Law of Righteousness* (1649), the second from *A Fire in the Bush* (c.1650) – both utterances conspicuously fail to engage with Mrs Maidley's scene-stealing challenge that the truly godly might see divinity in all creatures, male and female, saved and reprobate. It is part of Winstanley's redemption in this play that, when confronted with Mrs Maidley in the final scene he has realised the justice of her words. Disowned by her husband and her lovers and now scarred by venereal infection, Mrs Maidley finds fellowship once again amongst the Diggers, with Winstanley recognising that he had used "fine words and sentiments as an excuse for not acting" sooner.

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[48] Dewhurst, *War Plays,* pp. 79-82.

Though Dewhurst here goes much further than Hill in questioning the heroism of Winstanley, he does so in a play which is as committed as the earlier work to celebrating the revolutionary struggles of the non-elite. Rather than presenting the low-born as undifferentiated, interchangeable or anonymised members of a collective, however, both play and book work hard to recuperate them as individuals and personalities who shaped the tumultuous events the of the mid seventeenth century. In performance at the Cottesloe theatre in 1978, as a work of popular theatre, *The World Turned Upside Down*, has much in common with the goals of Hill's immensely successful work of people's history: a shared pride in communicating the popular origins of England's radical heritage to as large an audience as possible. It is fitting, too, that the most popular book of Hill's career should have been adapted for the stage since the theatre played a key role in defining the path that career would take. When Hill returned home as a worldly undergraduate in 1931, he expressed his rejection of his parents' anti-theatrical Methodism by taking his sister Irene out to watch a play in York. Even though, as Penelope Corfield recalls, "the ensuing crisis was a rare breach in the normal family harmony", it seems that it was a trip to the theatre which first showed Hill the pleasures as well as the perils of renouncing Wesley for Marx.[49]

[49] Penelope J. Corfield, ' "We are All One in the Eyes of the Lord": Christopher Hill and the Historical Meanings of Radical Religion', *History Workshop Journal* 58 (2004), p. 114.