

# Restoring the Garden of Eden in England's Green and Pleasant Land: The Diggers and the Fruits of the Earth

■ **Ariel Hessayon**, *Goldsmiths, University of London*

*This Land which was barren and wast is now become fruitfull and pleasant like the Garden of Eden*

—*The Kingdomes Faithful and Impartiall Scout*<sup>1</sup>

I will not cease from Mental Fight, Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: Till we have built Jerusalem, In Englands green & pleasant Land

—*William Blake, 'Preface' to 'Milton'*<sup>2</sup>

## I. The Diggers, 1649–50

On Sunday, 1 or perhaps 8 April 1649—it is difficult to establish the date with certainty—five people went to St. George's Hill in the parish Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, and began digging the earth. They “sowed” the ground with parsnips, carrots, and beans, returning the next day in increased numbers. The following day they burned at least 40 roods of heath, which was considered “a very great prejudice” to the town. By the end of the week between 20 and 30 people were reportedly laboring the entire day at digging. It was said that they intended to plow up the ground and sow it with seed corn. Furthermore, they apparently threatened to pull down and level all park pales and “lay all open,” thereby evoking fears of an anti-enclosure riot (a familiar form

of agrarian protest).<sup>3</sup> The acknowledged leaders of these “new Levellers” or “diggers” were William Everard (1602?–fl.1651) and Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76). Apprenticed in the Merchant Taylors’ Company, Everard seems to have been a Parliamentary spy during the English Civil War, was implicated in a plot to kill Charles I, jailed and subsequently cashiered from the army. Thereafter Everard was imprisoned by the bailiffs of Kingston in Surrey, accused of blasphemously denying God, Christ, Scriptures, and prayer, and then charged with interrupting a church service in a threatening manner. He also called himself a prophet and was portrayed as a madman.<sup>4</sup> His companion Winstanley was a freeman of the Merchant Taylors’ Company, whose London business had been severely disrupted by wartime, reducing him to bankruptcy. Afterwards Winstanley relocated to Cobham in Surrey, supporting himself as a grazier by pasturing cattle, harvesting winter fodder, and digging peat on waste land—for which he and several others were fined by the local manorial court (as inhabitants they lacked the customary rights of tenants to take fuel from the commons).<sup>5</sup>

Everard justified the new communal experiment with a vision bidding him “*Arise and dig, and plow the Earth and receive the fruits thereof*” (cf. Matthew 21:34),<sup>6</sup> while Winstanley declared that during a trance he had heard “these words, *Worke together. Eat bread together*” (cf. Jeremiah 41:1). St. George’s Hill was revealed as the place where by “righteous labour, and sweat of our browes” (cf. Proverbs 10:16, Genesis 3:19) work should begin in making the Earth “*a common Treasury of livelihood to whole mankind, without respect of persons*” (cf. Mark 12:43, Acts 2:44).<sup>7</sup> Complaints, however, were soon made to the authorities against these “new fangled,” “distracted, crack brained,” “disorderly and tumultuous sort of people.” Wary of a royalist rendezvous gathered under cover of the commotion caused by such “ridiculous” activities, the Council of State instructed Lord General Thomas Fairfax to investigate. Two cavalry troops under the command of Captain John Gladman therefore marched from London, four advance riders encountering Everard and Winstanley while the remaining 20 or more Diggers—“*feeble souls*” with “*empty bellies*”—were dispersed.<sup>8</sup> On Friday, 20 April 1649, Everard and Winstanley were brought to Whitehall before Fairfax. According to one account, reprinted in several newsbooks, they refused to remove their hats in deference. Moreover, Everard allegedly asserted:

That he was of the Race of the Jewes, & that all the liberties of the people were lost by the coming in of *William* the Conquerour; and that ever since, the people of God have lived under tyranny and oppression.<sup>9</sup>

But now the “time of deliverance was at hand, and God would bring his people” (cf. Obadiah 1:17, Psalm 53:6) out of their Egyptian “slavery” (Exodus 6:5–6) and “restore them their freedoms,” thereby enabling them to enjoy “the fruits and benefits of the Earth” (James 5:7). Intending to “restore the Creation to its former Condition” (cf. Genesis 3:17, Romans 8:22), the Diggers justified their actions as a fulfilment of the prophecy “*This Land which was barren and wast is now become fruitfull and pleasant like the Garden of Eden*” (Ezekiel 36:35). In addition, by renewing “the ancient Community” and distributing the earth’s produce to the poor and needy, they performed gospel injunctions to feed the hungry and clothe the naked (Matthew 25:36). The Diggers thus welcomed those that would willingly submit to their communal precepts—especially the Golden rule “to do to others as we would be done unto” (Matthew 7:12), promising to provide newcomers with food, drink, clothing, and other necessities. They were also opposed to using weapons in self-defense, and when one was struck, he turned the other cheek.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, Walton’s inhabitants were predominantly hostile to the “new Plantation” on St. George’s Hill. Winstanley claimed that several Diggers were imprisoned in Walton church and beaten by the “rude multitude,” while the acre of ground they had worked was “trampled down” and “re-levelled,” their “new Creation utterly destroyed” by the “Country people” thereabouts.<sup>11</sup> Undeterred, a “considerable party” of Diggers returned intending to sow hempseed. Within days they had issued their first manifesto, *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, the London bookseller George Thomason dating his copy 26 April 1649. Everard and Winstanley headed the list of 15 named subscribers, contending that so long as a system of landlords and their rent-paying tenants persisted, the “Great Creator Reason” remained “mightily dishonoured.” Buying, selling, and enclosing land, which had been gotten through oppression, murder, or theft, kept it “in the hands of a few,” placing the “Creation under bondage.” Nor would the English be a “Free People” until the landless poor were permitted “to dig and labour the Commons” and “Waste land,” averting starvation through their “righteous Labours.”<sup>12</sup> About a month later, while fetching wood to build a house, the Diggers were ambushed, their cart sabotaged, and a draft horse maimed.<sup>13</sup> At the end of May when Fairfax visited St. George’s Hill with his entourage, he found nine “sober honest” men and three women “hard at work” among some sprouting barley.<sup>14</sup>

On 1 June, Thomason acquired the Diggers’ second manifesto, *A Declaration from the Poor oppressed People of England*, signed by 45 men. Renouncing their subordinate position—“Slaves, Servants, and Beggars” subject to the “Lords of the Land”—these poor, hungry signatories condemned hoarding the

earth's treasures in "Bags, Chests, and Barns." Instead the Diggers proclaimed "the Earth, with all her Fruits of Corn, Cattle, and such like" (cf. Mark 4:28) to have been made "a common Storehouse of Livelihood" for all mankind, friend or foe, without exception (cf. Deuteronomy 28:8). In addition, they claimed an "equal right" to the land by the "righteous Law of Creation" (cf. Romans 10:4), denouncing the "subtle art of buying and selling the Earth" and her fruits (cf. Revelation 13:17) together with the "great god" money (cf. 1 Timothy 6:10).<sup>15</sup> This declaration was followed by *A Letter to The Lord Fairfax* (delivered 9 June) in which Winstanley accused some infantry quartered at Walton of assaulting a man and beating a boy; stealing clothing, linen, and food; and setting fire to the Diggers' house.<sup>16</sup> On 11 June, four Diggers were brutally attacked by a group of local men wielding staves and clubs, and ritually dressed in women's apparel.<sup>17</sup> Yet physical violence was not the only threat Diggers faced; their enemies also filed suits for trespass against them in Kingston's court. Winstanley and several others were arrested, and though they demanded to plead their own case rather than paying an attorney, the jury required them to pay damages. One Digger was briefly jailed while some of Winstanley's cows were distrained, driven away to feed the "snapsack" boys and "ammunition drabs" until "strangers" rescued them out of the bailiffs' hands.<sup>18</sup> At an unknown date, the Diggers abandoned their colony on St. George's Hill.

By late August 1649, they had relocated to the Little Heath in neighboring Cobham, a parish where a number of Diggers originated. It has been suggested that among those of middling social and economic status there was a mixed response, which may be contrasted with determined opposition from local gentry, rich landowners, and their tenants.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of October, the Council of State instructed Fairfax to send cavalry to assist the Justices of the Peace for Surrey in dispersing an estimated 50 Diggers. Reportedly aspiring to "*a Community in all things*" where "*they should share with the rest of the sonnes of Adam, the Wealth and Riches of the Nation,*" several of these "Planters of Parsnips and Carrats" were arrested. They were subsequently bailed on a legal technicality.<sup>20</sup> Then on consecutive days in late November with gentry in attendance, laborers and soldiers pulled down the Diggers' two wooden houses, forcing an elderly couple to sleep out in the cold, open field.<sup>21</sup> In April 1650, a poor man's house was pulled down, and his pregnant wife savagely kicked so that she miscarried. The week after Easter, John Platt, rector of nearby West Horsley, came with about 50 men and had the hirelings burn down six houses. At night some returned to threaten the Diggers with murder unless they departed, making their point by hacking salvaged furniture to pieces. Afterwards news spread that the Diggers had been "routed," and

church bells were rung in celebration.<sup>22</sup> The colony at Cobham had endured for approximately 34 weeks, the original plantation at St. George's Hill less than 21. Although other Digger communities were established at Iver (Buckinghamshire) and Wellingborough (Northamptonshire), these too were short-lived. Moreover, little is known of alleged Digger activity at Barnet (maybe Friern Barnet, Middlesex), Dunstable (Bedfordshire), and Enfield (Middlesex), or at unidentified locations in Gloucestershire (possibly Slimbridge and Frampton), Kent (plausibly Cox Heath, Cox Hall, or Cock Hill), Leicestershire (perhaps Husbands Bosworth), and Nottinghamshire.<sup>23</sup>

## II. Afterlife: Identity, Memory, and Interpretation

In August 1650, Winstanley and some "Honest Diggers" found employment as wheat threshers on the prophetess Lady Eleanor Douglas's estate at Pirton, Hertfordshire, but by June 1652, Winstanley had returned to Cobham where he witnessed the will of a fellow Digger.<sup>24</sup> During the interval Winstanley compiled and probably revised scattered papers that were issued as his last publication, *The Law of Freedom in a platform* (1652). Dedicated to Captain-General Oliver Cromwell, Commander-in-Chief of all the Commonwealth's forces and military victor cast in Davidic mold, this remarkable treatise concerns the equitable distribution of the spoils of war.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on biblical history, Winstanley noted how, rather than dividing Canaan among themselves, the triumphant Israelite army officers "divided the Land by lot" among the twelve tribes (Joshua 16–18). He also emphasized Samuel's warning to the Israelite elders against setting up a king instead of God to reign over them (1 Samuel 8:10–19).<sup>26</sup> Comparing Charles I to an "Oppressing Pharaoh" whose authority stemmed from the Norman Conquest over "our Forefathers," Winstanley identified the "Clergy, Lawyers, and Law" as fundamental props of monarchical power.<sup>27</sup> Using another biblical image, that of the struggle between Jacob and Esau in the womb (Genesis 25:22–34, Romans 9:11–13)—interpreted as the younger brother supplanting the elder's possession of the land by birthright<sup>28</sup>—Winstanley interpreted the abolition of "Kingly Power" as fulfilment of the apocalyptic prophecy that the "old Heaven, and the old Earth . . . must pass away" (Revelation 21:1).<sup>29</sup> In its place he envisaged "Commonwealths Government."

This ideal republic was partly modelled on premonarchical ancient Israel, with a legal system derived to a certain extent from a combination of Mosaic Law and the commentaries of Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634), former Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench.<sup>30</sup> Established on patriarchal foundations,<sup>31</sup>

with a Parliament protected by a standing army that would quell insurrection and repel foreign invasion,<sup>32</sup> Winstanley's commonwealth required obedient citizens, conscious of the punishments for breaching the laws.<sup>33</sup> With "*a rod . . . prepared for the fools back*" (Proverbs 26:3), transgressors faced public humiliation, whipping, restricted diet, year long servitude, an "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, limb for limb" (Exodus 21:24), and execution for crimes such as taking legal fees, maintained preaching, buying and selling land or produce within the commonwealth, rape, and murder.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, if Coke's advice were followed to build extra houses of correction, then "there shall be neither beggar nor idle person" in the commonwealth.<sup>35</sup> Recently seized Crown and Bishops' lands that, in Winstanley's opinion, had been liberated by bloodshed during the Civil Wars, together with the ancient commons and wasteland, were to be returned to the "oppressed People" hitherto prevented from enjoying their "Birth-Rights."<sup>36</sup> The Earth would "become a Common Treasury to all her children,"<sup>37</sup> with communal barns and storehouses stocking butter, cheese, corn, and the precious "fruits of the Earth" (James 5:7) and butchers' shops dispensing free meat to the hungry.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, natural resources—land, herbs, roots, plants, trees, minerals, metals, animals—were not to be preserved. Instead they would be put to "profitable" use for the benefit of mankind through husbandry, mining, livestock management, forestry, astronomy, astrology, and navigation, thus ensuring the peace and harmony of the commonwealth. Indeed, young people were to be instructed in "the inward knowledg of the things which are," enabling them to discover "the secrets of Nature" and thereby "know the works of God within the Creation."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, *The Law of Freedom* has been likened to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and variously interpreted as a blueprint for a secular millennium, an unprecedented analysis by a great political theorist who wished to establish a communist society and the model for a state-within-a-state where repressive laws would enforce totalitarian discipline.<sup>40</sup>

The remainder of Winstanley's life is notable for intermittent local office holding (waywarden, overseer of the poor, churchwarden, chief constable) and, crucially, his death and burial as a Quaker.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, several critics suggested that Winstanley's works shaped the formation of Quaker thought, one maintaining that they contained "the very draughts and even Body of Quakerism."<sup>42</sup> The extent of this connection is still vigorously debated.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, despite the Leveller leaders professing that they had never intended "to Levell mens estates," abolish social distinctions, or introduce anarchy, contemporary journalists tended to describe Diggers imprecisely as new Levellers or true Levellers (after their first manifesto's title).<sup>44</sup> A prominent exception was Marchamont Nedham, who argued that blurring differences between these

two groups was designed to bring the Levellers into disrepute. As a republican propagandist Nedham condemned attempts to introduce an “*absolute Community*.” He was equally critical of the notion that “God is our *common-Father*, the earth our *Common-Mother*” and the Diggers’ belief that ownership stemmed from human pride and covetousness. Even so, when visiting Surrey in 1673, the antiquarian John Aubrey incorrectly noted that St. George’s Hill was where “a great meeting of Levellers” were “like to have turned the world upside downe,” adding that they were “encouraged” by their leader John Lilburne.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike the Levellers, whose memory was invoked and appropriated by radicals in the late eighteenth century as part of their republican heritage, traces of the Diggers almost vanished.<sup>46</sup> Although it is difficult to find any opinions about Winstanley, there are examples of ownership and, more rarely, readership of his writings.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the Diggers were noticed by the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume, who lumped their doctrine of a community of goods with the “numberless” “extravagances” that “broke out among the people” in 1649. William Godwin, philosopher and novelist, was likewise scathing, and the French politician and historian François Guizot thought they, together with other small groups, were influenced by “political or religious ideas of a variously anarchical nature.” The biographer Thomas Carlyle, however, pitied them as a “poor Brotherhood.”<sup>48</sup> Yet it was not until the growth of bourgeois Liberal-, Socialist-, and Marxist-inspired historical studies that the Diggers began to merit extensive discussion. In 1895—the year of Friedrich Engels’s death—Eduard Bernstein, a German journalist exiled in London, published a book tracing the struggle for democracy and social reform in early modern England in which he outlined the atheistic and communistic tendencies of the Levellers and Diggers. Acknowledging the importance of Bernstein’s work, the Cambridge-educated George Gooch considered Winstanley the accepted “leader of the English Communists,” who alone among his English contemporaries “recognised the well-being of the proletariat as constituting the criterion not only of political but of social and economic conditions.”<sup>49</sup> In the years around the turn of the twentieth century, the Diggers’ significance continued to be debated, notably by the Scottish journalist, republican, and democrat John Davidson, who compared Winstanley with Henry George (1839–97), an American political economist and campaigner for public ownership of land. So too did the Quaker Lewis Berens, claiming that it was as a sincere “advocate of peaceful, practical reforms” and courageous, “unflinching opponent of the use of force” that Winstanley appealed to his own generation.<sup>50</sup>

In 1940 the Socialist publisher Victor Gollancz distributed *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* through the Left Book Club—an anti-fascist

organization with a membership at its peak of 57,000. Its author was David Petegorsky, a Canadian-born Jewish scholar influenced by Socialist teaching at the London School of Economics. According to Petegorsky, Winstanley's first two "almost unreadable" pamphlets of 1648 were typical products of chiliastic mysticism, his religious doctrines characteristic of the "environment of the age." Thereafter Winstanley shed that mysticism, developing "progressive rationalist" arguments and a concern with "practical communism" to appear as the "most advanced radical of the century."<sup>51</sup> The following year—which ended with the United States entering the Second World War—George Sabine of Cornell University issued an edition of *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, reprinting all except the earliest three pamphlets, for which he provided abstracts. This crucial omission of Winstanley's pre-1649 tracts distorted the trajectory of his thought (an imagined journey from Calvinist convictions to social philosophy) by emphasizing the perceived rational elements at the expense of the supposedly mystical. Accordingly, Democrats, Socialists, and Marxists welcomed it.<sup>52</sup> Forewarned by Sabine's edition, Leonard Hamilton and other members of the Oxford University History Society (the "Diggers of 1939–40") published an inexpensive selection from Winstanley's works in which the so-called mystical writings were again misleadingly excluded.<sup>53</sup> The North American response was swift. Winstanley's identity as "a seventeenth-century Marxist" was dismissed as sophistry, a disingenuous attempt to demonstrate that "left-wing socialism" was "indigenous to the British Isles" and had "its roots in 'the native British tradition.'"<sup>54</sup>

Against the background of student protests in 1968, Christopher Hill, a former member of the Historians' Group of the Communist Party who had argued that only the Marxist approach could "restore to the English people part of their heritage of which they have been robbed," completed an extremely influential work: *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (1972). In Hill's opinion Britain doubtless "fared the worse in some respects for rejecting the truths" of seventeenth-century radicals.<sup>55</sup> Nowhere was his despair more apparent than when he contemplated:

our landscape made hideous by neon signs, advertisements, pylons, wreckage of automobiles; our seas poisoned by atomic waste, their shores littered with plastic and oil; our atmosphere polluted with carbon dioxide and nuclear fall-out, our peace shattered by supersonic planes; as we think of nuclear bombs which can "waste and destroy" . . . we can recognize that man's greed, competition between men and between states, are really in danger of upsetting the balance of nature, of poisoning and destroying the globe.<sup>56</sup>



These were the consequences of living in a “brain-washed” society, of rejecting one of Winstanley’s “profoundest” insights that “in a competitive society the state is just a part of the competitive system.”<sup>57</sup> Hill’s edition of Winstanley’s selected writings reinforced his subject’s relevance for the modern world by making “allowances for the Biblical idiom” and instead portraying him as a believer in “human progress,” “reason,” and “international brotherhood,” an author whose insights “may be of interest to those in the Third World today who face the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society.”<sup>58</sup>

Undeniably dramatic, Hill’s shifting narratives of radicalism in the English Revolution lent themselves to historical fiction and were adapted for screen, stage, and song. Based on David Caute’s enjoyable novel *Comrade Jacob* (1961), which drew upon Hill’s “unrivalled knowledge” of the subject, the 35mm black and white film *Winstanley* (1975) was directed on a limited budget by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo. With a cast composed almost entirely of amateurs and an eye for historical detail (footwear, agricultural implements, livestock, terrain, and climate), its connections with the present—raging inflation, unemployment, troubles in Northern Ireland, a desperately divided left-wing, the commune movement—were, as Brownlow noted, “obvious.”<sup>59</sup> In the same vein, a Digger pamphlet provided the title for Caryl Churchill’s play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), which showed “the amazed excitement of people taking hold of their own lives, and their gradual betrayal as those who led them realised that freedom could not be had without property being destroyed.”<sup>60</sup> What is more, the singer and songwriter Leon Rosselson composed “The World Turned Upside Down” (1976). Rosselson’s emotional lyrics, subsequently covered by Billy Bragg after hearing them sung at a benefit for striking miners in 1984, sympathized with the Diggers’ lingering vision.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, Chumbawamba then recorded and performed “The Diggers Song” (1649).<sup>62</sup> This left-wing “sentimentalism” extended to the literal observance of the 350th anniversary of the Diggers’ foundation by The Land is Ours, an organization that briefly reoccupied St. George’s Hill in April 1999 before the landowners, North Surrey Water Limited, had them evicted. Elmbridge Borough Council has since named two new streets in Cobham after Winstanley.<sup>63</sup>

Also present at events commemorating the Diggers was the environmental activist George Monbiot. He has stated that Winstanley’s writings “inspired thousands of modern activists,” seeing striking parallels with the perspectives developed by Brazilian peasants resisting the seizure of their lands. According to Monbiot, Winstanley was “one of the world’s first liberation theologians” as well as a “non-violent direct activist” and author of “the first communist

manifesto in the United Kingdom.” Monbiot, moreover, has spoken of the Diggers’ “direct activist camp” on St. George’s Hill, likening it to a “climate camp” run as “a perfect anarchist collective.”<sup>64</sup> This latest refashioning of Winstanley’s image has its roots in mounting, if diverse, environmental concerns during the late 1960s (an era when latter-day Diggers flowered in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district), the environmentalist lobbies that emerged in the early 1970s (particularly campaigns against nuclear weapons, nuclear power, and industrial pollution in West Germany), and their fruition in the latter part of that decade as European Green parties.<sup>65</sup> Green, of course, is found in nature as the color of growing herbage and leaves. In Muslim tradition it was the symbolic color of Paradise; in early modern England the color of youthfulness, inexperience, lovers, envy, and the forest (green men were synonymous with woodland savagery). Nonetheless, its association with politics is older than commonly thought. Hence Levellers and Leveller sympathizers wore sea-green colors at funerals in 1649, London weavers rioted in 1675 wearing green aprons, and there was a Whig Green Ribbon Club.<sup>66</sup>

Given these connotations, the question posed by Ian Bradley in 1989—was Winstanley “England’s Pioneer Green”?—is not incongruous. Writing at a time of “increasing interest among Christians in developing a ‘greener’ theology,” Bradley suggested that Winstanley could be regarded as “the founding father of organic gardening,” a man whose “ecological message” made him “one of the first Friends of the Earth.” Winstanley’s credentials as a Green revolutionary were reaffirmed by his inclusion in a *Green History* reader edited by Derek Wall—currently “the Male Principal Speaker for the Green Party.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, introducing the theme of “Ecological spirituality” at a Quaker Yearly Meeting, a campaigning academic insisted that Winstanley “points towards a taproot of English social and ecological values that might again be drawn upon today.” The Socialist politician Tony Benn would doubtless agree, claiming the Diggers “anticipated today’s environmental and green movements in seeing the earth as a precious ‘common storehouse for all.’”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, James Holstun detected a “green millennialism” sprouting within Winstanley’s agrarian communist utopia and has heard its echoes in the Amazonian rubber tappers’ manifesto, revealing the “common desire” over a “gulf of 350 years” of both Diggers and Forest People “to create themselves freely through collective labour on the land.”<sup>69</sup> This ideologically motivated construction of a Green heritage that incorporates Winstanley and his Digger comrades has thus enabled Monbiot to claim “we are not alone. We have historical allies going back a very long way.”<sup>70</sup>

### III. Anachronisms: Ecology and Environmentalism

Derived from a combination of the Greek for household (*oikos*) and word or thought (*logos*), the term *Ökologie* was coined by the German biologist Ernest Haeckel, first appearing in *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin, 1866). In a subsequent work translated into English as *The History of Creation* (1876), Haeckel defined *æcology* as the science of “the correlations between all organisms living together in one and the same locality and their adaptations to their surroundings.” Although variations of this definition were formulated, there remained a long-standing consensus that ecology was concerned with studying the interrelations between living organisms and, more generally, their relationship to their habitat. Since the late 1960s, however, there has arguably been a “greenwashing” of the English language. Consequently, *ecology* and several of its lexical offshoots—*ecological*, *ecologist*, *eco-awareness*, *eco-catastrophe*, *ecocide*, *ecocriticism*, *ecopolypse*, *eco-spirituality*, *ecosystem*, *eco-tax*, *eco-terrorist*, *eco-tourism*, *eco-war*—have become expressions predominantly associated with political and social movements agitating against damage to our planet caused by human activity.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, whereas *environment* in the sense of physical surroundings was used by Thomas Carlyle in 1830, *environmentalism*, meaning concern with preservation of these surroundings—air, water, wilderness, nonrenewable fuels, endangered species—especially from the effects of pollution and global warming, as well as urban sprawl, intensive farming, overgrazing, deforestation, desertification, mining, hunting, and fishing, came into vogue in about 1970.<sup>72</sup> To speak of ecology or environmentalism in an early modern context is therefore anachronistic. Nonetheless, because the names were absent during this period, it does not necessarily follow that there were no comparable concepts. So I will argue that researching early modern ecological issues is a legitimate field of enquiry. Indeed, examining ideas about air, water, wood, minerals, earth, and animals suggests that there were examples of what we now call environmentalism in early modern England, albeit with a caveat: inattention to context results in oversimplification and, sometimes, error.

The major cause of concern was London. Seventeenth-century intramural parishes tended to be dirty, smelly, and noisy, those in the less fashionable east end of the metropolis subject to the polluting stench carried across the City by the prevailing westerly wind.<sup>73</sup> Smoke from burned sea coal (a very soft, sulphurous, low-grade coal) had been an intermittent health hazard since the late thirteenth century. A cheaper urban alternative to firewood and charcoal, near universal domestic and industrial use of sea coal was identified by the statistician John Graunt (1620–74) as contributing to London's high mortality

rate. In a work dedicated to the restored Charles II on the inconvenience of London's smoky air entitled *Fumifugium* (1661), the diarist and botanist John Evelyn (1620–1706) likewise deplored that “Hellish and dismall Cloud” of sea coal “perpetually imminent” over this “*Glorious and Antient*” City’s “*stately head*,” wrapping it in “*Clouds of Smoake and Sulphur*.” Evelyn’s observation that London’s inhabitants breathed nothing except “an impure and thick Mist accompanied with a fuliginous and filthy vapour” that lead to lung disorders—catarrh, bronchitis, coughing, tuberculosis—together with his remedy—removing industries dependent on burning sea coal five or six miles beyond the City and planting acres of shrubs yielding the “most fragrant and odoriferous” flowers on London’s outskirts—situates his pamphlet in contemporary scientific and medical debates about the properties of air and the connection between air quality and public health. Hence perfumes and pomanders were recommended by the College of Physicians as protection against miasma, which was commonly believed to cause plague.<sup>74</sup>

Another sanitary problem was water. Waste was regularly dumped into the River Thames, and access to fresh water for drinking, cooking, washing, and industry was a sporadic source of tension. Unlike Paris or Rome, whose piazzas were dramatic and symbolic locations for water spouting from Bernini-designed sculptures of mythological sea and river deities, London was no fountain city. Instead people obtained water from the Thames, pumps (many built over older wells), conduits, and water-bearers. Delivering adequate uncontaminated supplies of this natural resource was thus an important aspect of civic politics.<sup>75</sup>

Equally worrying, even allowing for contemporary exaggeration, was the growing shortage of wood, which led to Tudor Parliamentary legislation aimed at protecting and preserving this essential commodity. A major and burgeoning consumer was the shipping industry, but there were additional pressures. Despoliation of royal parks by locals and soldiers during and after the Civil Wars, their seizure and sale by Parliament and subsequent exploitation by new owners—one was accused of cutting down and selling £5000 worth of timber trees, leaving barely enough to make a gallows—meant that deforestation had become acute.<sup>76</sup> Responding to an enquiry to the Royal Society from naval officers and commissioners, Evelyn delivered *Sylva, or a discourse of forest-trees, and the Propagation of Timber* (1664). Condemning the “furious devastation of so many goodly Woods and Forests” by “our late prodigious Spoilers”—disloyal and avaricious purchasers of Crown lands—he blended classical sources with Italian and English poetry, contributions from several “*Worthy Persons*,” and personal experience in an impassioned appeal

to his “better-natur'd *Country-men*” to preserve, maintain, and replenish royal forests and other “*Magazines of Timber*.” Yet it was not just conservation that motivated Evelyn, for his advice on improving estate management was also intended to profit landowners. Accordingly, he enumerated the benefits of different trees, among them, oak for the navy, elm for firewood, beech for utensils and furniture, ash for weapons and carts, chestnut for building houses, walnut for shade and wainscot, birch for medical remedies, hazel for poles and angling rods, poplar for creating avenues, willow for clogs, pine for tar, cypress for chests, juniper for fuel and perfume, and laurel for ornament. Felling, however, was recommended only when a tree reached maturity.<sup>77</sup>

Whereas the earth “like a beneficent and kindly mother” yielded her abundant bounty of “herbs, pulses, grains and fruits of the trees” into the light of day, she buried her minerals far beneath in the depths. These potential riches, however, hidden—to quote the Roman poet Ovid—in the “bowels of the world . . . next the gates of Hell” had been considered an incentive to “wickedness and sin” since antiquity. Nonetheless, the Saxon humanist, physician, and geologist Georgius Agricola (1494–1555) defended mining in his posthumously published masterpiece *De re metallica* (Basel, 1556) as one of the most ancient, necessary, skillful, and profitable arts for those giving it care and attention. Influenced by Vitruvius, Pliny the Elder, and Columella's *De re rustica*, Agricola presented counter-arguments in order to refute them: mining was a “perilous” occupation—miners breathed “pestilential air,” were crushed in masses of rock and injured, or killed themselves falling down shafts; metals offered neither spiritual nor bodily sustenance; gold and silver were “deadly and nefarious pests,” the cause of avarice, adultery, destruction, invasion, robbery, and ruin; iron, copper, and tin were used in making weapons such as swords, pikes, and muskets; lead was a “pestilential and noxious” metal. Concealed because they were unnecessary for human life, metals were therefore despised by the noblest as the basis of “very great evils.” Moreover, as Agricola acknowledged, fields, woods, and groves were “devastated” by mining operations, countless trees were chopped down leading to the extermination of birds and beasts, and washing ores in water poisoned brooks and streams destroying fish or driving them away.<sup>78</sup>

Echoes of Ovid's account of the rape of the earth by violent, greedy miners can be found in Guillaume Salluste, Sieur du Bartas's *La Semaine, ou Creation du Monde* (Paris, 1578), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Hence Du Bartas's “Not contented with / Th' abundant gifts she outward offereth, / With sacrilegious Tools we rudely rend-her / And ransack deeply in her bosom tender”; Spenser's “the hid treasures in her

sacred tombe, / With Sacriledge to dig"; Milton's "Men also, and by [Mammon's] suggestion taught, / Ransacked the centre, and with impious hands / Rifled the bowels of their mother earth / For treasures better hid."<sup>79</sup> In a different vein, the chemist and physiologist Robert Boyle (1627–91) reworked passages from Agricola into a series of more than 100 questions on mines printed in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (1666). Boyle's enquiries included questions about the terrain's fertility, the type and size of animals feeding on it, the inhabitants' longevity and susceptibility to disease, the purity of surrounding water sources, air quality and weather variability, and the condition of trees and vegetation. A response concerning mines on the Mendip Hills, Somerset indicated that those employed melting lead contracted a deadly disease when working in low-lying smoke, which was likewise fatal to big-bellied, stunted sheep grazing thereabouts, while nearby undersized trees had their tops burnt and leaves discolored.<sup>80</sup> Other evidence from lead mines within the Wirksworth and High Peak districts of Derbyshire warns of "bellanding" or lead poisoning: miners striking ore with their picks inhaled sulphurous smelling dust that caused constipation and "Intolerable Pain"; prolonged exposure gave them a deathly gray pallor, "distemp'ed brain," and "wild staring look." Cattle, sheep, and men also fell down open mineshafts and holes.<sup>81</sup>

All the same, despite the consequences and dangers of mining, biblical references to metals—gold, silver, tin, brass, iron, lead—and precious stones—agate, amethyst, beryl, carnelian (sardius), chalcedony, crystal, diamond, emerald, hyacinth (ligure), jasper, onyx, ruby (carbuncle), sapphire, topaz (chrysolite)—encouraged the belief that the Creator had placed these minerals within the "*belly of the Earth*" for "mans use, and Gods glory."<sup>82</sup> Mining was thus regarded as a great benefit to the Commonwealth, a potential source of employment for thousands of poor people that would generate bullion for minting coin, thereby advancing trade and reducing taxes.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, locating untapped veins and improving productivity through better ventilation, drainage, and drilling techniques were recurrent features of the industry.<sup>84</sup> Nor was depletion a universal fear, because as the metallurgist John Webster (1611–82) explained, metals grew like vegetables; generated within hard, rocky wombs, they replenished themselves after an interval of about 20 or 30 years.<sup>85</sup>

Just as mining had a visible impact on the landscape, so too did cultivation. According to Genesis, God had planted the first garden in Eden. Fruit-bearing trees grew there, watered by a stream that divided into the four great rivers of the world. Adam was put into Eden to till and preserve it. After eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, however, the ground was cursed, forcing man to labor for food outside Eden—thorns and thistles had to be removed and

the earth from which Adam had been formed cultivated. Additional scriptural passages emphasized that husbandry averted hunger and thirst, contrasting the perfect, tended Garden of Eden with desolate wilderness.<sup>86</sup> As Keith Thomas has shown, these biblical imperatives to subdue and replenish the earth were implemented in early modern England; order was imposed on environment as marshes were reclaimed, fens drained, and heaths converted into arable land.<sup>87</sup> Civilization was advanced through husbandry; the “*most common*,” “*natural*” and “*Holy*” of occupations. Furthermore, whereas dearth resulted from bad weather, crop failure, neglect of tilled land, and taking the nutrients out of the soil through overplowing, successful agricultural improvements—innovations in plowing, sowing, crop rotation, manuring, and planting and pruning fruit trees—brought an increased yield, economic benefits for landowners, and employment. Imitating classical precedents and associating beauty with fertility rather than barren disorder, the ideal cultivated landscape was intended to mirror geometric harmony through neat, symmetrical forms.<sup>88</sup> Transposed from earth to verse, the virtues of order were a common feature of country house poems. Hence writing of Thomas Fairfax's Yorkshire estate at Nun Appleton, Andrew Marvell compared gardening to soldiering, the arrangement of blooming flowers to military formations and emplacements.<sup>89</sup>

Like the earth that was to be tamed by Adam and Eve's offspring, God had made fish in the sea, fowl in the air, four-footed beasts, and creeping things over which man was to have dominion once he had named them.<sup>90</sup> Accordingly, it was commonly believed in early modern England that animals had been created to serve human needs. They could be used for labor and transport, domesticated for company, eaten for food, hunted for pleasure, and experimented upon to further scientific knowledge. Although fish, birds, animals, and insects were believed, along with humans and angels, to be divinely ordered on a hierarchical scale, the boundaries between humans and animals were maintained in a number of ways. These included stressing human's unique anatomy, erect posture, rationality, conscience, and acquisition of language, as well as questioning the existence of animals' souls. Sentiment was generally lacking. Bull and bearbaiting, as well as cockfighting, were popular English pastimes, while the few known vegetarians such as Roger Crab (c. 1616–80), soldier, Baptist, and hermit, and Thomas Tryon (1634–1703), Baptist, merchant, and author, were widely regarded as eccentrics.<sup>91</sup>

This sketch of what may arguably be termed English proto-environmentalism—early modern attitudes toward air, water, wood, minerals, earth, and animals—is necessary to appreciate the Diggers' outlook on their environment. We have seen that in *The Law of Freedom* Winstanley envisaged an ideal republic

where the earth would become a common treasury: commons and wasteland cultivated by the poor; communal barns and storehouses furnished with the fruits of the earth; butchers distributing free meat; and land, vegetation, trees, stones, metals, and animals put to profitable use for mankind's benefit through husbandry, mining, livestock management, forestry, astronomy, astrology, and navigation. Yet this treatise, which sometimes chimes with the vision of universal reformation disseminated by the Polish émigré Samuel Hartlib (c. 1600–62) and his circle, was published after the Diggers had been defeated.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, we must be sensitive to developments in Winstanley's thought by comparing it with the message of his earlier writings.

For the most part he was consistent. Thus the needy Diggers deplored manorial lords profiting from cutting down and selling trees growing on the commons, stating their intent to "cut and fell" these "Woods and Trees" so as to provide a stock for themselves. Elsewhere, however, Winstanley spoke not of external but internal verdure, notably with his exposition of the verse "*it was commanded by them, that they should not hurt the green grasse of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree*" (Revelation 9:4) as a reference to "tender sons and daughters that Christ hath newly called out of the earth."<sup>93</sup> Similarly, he likened the soul's apprehension of barrenness with her presence amidst an "unfruitfull and dry" wilderness.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, barren land was to be made fruitful through communal cultivation; fertilizing, tilling, digging, and plowing the earth would remove both entanglements—thorns and briars (Isaiah 10:17)—and the curse, creating a blessed common treasury. Then "*Jerusalem*" in England would become "a praise to the whole earth."<sup>95</sup> Gold and silver could be used, provided they were not minted into currency; stamped with the image of tyranny, encircled with letters that Winstanley reckoned made 666, the number of "Kingly Power and Glory" (Revelation 13:18).<sup>96</sup> Moreover, unlike beasts, which ranked below him, man was privileged with knowing that he was ruled by reason.<sup>97</sup> Carnivorous by choice, vegetarian of necessity, Winstanley nonetheless pitied his skinny underfed cows when they were beaten on their heads and sides with clubs.<sup>98</sup> These feelings complemented his belief that God had made all creatures for man's "pleasure or profit" and that in the "beginning of time" the "whole Creation" had lived harmoniously "in man, one within."<sup>99</sup> Hence Winstanley's declaration:

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.<sup>100</sup>



Ecology is a complex subject, and one needs to acknowledge the varieties of modern environmental beliefs from the light and dark shades of Greens to the social and deep ecologists. While it is illuminating to witness how various and sometimes divergent strands of thought have been teased out and traced back to the Diggers, it does them an injustice to read their texts with a present-centered perspective. Abusing the past in the service of modern ideological movements is unfortunately widespread, and the Diggers' afterlife vividly illustrates how, since their rediscovery in the nineteenth century, they have been successively appropriated by Liberals, Socialists, Marxists, Protestant nonconformists, and, latterly, Greens. Though this process is instructive, most of the arguments advanced by politically committed scholars remain, to my mind, unconvincing, functioning more as a vane for shifting academic political allegiances than as a sensitive representation of the surviving evidence. It must be emphasized that Winstanley and the Diggers cannot easily be accommodated within emerging Green narratives, which at their worst seem little more than exercises in legitimation. Context matters, and the second part of this article—intended to appear in the forthcoming issue on Christian radicalism—will examine how, against the backdrop of political, religious and social turmoil, as well as economic distress, Winstanley's notions about his environment fit within the body of his thought. Accordingly, it will explore his understanding of cosmogony, anthropology, and soteriology; the nature of Creation, God, Jesus, macrocosm and microcosm, angels, the Devil, serpent, Adam, Eve, Garden of Eden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life, the curse and the woman's seed, salvation, and the fruits of the earth. I will suggest that digging operated as interior and exterior processes, corresponding to Winstanley's belief in a kingdom within and a kingdom without.

## NOTES

A version of this paper was read at the British History in the 17th Century seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, London (24 January 2008), and I would like to thank the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. In addition, I have profited from the advice of Mario Caricchio, Vittoria Feola, Lorenza Gianfrancesco, John Gurney, and Devin Zuber. Place of publication, where known and unless otherwise stated, is London. Though Winstanley and the Diggers sometimes glossed scriptural phrases, they did not always provide sources for their biblical allusions. I have therefore considered it helpful to supply these references to the so-called Authorized Version of the Bible (1611) in parentheses. I alone am responsible for any mistakes or shortcomings.

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