GERRARD WINSTANLEY
1609?–?

Gerrard Winstanley is generally taken to represent the high-water mark of the English Puritan revolution. His little movement of Diggers grew out of Lilburne’s Levelers, complementing a program of political radicalism with one of economic radicalism. But it faded away as abruptly as it appeared. And so did Winstanley himself; we can hardly guess his birth-date or trace his career through a possible bankruptcy as far as the years 1649–51 when the notoriety of the Diggers brought him to public view. After that brief moment, he relapses again into obscurity, and we cannot tell where he lived or when he died.

What Winstanley propounded in that short crest of time was the repeal not only of the Norman Conquest, but of Adam’s fall. His first messianic manifestos attracted little notice, being unclear, though ardent, in then rhetoric. But then on April 1, 1649, Winstanley with a handful of followers appeared on George’s Hill in Surrey, and began to dig there in preparation for planting. Everyone understood what that meant. The ground did not belong to the cultivators; one Francis Drake, as “Lord of the Manor,” held title to it, and they did not have his permission to dig there. That was the point of the exercise. What Winstanley wanted to establish was what we would instantly recognize as a commune. While disclaiming all violence, the Diggers called on the common people of England to reassume the earth which was rightfully theirs and to live on it as a common inheritance. Violence was unnecessary, as Winstanley argued, because the defeat and execution of Charles I had cancelled not only the Norman Conquest, but the original contract by which the Jews took to themselves a monarch, King Saul. James I had been 25 years in his grave, and he would have sputtered with fury had he been able to read Winstanley’s pamphlets; but their logic was his own, only turned against his son and successor.

Property owners near and far were naturally dismayed by Winstanley and his little band of 50 or 60 instant communists. Like threatened landowners everywhere, they resorted to counter-measures—law officers, lawsuits, vigilante assaults, trampling of the new crops. The Diggers were driven from George’s Hill and the island made safe once again for private property.

From The True Leveler’s Standard Advanced

[THE FREEING OF THE ENGLISH ISRAELITES]

A DECLARATION TO THE POWERS OF ENGLAND, AND TO ALL THE POWERS OF THE WORLD, SHOWING THE CAUSE WHY THE COMMON PEOPLE OF ENGLAND HAVE BEGUN, AND GIVES CONSENT TO DIG UP, MANURE, AND SOW CORN UPON GEORGE-HILL IN SURREY; BY THOSE THAT HAVE SUBSCRIBED, AND THOUSANDS MORE THAT GIVES CONSENT.

In the beginning of time, the great Creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasury, to preserve beasts, birds, fishes, and man, the lord that was to govern this creation; for man had domination given to him, over the beasts, birds, and fishes; but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another.

1. Though his basic myth is obviously Biblical, Winstanley does not in this tract refer directly to God; “the great Creator Reason” perhaps seemed to him more general or more persuasive as a title.
And the reason is this. Every single man, male and female, is a perfect creature of himself; and the same spirit that made the globe dwells in man, to govern the globe; so that the flesh of man being subject to Reason, his Maker, hath him to be his teacher and ruler within himself, therefore needs not run abroad after any teacher and ruler without him, for he needs not that any man should teach him, for the same anointing that ruled in the son of man teacheth him all things.

But since human flesh (that king of beasts) began to delight himself in the objects of the creation, more than in the spirit of Reason and Righteousness, who manifests himself to be the indweller in the five senses, of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling; then he fell into blindness of mind and weakness of heart, and runs abroad for a teacher and ruler: And so selfish imagination taking possession of the five senses and ruling as king in the room of reason therein, and working with covetousness, did set up one man to teach and rule over another; and thereby the spirit was killed, and man was brought into bondage, and became a greater slave to such of his own kind than the beasts of the field were to him.

And hereupon the earth (which was made to be a common treasury of relief for all, both beasts and men) was hedged into enclosures by the teachers and rulers, and the others were made servants and slaves: and that the earth, that is within this creation made a common storehouse for all, is bought and sold and kept in the hands of a few, whereby the great Creator is mightily dishonored, as if he were a respecter of persons, delighting in the comfortable livelihood of some and rejoicing in the miserable poverty and straits of others. From the beginning it was not so.

But this coming in of Bondage is called A-dam because this ruling and teaching power without doth dam up the spirit of peace and liberty; first within the heart, by filling it with slavish fears of others. Secondly without, by giving the bodies of one to be imprisoned, punished, and oppressed by the outward power of another. And this evil was brought upon us through his own covetousness, whereby he is blinded and made weak and sees not the law of righteousness in his heart, which is the pure light of reason, but looks abroad for it, and thereby the creation is cast under bondage and curse, and the Creator is slighted. First by the teachers and rulers that set themselves down in the spirit’s room to teach and rule, where he himself is only king. Secondly, by the other that refuses the spirit, to be taught and governed by fellow creatures, and this was called Israel’s sin in casting off the Lord and choosing Saul, one like themselves to be their king.

And thus Esau, the man of flesh, which is covetousness and pride, hath killed Jacob, the spirit of meekness and righteous government in the light of reason, and rules over him. And so the earth that was made a common treasury for all to live comfortably upon, is become through man’s unrighteous actions one over another, to be a place wherein one torments another.

And this elder son or man of bondage (Esau) hath held the earth in bondage
to himself, not by a meek law of righteousness, but by subtle selfish counsels and by open and violent force. For wherefore is it that there is such wars and rumors of wars in the nations of the earth? and wherefore are men so mad to destroy one another? But only to uphold civil propriety of honor, dominion, and riches one over another, which is the curse the creation groans under waiting for deliverance.

But when once the earth becomes a common treasury again, as it must, for all the prophecies of scriptures and reason are circled here in this community, and mankind must have the law of righteousness once more writ in his heart, and all must be made of one heart and one mind.

Then this enmity in all lands will cease, for none shall dare to seek a dominion over others, neither shall any dare to kill another, nor desire more of the earth than another; for he that will rule over, imprison, oppress, and kill his fellow creatures, under what pretence soever, is a destroyer of the creation and an actor of the curse, and walks contrary to the rule of righteousness.

The work we are going about is this. To dig up George’s Hill and the waste ground thereabouts, and to sow corn and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows.

And the first reason is this, that we may work in righteousness and lay the foundation of making the earth a common treasury for all, both rich and poor, that every one that is born in the land may be fed by the earth his mother that brought him forth, according to the Reason that rules in the creation. Not enclosing any part into any particular hand, but all as one man working together and feeding together as sons of one father, members of one family; not one lording over another, but all looking upon each other as equals in the creation; so that our Maker may be glorified in the work of his own hands, and that everyone may see, he is no respecter of persons, but equally loves his whole creation, and hates nothing but the serpent, which is covetousness branching forth into selfish imagination, pride, envy, hypocrisy, uncleanness; all seeking the ease and honor of flesh, and fighting against the spirit Reason that made the Creation; for that is the corruption, the curse, the devil, the father of lies; death and bondage that serpent and dragon that the creation is to be delivered from.

If you cast your eye a little backward, you shall see that this outward teaching and ruling power is the Babylonish yoke laid upon Israel of old, under Nebuchadnezzar: and so successively from that time the conquering enemy have still laid these yokes upon Israel to keep Jacob down: and the last enslaving conquest which the enemy got over Israel was the Norman over England; and from that time, kings, lords, judges, justices, bailiffs and the violent bitter people that are free-holders are and have been successively: the Norman Bastard William himself, his colonels, captains, inferior officers, and common soldiers who still are from that time to this day in pursuit of that victory, imprisoning, robbing, and killing the poor enslaved English Israelites.

6. Property.
7. “George” means “farmer,” and St. George is patron saint of England; but the Diggers probably began their work on this hill in Surrey (not far from present Wimbledon) because it was near London.
8. With serpent, dragon, and Babylon in the background, we are not far from the stock apocalyptic imagery of the Book of Revelation. The Babylonian captivity of the Jews in the 6th century B.C., when they had to serve Nebuchadnezzar, gets into the story (anachronistically) as another piece of oppression. 9. William the Conqueror was in fact illegitimate; but he would have been amazed to learn that the English whom he conquered would someday compare themselves to the Children of Israel, and him (consequently) to Nebuchadnezzar.