

## CHAPTER TWO

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# Nostalgia in and against English Socialism, 1775–1894

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### Introduction

In this chapter I explore a rupture in the politics of the past. Drawing on three English examples, I argue that, in the late nineteenth century, the relationship of the left to the past began to change. The past was increasingly filtered through an anti-nostalgic world-view. Thus nostalgia became a site of anxiety and transgression. This argument is developed around portraits of three of the foundational figures in English socialism, Thomas Spence (1750–1814), William Morris (1834–1896) and Robert Blatchford (1851–1943).

The first of the two dates that bookend this chapter refers to the publication of *Property in Land Every One's Right*, by one of English history's authentic examples of 'radicalism from below', Thomas Spence.<sup>1</sup> I discuss Spence's politics in terms he would recognize: not in the anachronistic language of socialism or class struggle but in terms of the natural and historical right of the people to the common ownership of the land. I also intend to emphasize the unselfconscious role of continuity, memory and tradition in Spence's radicalism. When we turn to the *rediscovery* of Spence, from the early 1880s to the present day, we see these themes being put aside. They were neglected in favour of a vision of Spence as a proletarian, an embryonic class warrior. Thus, in tracing the socialist invention of Spence, I chart a developing anti-nostalgic political orthodoxy. It is an orthodoxy that demanded that the early heroes of a maturing movement be duly celebrated but also that the backward-looking components of their contribution be either ignored or identified as residual.

As this implies, I offer the difference between the politics of the past found in Spence, and the politics of the past found among his later admirers, as evidence of a schism between the populist radicalism of the former and the progressive world of the latter. The argument that the late nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a culture of suspicion towards nostalgia is explored further in my other two case-studies. In each I focus upon the difficulty of sustaining nostalgia in an increasingly anti-nostalgic political milieu. Thus I show that William Morris was involved in an uneasy negotiation with, through and against nostalgia. His *self-consciously* romantic yearnings reflected a *defensive* attachment to the past. The defensive nature of this attachment can be witnessed in Morris's compartmentalization of his nostalgic interests. By offering his nostalgic vision as an aesthetic and cultural sensibility, Morris found a way to express loss within and against an increasingly dominant modernist culture of the left.

The second of the dates in my title refers to the publication of Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* (1894, although the book had been published in parts the previous year in *The Clarion*).<sup>2</sup> *Merrie England* remains by far the most popular introduction to socialism written by an Englishman. Over two million copies were sold over the decade following its publication,

many at public meetings and football matches. Blatchford's book, subtitled *A Series of Letters to John Smith, of Oldham – a Practical Working Man*, combines an anti-industrial spirit with a demand for modern state socialism. The book was the centrepiece of Blatchford's celebrity. 'No honest man will deny', wrote Albert Lyons in his enthusiastic biography, 'that Blatchford's pen alone has produced – has invented if you like – "the rank and file" of Socialism'.<sup>3</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* pointed out that 'For every convert made by *Das Kapital*, there were a hundred made by *Merrie England*'.<sup>4</sup> These claims are interesting, in part, because Blatchford's Clarion movement appears so strikingly unusual and unorthodox when set beside the dominant forms of modern socialism. With Blatchford we again encounter the defensive dilemma of expressing nostalgia in an anti-nostalgic political milieu. However, Blatchford's populism offers a different context for the negotiation of this paradox. I will explore what appears as the oddity of the Clarion movement – its emphasis on personal fulfilment and its idealization of a jovial clubbiness – as a way of bringing together revolutionary modernity and revolutionary nostalgia. More specifically, it is suggested that the rendering of political transformation into convivial 'fellowship' and individual 'salvation' allowed the 'Clarionettes' to assert a radical message while laying claim to a British tradition of bonhomie and pride in place and nation.

## The Politics of Loss in English Socialist History

*The history of nostalgia might allow us to look back at modern history not solely searching for newness and technological progress but for unrealized potentialities, unpredictable turns and crossroads.*

Svetlana Boym<sup>5</sup>

Boym's aspiration offers a familiar message. In Britain the search for 'unrealized potentialities' grew to prominence with the rediscovery of the diverse political heritage of the working class, associated with E. P. Thompson and kindred historians. 'In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution', Thompson explained, 'we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure'.<sup>6</sup> However, to evoke Thompson's exploration of the birth of class consciousness, in the late eighteenth century and the first three decades of the nineteenth century, is also to invite further refinement of my argument that a rupture in the politics of the past can be identified later in the nineteenth century. In celebrating early English radicals, Thompson offers them as attractive, yet primal, figures at the beginning of a story which concludes with the accomplishment of a recognizably modern socialist identity. Nostalgia, if admitted at all – for even Cobbett is said by Thompson to be only 'seemingly "nostalgic"' – becomes a strategic device; the weapon of memory against capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

The progressivism found (but also sometimes questioned) in Thompson has much bolder expression in Hobsbawm, for whom 'primitive rebels' are

*pre-political* people who have not yet found, or are have only begun to find a specific language to which to express their aspirations about the world. Though their movements are thus in many respects blind and groping, by the standards of modern ones, they are neither unimportant nor marginal.<sup>8</sup>

The attempt to locate *transitions* towards class identity, or of periods which offer us a *turning point* towards the political organization of class struggle, is characteristic of socialist

history.<sup>9</sup> This task has been complemented by the expectation that capitalist processes of social disembedding and dispossession have been followed by political processes of segregation and affiliation around antagonistic class identities. Although often connected with Marx, one can find intimations of this chain of association throughout nineteenth-century radical thought. In the 1850s, the Chartist leader, Ernest Jones, repeatedly wrote about the emergence of class conflict in the context of the fact that the ‘intervening classes are melting away’.<sup>10</sup> Although Jones’s repetition of the point suggests he believed it to be a novel one, it had in fact been observed decades earlier. Indeed, Thompson finds comparable ideas being voiced from the last decades of the eighteenth century, as connections were forged between ‘the clamour of the mill’ and a new population among whom ‘levelling systems are the discourse; and rebellion may be near at hand’.<sup>11</sup>

By 1869, when John Stuart Mill started planning his major study of socialism, the term had been in circulation for over four decades.<sup>12</sup> It was clear to Mill that, ‘the fundamental doctrines which were assumed as incontestable by former generations, are now put again on their trial.’<sup>13</sup> Moreover, he believed that a new dispossessed and alienated class had emerged that was the agent of a new ‘standpoint’:

[C]lasses who have next to no property of their own . . . will not allow anything to be taken for granted – certainly not the principle of private property, the legitimacy and utility of which are denied by many of the reasoners who look out from the standpoint of the working classes.<sup>14</sup>

Mill’s analysis suggests that feelings of loss and attachment can best be described as residual. In placing nostalgia as a dying form, his narrative both problematizes and marginalizes it within the bigger story of a maturing class movement. Thus the persistent desire voiced by the radical poor, especially in the turbulent decades at the start of the nineteenth century (but echoed many times in later years), to see a transition, in the words of the *Poor Man’s Guardian* (of November, 1831), back ‘from a state worse than slavery to the old system of old England’,<sup>15</sup> is rendered anachronistic.

A key figure in the expression of such supposedly anachronistic attitudes is the journalist and farmer William Cobbett (1763–1835). In the 1810s and 1820s, Cobbett was the most widely read and influential radical in English politics. His *Political Register* campaigned against the immiseration of the labouring population as well as the corrupt nature of the new commercial society Cobbett saw growing around him. Cobbett also made it crystal clear that,

[W]e want *nothing new*. We have great constitutional laws and principles, to which we are immovably attached. We want *great alteration*, but we want nothing new . . . the great principles ought to be, and must be the same, or else confusion will follow.<sup>16</sup>

It was on this basis that Cobbett denounced the new ‘race of merchants and manufacturers, and bankers and loan-jobbers and contractors’ which he saw as destroying the well-being and fine traditions of rural life.<sup>17</sup> ‘Unnatural changes’ are Cobbett’s target throughout his *Rural Rides*. He foresees with horror ‘the long oak-table’ of village life disposed of at the ‘bottom of a bridge that some stock-jobber will stick up over an artificial river in his cockney garden’.

‘Nowadays the limits of Cobbett’s outlook are obvious’, John Derry confidently informed us in 1967: ‘he idealised the England of his youth’.<sup>18</sup> This verdict accords with the widespread

late modern assumption that Cobbett is part of an inherently conservative tradition of rural and national mythology. The fact that 'Cobbett most always had in mind the village labourer or small farmer', explains Richard Johnson, means that 'his prescriptions have an old-fashioned or "Tory" ring'.<sup>19</sup> More boldly, Linda Colley finds in Cobbett's nostalgic evocations of popular solidarity a precursor of fascism: he was, she suggests, a 'forerunner . . . ultimately of the National Front'.<sup>20</sup>

Ian Dyck has effectively challenged many of these associations by making the case that, by 1805, Cobbett was 'an unqualified Radical'.<sup>21</sup> Dyck links the modern difficulty in accepting this political identity to the fact that 'folk tradition and cottage politics . . . have become increasingly estranged from the theory and practice of left-wing radicalism'.<sup>22</sup> Dyck opens out Cobbett's nostalgia to show that, idealized as it undoubtedly was, it nevertheless referred to concrete experiences and specific memories. 'It was not country workers but middle-class rural writers', Dyck argues,

who lapsed into vague and romantic effusions about the past. Cobbett and the labourers were not vague: their sense of the eighteenth-century past was grounded in experience and oral traditions rather than in a chronic and wistful impulse to recover the past for the past's sake.<sup>23</sup>

Surveying the evidence for generational differences in living standards between 1790–1840 E. P. Thompson found that 'there was a slight improvement in average material standards'.<sup>24</sup> However, looking beyond the statistics of income and prices, he comes down on the same side as Dyck.

Over the same period there was intensified exploitation, greater insecurity, and increasing human misery. By 1840 most people were 'better off' than their forerunners had been fifty years before, but they had suffered and continued to suffer this slight improvement as a catastrophic experience.<sup>25</sup>

Dyck's argument also finds support in the portrait of Thomas Spence I offer later in this chapter. He too had 'grounded' experience to draw on when he criticized the changes he saw around him. However, in turning to Spence we can also make a broader attempt to challenge the identification of early nostalgic radicalism with the right. For unlike Cobbett, whose thumping rhetoric and ruddy farmer's demeanour allow him to be easily rendered as 'really a Tory', Spence is the poorest and most determined militant in English history; an unassailable icon of revolutionary integrity.

To identify and understand the role of nostalgia in Spence's politics might seem, then, a disquieting prospect. However, as Dyck's intervention suggests, over recent years the history of socialism in Britain has become far more receptive to the complexity of radical identity. One of the most influential interdisciplinary contributions to this new mood was Craig Calhoun's *The Question of Class Struggle*. Calhoun unpicks the fabric of Marxist analysis by arguing that it was not the factory worker but the artisan, deeply embedded in locality and tradition and rebelling against the destruction of his whole way of life, that provided the most active revolutionary agent.<sup>26</sup> The 'reactionary radicalism' of such workers, best exemplified for Calhoun by the Luddite movement of the 1810–1820 period, was a fight for survival: 'what they sought could not be granted except by fundamentally altering the structure of power and rewards in English society'.<sup>27</sup> Hence such 'workers were not fighting for control of the

industrial revolution as much as against that revolution itself.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to Mill and Marx's idea that radicalism emerged from deracination (when people have 'nothing but their chains' to lose), Calhoun suggests that 'revolutionary and other radical mobilisations take place when people do have something to defend'.<sup>29</sup>

Turning one of the assumptions of class history on its head, Calhoun goes on to conclude that 'reformism is the characteristic stance of the working class': for the 'new working class could gain an indefinite range of ameliorative reforms without fundamentally altering its collective existence'.<sup>30</sup> Although Calhoun's assessment of defensive radicalism is compelling his notion that the proletariat are essentially reformist is less convincing. While the former argument captures the specific social experience of artisan radicals in the early nineteenth century, the latter is sweeping. Moreover, it makes it difficult to understand why the proletariat in Britain were later to play a central role in non-reformist radicalism. Nevertheless, Calhoun's wider thesis opens up the question of whether later working-class radicalism emerged in spite of, or because of, the diminution of cultural ties and traditional attachments. *The Question of Class Struggle* unsettles and convincingly challenges the *expectation* that authentic radicalism is tied to the loss of cultural embeddedness.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and influential recent revision of English popular history has been offered by Patrick Joyce. In *Visions of the People* Joyce questions the existing 'emphasis on the onward march of class, or class as the only or the main outcome of historical change'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, for Joyce, the idea of 'class consciousness' has 'an antiquated ring to it' and may be placed alongside 'hopelessly idealised categories such as "revolutionary" or "labour consciousness"'.<sup>32</sup> Joyce's version of English radical history from 1848 up to 1914 emphasizes the continuity of populism. Thus he is interested in the mobilizing power of discourses about 'the people' and popular autonomy, as well as the interconnections between liberal, radical and socialist perspectives. Joyce's pluralistic approach has helped open the door for more sympathetic and nuanced approaches to radical nostalgia. This is evident from his appraisal – which focuses upon but is not restricted to the Independent Labour Party (ILP) – of the way the 'romantic, moral and aesthetic critique of "industrialism" was taken over intact by socialists'.

The pantheon of Liberalism and radicalism was the pantheon of socialism – Dickens, Bunyan, Carlyle, Ruskin, and, later, Emerson, Thoreau and Tolstoy. Marx and Morris were not much bothered with. Strands of socialist thinking influential beyond as well as within the ILP preached a similar message: MacDonald's anti-urbanism was as evident as Blatchford's evocation of a 'merrie England' in which 'pre-industrial values' were exalted. Edward Carpenter attacked 'modern civilisation' rather than capitalism as a system.<sup>33</sup>

However, although Joyce's shared 'pantheon' usefully highlights continuities, it smoothes over the rupture in the radical attitude to nostalgia that occurred in the late nineteenth century. For one of the things that is striking about the politics of nostalgia found in Blatchford and Morris is its self-conscious and defensive nature. By the end of the nineteenth century, the common-sense, practical turn to the past found in earlier periods was no longer possible. In its place a kind of injured yearning came occasionally to the fore and, more commonly, into an awkward, broken, dialogue with anti-nostalgic and modernist aspirations.

Over recent years, the names of E. P. Thompson and Patrick Joyce have often been used to mark out opposing poles in the debate on the evolution of radical politics. The difference

between them has been framed as an argument between materialist and postmaterialist/post-modern approaches to the nature and production of social meaning.<sup>34</sup> However, our interest in the dilemma of radical nostalgia points to political connections rather than theoretical distinctions. The dispute over the nature of social meaning between materialists and postmaterialists should not blind us to the fact that Thompson and Joyce (and Calhoun) all seek to rescue forms of popular resistance from the ‘condescension of prosperity’. Indeed, while Joyce and Calhoun have subverted the fetishization of developmental narratives, it is Thompson who comes closest to, not simply recording, but offering a politics of nostalgia. Thompson’s history has a vulnerable quality that finds space and accords value to sentiments of loss and yearning. ‘I like these Muggletonians’, he writes in his book about William Blake, *Witness against the Beast*, ‘but it is clear that they were not among history’s winners. Nor did they wish to be.’<sup>35</sup> The following wistful passage at the end of *The Making of the English Working Class* suggests a powerful sense of nostalgia for missed pathways within English political culture:

both the Romantic and the Radical craftsmen opposed the annunciation of Acquisitive Man. In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers.<sup>36</sup>

### **From Poorman’s Advocate to Proletarian: Thomas Spence and Radical Tradition**

Spence was born in 1750 on the Quayside in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He was one of 19 children. His mother sold stockings, his father made fishing nets. Spence received no formal education. At the age of 10 he joined his father’s trade. When Spence was thrown out of the Newcastle Philosophical Society for hawking his pamphlet – *Property in Land Every One’s Right* – on the streets of the city it was the start of a long and impoverished life on the margins of British politics. One of his biographers, Francis Place, observed that Spence was ‘a typical specimen of those political poor preachers’ and that he was ‘as poor as any man could well be. And with some trifling fluctuation in his affairs he continued in this state to the day of his death.’<sup>37</sup>

Spence’s politics centred on his ‘Plan’, which he set out in his pamphlet and stuck to throughout his life. Spence’s Plan was a scheme to take the ownership of land away from individuals and place it under local (parish) ownership as common property. The model of self-government Spence foresaw was, as Mary Ashraf notes, based on the ‘well-tested experience of the common people in organizing their numerous benefit clubs and societies’.<sup>38</sup> For Spence, who saw himself as ‘the poorman’s advocate’, autonomy was part of the political heritage of ordinary people.<sup>39</sup> Spence’s implacability on the capacity of ordinary people to control their own affairs earned him a reputation as an extremist and an eccentric. Indeed, he worried that only the Government took him seriously. Imprisoned for a year for seditious libel in 1801, he complained,

The people without treat me with the contempt due to a Lunatic . . . it is only the Government that wishes to make me appear of consequence, and the people within [the prison] treat me as bad or worse than the most notorious Felons among them.<sup>40</sup>

However, Spence’s disappointment with his countrymen must be judged in the context of his ambition. In fact, he had many followers. The term ‘Spencean’ was, in the first two

decades of the nineteenth century, synonymous with ultra-radical opinion. Such was the Government's fear of the spread of his doctrines that three years after his death, an Act of Parliament was passed prohibiting 'all Societies or Clubs calling themselves *Spenceans* or *Spencean Philanthropists*'.<sup>41</sup> In the same year, 1817, Thomas Malthus observed that,

[I]t is generally known that an idea has lately prevailed among some of the lower classes of society, that the land is the people's farm, the rent of which ought to be divided equally among them; and that they have been deprived of the benefits which belong to them, from this their natural inheritance, by the injustice and oppression of their stewards, the landlords.<sup>42</sup>

Spence's intransigent hostility to aristocrats and landlords was based on two historical claims. First, that they had stolen the land from the people and second, that the power of this 'band of robbers' was a transgression of the people's 'native state' of natural, God-given, freedom.<sup>43</sup> The former argument was based on Spence's personal experience, the latter on a sweeping sense of rights being established and defended 'from the beginning'.<sup>44</sup>

Spence's active interest in politics appears to have begun in 1771, when the Corporation of Newcastle attempted to enclose the city's common, the Town Moor. Lessee's fences were knocked down by irate town folk while the city's Freemen challenged the legality of the Corporation's actions. The defeat of enclosure took two years to achieve. When it came it was celebrated as a victory of common ownership over private interests. Signet rings issued to mark the occasion were inscribed *vox populi vox dei*. Though not a Freeman, the fight for the Town Moor had a tremendous impact on Spence. His life-long conviction that the common ownership of land is possible was based on his experience of the way common ownership had been defended in his native city. In later life he recalled that he 'took a lesson' from the Town Moor affair 'which I shall never forget'.<sup>45</sup>

For Spence, the enclosure of common land represented an attack on the traditional rights of the people. Today, he explained in his lecture of 1775, 'men may not live in any part of this world, nor even where they are born, but as strangers'.<sup>46</sup> Under his Plan this situation would be reversed, for 'All would be little farmers and little Mastermen'.<sup>47</sup> Despite being a city dweller himself, Spence's model for the future was almost entirely agrarian. As H. T. Dickinson notes, 'Mines, factories and cotton mills had no place in Spence's vision of Britain's green and pleasant land'.<sup>48</sup> Spence's idealized images of egalitarian and autonomous village communities, in which land was held in common, emerged from, and appealed to, a predominately rural society in which attachments to the land remained strong. In his 1775 lecture he looks forward to a time when there is 'perfect freedom from every imposition'; a time when,

there no more nor other lands in the whole country than the parishes; and each of them is sovereign lord of its own territories.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to note, in the light of later interpretations of his work, that Spence explicitly ruled out land nationalization. His experience of political struggle and belief in popular democracy expressed itself as a distrust of national government,

[A] Government that draws great Riches from sources which do not immediately affect the people, as from Loans, Mines, Foreign Tribute or Subsidies is sure to creep by Degrees

into absolute power and overturn everything. It is for this reason I would not have the Land national, nor provincial, but parochial property.<sup>50</sup>

When Spence looked forward to the implementation of his Plan he was applying and developing his direct knowledge of co-operation and common ownership. This aspect of his nostalgia, like Cobbett's, offered a critique of the present that was based upon knowledge of the recent past. However, there is another, broader, aspect to Spence's nostalgia, an aspect which arose from the idea that there once existed a Golden Age of freedom and that the people had been brought low from this state by being deprived of their natural and God-given rights. Tracing the developing of the myths of the Norman Yoke and Golden Age in radical thought, Christopher Hill writes that,

One of the great revolutions of radical thought, secularising Winstanley's demand for heaven on earth, was Thomas Spence's claim in 1783 that 'The Golden Age, so fam'd by Men of Yore/Shall soon be counted fabulous no more.'<sup>51</sup>

However, although Spence's religious convictions may not have been as dominant as those found among earlier radicals, it is misleading to ignore them entirely. Spence was brought up in an egalitarian dissident sect called the Glassites and often referred to the biblical teaching that 'God hath given the earth to the children of men, given it to mankind in common.'<sup>52</sup> Seeking to explain Spence's frequent biblical references T. M. Parssinen suggests that 'The cry of revolution entailed a new rhetoric' and that Spence 'found in his fundamentalist religious background a ready source of language to suit his purpose'.<sup>53</sup> However, in his detailed study of Spenceanism, Malcolm Chase corrects the suggestion that Spence was merely deploying Christian language for political ends. Spence's 'religious terminology', he notes 'meant more than a cynical means of self-promotion',

A tendency to see Spence within the context of the development of socialist theory, as a far-sighted 'pioneer' and 'forerunner', has encouraged in historians an anachronistic disbelief that he actually *meant* what he wrote.<sup>54</sup>

When we do listen to Spence we hear an unselfconscious, 'common-sense' assertion of the people's political heritage.

[T]he country of the people, in a native state, is properly their common, in which each of them has an equal property, with free liberty to sustain himself and family with the animals, fruits and other products thereof.<sup>55</sup>

Spence identified his Plan with 'Nature's plan'.<sup>56</sup> One notices again and again in his work a sense of nature that goes beyond biblical teaching or political imperative and suggests a specific identification with animals as a repository of incorruptible freedom and defiance against novelty. The title of Spence's journal *Pigs Meat*, was a response to Burke's dismissal of the revolutionary masses as the 'swinish multitude'. But Spence's frequent use of the image of an angry hog, stamping upon the symbols of authority (a motif also found on many of the hundreds of political tokens he minted and distributed) and the abundance and diversity of references to other animals throughout his work, suggests that he found within the animal kingdom the kind of unchanging, primordial integrity that he wished to find in people.

When Spence – who liked to describe himself as ‘free as a cat’ – writes about dispossession it is towards a comparison with other creatures that he turns:

A worm pays no rent: the Earth while he lives is his portion, and he riots in untaxed Luxuries. And, if perchance, a Crow, or other creature, should pick him up, why that is only Death, which may come in some shape or other to us all as well as he. But in this respect he had the advantage of us that while he lived he paid no Rent! And herein are all the Creatures to be envied.<sup>57</sup>

Spence took the idea of natural rights further in *The Rights of Infants* (1796). Like many of Spence’s tracts this pamphlet portrays a dialogue, on this occasion between a contemptuous Aristocrat and a Spencean woman.

‘AND pray what are the Rights of Infants?’ cry the haughty Aristocracy, sneering and tossing up their noses.

Woman: Ask the she-bears, and every she-monster, and they will tell you what the rights of every species of young are. – They will tell you, in resolute language and actions too, that their rights extend to a full participation of the fruits of the earth.<sup>58</sup>

Spence goes on to claim that women were the natural defenders ‘from the beginning’ not only of the rights of children but rights in general.

*Aristocracy (sneering): And is your sex also set up for pleaders of rights?*

Woman. Yes, Molochs! Our sex were defenders of rights from the beginning. And though men, like other he-brutes, sink calmly into apathy . . . You shall find that we not only know our rights, but have spirit to assert them, to the downfall of you and all tyrants.<sup>59</sup>

Spence’s precise impact on later radicals is difficult to gauge. In *The People’s Farm* Chase argues that Spence’s agrarian radicalism, including elements of his Plan, fed into Chartism. Spence’s fundamental conviction – that the land should be returned to the people as common property – retained a place in English socialism into the last century.<sup>60</sup> However, by the late nineteenth century, this idea had been largely absorbed by campaigns for the nationalization of land. Moreover, the interpretation of Spence was increasingly shaped by socialist progressivism and socialist modernity. These interpretations suggested that Spence was, at best, an embryonic figure in a maturing class movement. Spence’s nostalgic concern with the popular experience of co-operation and with reviving a Golden Age of natural rights were filtered out. What remained was an early working-class militant, fumbling towards the future. This image was open to both negative or positive representations. Spence was rendered by some critics into a simple-minded misfit. Thus in *The Socialist Tradition* Alexander Gray writes that Spence was ‘in himself a poor creature of little capacity and less gifts’. Gray adds that ‘oddly, he became a symbol and played a certain part in history’.<sup>61</sup> The idea that Spence was an oddity is repeated by E. P. Thompson and G. D. H. Cole. Thompson says that ‘[i]t is easy to see Spence . . . as little more than a crank’,<sup>62</sup> while for Cole he had ‘little practical bearing on the contemporary development of British radical or working-class thought’.<sup>63</sup> A final stinging blow comes from Knox, who argues, on the basis of Spence’s localism, that he was ‘less a harbinger of modern revolutionism than a mutation of the past’.<sup>64</sup>

However, more positive interpretations could call on the authority of Marx. In *The German Ideology*, Marx included Spence in his short roll call of early English communists. In *Theories of Surplus Value* he speaks warmly of him as the author of a tract called *Private Property in Land* and as a ‘deadly enemy’ of this form of property.<sup>65</sup> The emergence of land nationalization campaigns in the 1880s also provided fertile soil for Spence’s rehabilitation.<sup>66</sup> The English Marxist Henry Mayers Hyndman came across Spence’s work in the early 1880s and immediately identified it as an important indigenous statement of socialism. Hyndman’s discovery of Spence shaped his interpretation for the next one hundred years. Hyndman issued a work, in 1882, called *The Nationalisation of the Land in 1775 and 1882*, which reprinted Spence’s 1775 lecture.<sup>67</sup> Spence was to become a key figure in Hyndman’s argument that ‘In England . . . there was perhaps more practical Socialism than in any other nation.’<sup>68</sup>

From generation to generation the idea of nationalising the land has been kept alive among the people. A hundred years ago, Thomas Spence of Newcastle formulated a complete scheme to bring about this result through the action of parishes and municipalities. The time was not ripe.<sup>69</sup>

Frederick Engels enthused to Hyndman (in a letter of 13 March 1882) that he was ‘very glad that glorious old Tom Spence has been brought out again’.<sup>70</sup> But what had happened to Tom Spence? He had developed what the Marxist historian Max Beer eulogized as a ‘thoroughly honest, proletarian and consistent character’.<sup>71</sup> He was being turned into an authentic working-class revolutionary.

To understand the growth of interest in Spence it is also useful to be reminded that Hyndman’s main concern was to translate Marx into the common language of ordinary people. His worry was that Marxism was too theoretical to be readily comprehended. Indeed, in his *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, Hyndman notes that even the *Communist Manifesto* ‘is by no means written in a popular form’.<sup>72</sup> With his non-nonsense rhetoric and irascible style Spence had the kind of common touch Hyndman considered to be absent from Marx. Hence, within an increasingly intellectual and abstract radical discourse, his plain-speaking populism took on a class value. Yet it is a value that reinforces the argument that Spence was being cast in the role of rudimentary forerunner; a primitive prototype that confirmed the more educated and advanced status of later radical thinkers.

The most diligent attempt to pull Spence into a Marxist lineage was to come in the 1960s, with the research of Mary Ashraf, an English communist historian based in the German Democratic Republic.<sup>73</sup> A number of Marxist historians in the Soviet Union were already familiar with Spence. He was a reference point in an existing debate on the origins of revolutionary communist consciousness. Ashraf was attempting to challenge the view, associated with V. P. Volgin, that Spence was an egalitarian but not a socialist, because he did not reject private property in anything other than land.<sup>74</sup> Ashraf’s attempt to turn Spence into a modern socialist demanded that she counter this view and insert into his work her own conjecture:

It seems clear that Spence intended large-scale industry to be public property or if not managed by the Parish as a whole, to be run by ‘corporations’ of workers collectively. From land confiscation which included these larger industries intimately associated with land tenure but already long established on capitalist lines, there is not a great step to the concept of the workers’ ownership of the means of production.<sup>75</sup>

However, Spence will always disappoint this kind of appropriation. Indeed, there is an undertow of frustration in Ashraf's attempts to corral him. Spence's backward-looking evocations of better times and natural rights, along with his determined parochialism, make him an unconvincing proto-Marxist. He is, says a suddenly unenthused Ashraf, ultimately part of an 'inchoate tendency' of 'working class eccentrics' whose 'passionate denunciations . . . made no distinction between one method of accumulation and another'.<sup>76</sup>

The rupture between the street-level organic politics of Spence and the socialist modernity offered by his later critics and admirers, renders him incomplete and incoherent. It is only with the disintegration of Marxism's certainties, over the past few decades, that Spence's voice has re-emerged and been allowed to speak in terms which he might have recognized. The new attention he is receiving today is notable for its openness to the localist and anti-authoritarian aspects of his political message.<sup>77</sup> The commemorative Blue Plaque put up at the Quayside in Newcastle in 2010 to celebrate his birth symbolizes a new interest in this once forgotten 'poorman's advocate'. It may also mark a new willingness to listen to Spence and his deeply rooted plans for the future.

### William Morris: Revolutionary Nostalgia in an Age of Progress

Morris is the best known example of a nostalgic radical. He concluded his socialist ode *The Pilgrims of Hope* in characteristic style with the lines,

I cling to the love of the past and the love of the day to be,  
And the present, it is but the building of the man to be strong in me.<sup>78</sup>

And yet, as Mark Bevir notes, 'Morris is an icon of the left. Everyone wants to have him on their side.'<sup>79</sup> Morris's unembarrassed love of beauty, craftsmanship and nature makes him an intriguing hero for modern politics. It is, perhaps, precisely because we find such themes so difficult to voice that he has become so necessary.

Morris's broadly Marxist understanding of the division of labour, art and life emerged, in the early 1880s, directly from having 'studied socialism from the scientific point of view'.<sup>80</sup> However, his consistent eulogies for medieval society and repugnance at the ugliness of industrial existence were problematic and paradoxical within a movement and wider society that had come to identify nostalgia with conservatism. For Engels he was 'good for nothing but sentiment'.<sup>81</sup> Slightly more sympathetically, Raymond Williams said of Morris that he suffered from a 'fragmentary consciousness'. The 'larger part of his literary work', he continued, 'bears witness only to the disorder which he felt so acutely'.<sup>82</sup> Another approach to Morris has been to trace his evolution, as the subtitle of E. P. Thompson's book on Morris has it, from *Romantic to Revolutionary*.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the unorthodox nature of Morris's socialism has enthralled generations of commentators. Indeed, in more recent years his 'disorder' has been construed positively. Fiona MacCarthy hopes that 'in the light of our own mellow post-modern eclecticism we can accept Morris more easily as the conservative radical he really was'.<sup>84</sup> It is a transition in which the nostalgic part of Morris is cast as playing both an early and limiting role. By contrast, Ruth Kinna offers an integrative perspective on Morris's 'art of socialism'.<sup>85</sup> Kinna argues that Morris's romanticism was integral to his socialism, leading him to a cultural and creative critique of the experience of alienation in industrialized capitalist society.

These different interpretations of Morris reflect the fact that radical nostalgia has been established as a site of anxiety but also of fascination. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the figure of the romantic revolutionary took on an anachronistic charm. Questions and worries about being backward-looking that never troubled Thomas Spence swarm around Morris, attracting our attention but also making him appear remote from the mainstream of twentieth-century socialism. I am going to look at how Morris responded to some of these concerns. More specifically, I will suggest a number of ways that Morris managed his revolutionary nostalgia in the context of an increasingly anti-nostalgic movement. As this implies, it is the self-conscious and defensive quality of Morris's socialism that interests me. I identify two ways Morris brought nostalgia and socialism together: first, by identifying socialism as an overcoming of modernity (a point explored in the company of Morris' utopian novel *News from Nowhere*); second, by concentrating his nostalgic concerns into particular periods of his life (e.g. in the 1890s) and spheres of activity (notably, the aesthetic and cultural). These distinctions are, of course, a descriptive and analytical device and not at all in keeping with Morris's own holistic ambitions and sensibility.

Morris's most celebrated depiction of a utopian future, *News from Nowhere; or, an Epoch of Rest* (published in 1890) is also a bold escape from modernity.<sup>86</sup> It was written in response to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a state socialist, industrial utopia set in the year 2000, published in 1888.<sup>87</sup> Morris's vulnerable sense of being overtaken by modernity, leaps off the page of the biting criticisms of this new 'Socialist bible' he contributed to *The Commonwealth* in 1889 and 1890.<sup>88</sup> Although 'attracting general attention', and although its 'temperament is that of many thousands of people', Morris despises the book and is clearly upset that its technocratic solutions are in the ascendant.<sup>89</sup>

The success of Mr. Bellamy's utopian book, deadly dull as it is, is a straw to show which way the wind blows. The general attention paid to our clever friends, the Fabian lecturers and pamphleteers, is not altogether due to their literary ability; people have really got their heads turned more or less in their direction.<sup>90</sup>

Bellamy's 'temperament', Morris explains,

may be called the unmixed modern one, unhistoric and unartistic; it makes its owner (if a Socialist) perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation, if only the injustice, misery, and waste of the class society could be got rid of; which half-change seems possible to him . . . it is necessary to point out that there are some socialists who do not think that the problem of the organisation of life and necessary labour can be dealt with by a huge national centralisation.<sup>91</sup>

*News from Nowhere* offers a bold, alternative, vision. Morris wishes to make the case that radicalism and a dissatisfaction with 'modern civilization' are mutually sustaining. It may be argued that he was, thereby, elaborating Marx's vision of class revolution as returning society to a time beyond time and beyond alienation. Yet *News from Nowhere* is no formal or orthodox exercise in Marxism. It draws out the nostalgic content within Marxism to the point where it transgresses and subverts Marx's modern spirit.

In the ideal society presented in *News from Nowhere*, modern techniques are acknowledged and selectively employed, but only so as to allow the integration of art and life and the disappearance of industrialization. Although Morris conceded elsewhere that 'machinery . . . has been, and for some time yet will be, indispensable', the pastoral utopia depicted in *News from*

*Nowhere* is a place where the sight and smell of factories is just a bad memory.<sup>92</sup> Looking back on the ‘labour-saving machines’ of the capitalist era, one elder recalls that they,

were meant to ‘save labour’ (or, to speak more plainly, the lives of men) on one piece of work in order that it might be expended – I will say wasted – on another, probably useless, piece of work. Friend, all their devices for cheapening labour simply resulted in increasing the burden of labour.<sup>93</sup>

The new world Morris envisages is one in which the division between intellectual and non-intellectual labour has also ended. Asking a weaver about his craft, the novel’s narrator-protagonist, William Guest, hears that he has, for the time being, ‘taken to mathematics’.<sup>94</sup> Morris’s distaste for intellectuals as a distinct social caste and for a library bound life of books and criticism, also finds full expression in the remembrance of how, in capitalist society,

[T]he prevailing feeling amongst intellectual persons was a kind of sour distaste for the changing drama of the year, for the life of earth and its dealings with men. Indeed, in those days it was thought poetic and imaginative to look upon life as a thing to be borne, rather than enjoyed.<sup>95</sup>

Morris’s utopia is a changeless *Epoch of Rest* in which social and natural harmony have been achieved. Revolutions and turmoil are at an end and a state of ‘bliss’ commenced that has no need for eras or ages, other than a vague foundational comparison between the present and the pseudo-civilization of the capitalist past. Thus the overcoming of modernity is also an overcoming of time: ‘You see, guest, this is not an age of inventions.’<sup>96</sup> An ‘old man’ muses that he does not think his

[T]ales of the past interest [the young] much. The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place is history enough for them. It was different, I think, when I was a lad, when we were not so assured of peace and continuous plenty as we are now.<sup>97</sup>

As I have already noted, Morris’s communist utopia can be portrayed as developing themes found in Marx. However, one of the reasons that Morris has excited so much debate over the years is that his imaginative journey both touches and challenges many different political traditions. Arguments that suggest Morris is really a Marxist, or really a conservative, or really an anarchist or green libertarian, have all been put forward, pulling us towards particular ways of approaching his work. By contrast, an emphasis on the way that nostalgia had become a site of counter-orthodoxy, while not necessarily assisting any one of these claims, may help explain why the political image of Morris appears so mutable and alluring. Morris’s revolutionary nostalgia offers, not a resolution, but a kind of negotiation with and through an awkward terrain. In more concrete terms, we find that Morris concentrated his nostalgia into particular areas, notably into his artistic and creative output but also into the less political years that preceded and followed his burst of socialist activism between 1883–1890. Indeed, it is pertinent to note the dramatic shifts in focus that characterized his life course. His life-long friend Edward Burne-Jones observed,

When I first knew Morris nothing would content him but being a monk . . . and then wanted to smash everything up and begin the world anew, and now it is printing he cares for, and to make wonderful rich-looking books.<sup>98</sup>

In the 1880s Morris was dismissive of the arts and crafts movement that he had inspired: 'the general public don't care a damn about arts and crafts.'<sup>99</sup> However, from 1890, his withdrawal from active involvement in socialism was, as Burne-Jones's depiction suggests, matched by a re-engagement with the revivalist craft movement and with romantic literature. This is not to suggest that, for Morris, old-age and nostalgia were connected. However, it is to find significance in the fact that Morris gave over certain years to the pursuit of revolution and others to the pursuit of lost arts and high romance.

Another way Morris's nostalgic yearnings were compartmentalized was by assigning them to the realm of the aesthetic and the cultural (as distinct from the political and economic). Carole Silver has argued that in the fantasy lands of Morris's late romances, such as *The Wood beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896) and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897), we find an 'internalisation' of his socialism.<sup>100</sup> *News from Nowhere* (written when Morris was still actively involved in the socialist movement) looks forward to his withdrawal from politics. Although it charts the dream of a member of the Socialist League (founded by Morris in 1885), it is also a journey towards a purely creative and organic form of community. William Guest enters his dream after an unsatisfactory and irritating meeting with members of the League:

[T]here were six persons present, and consequently six sections of the party were represented, four of which had strong but divergent Anarchist opinions.<sup>101</sup>

Guest's dream takes him away from the tedium and backbiting of politics and towards a restful realm where useful and fully human lives are being enjoyed. We do not have to accept Philip Henderson's claim that, in *News from Nowhere*, Morris is 'abolishing everything he disliked in the nineteenth century and replacing it by everything he nostalgically longed for', in order to appreciate that the book functioned not just as an outlet for politics but against politics.<sup>102</sup> In *News from Nowhere* Morris takes us to an intimate and imaginative realm, waving goodbye to scientific socialism and political struggle in the knowledge that we must return to them once the dream is over.<sup>103</sup>

Morris did not heal the rupture between progress and nostalgia but, given his popularity with so many sections of the British left, he may be said to have successfully negotiated it. The urge to forgive Morris's supposed quirkiness tells its own story. Indeed, many critics offer a tone of indulgence towards Morris. They like him not *despite* but *because* of his non-conformity. Morris himself seems to have played up to the role of maverick. 'Does Comrade Morris accept Marx's theory of value?' he was asked at one public lecture in Glasgow in 1884:

I am asked if I believe in Marx's theory of value. To speak quite frankly, I do not know what Marx's theory of value is, and I'm damned if I want to know . . . political economy is not my line, and much of it appears to be dreary rubbish.<sup>104</sup>

Morris's irreverence has tended to elicit more tolerant smiles than tuts of disapproval. Morris has been claimed by so many different political traditions because he lends them humanity. In an era when politics appears ideological and bureaucratic this is a valuable asset. The image of Morris as the grand old man of English socialism, as the Labour Party's father-figure, is rooted not just in his ability to synthesize Marxism with cultural creativity but with the desire to identify with someone who is so clearly both in and against the modern age.

Speaking in 1895, the year before he died, to one of the architects of democratic state socialism, Sidney Webb, Morris grumbled ‘the world is going your way, Webb, but it is not the right way in the end’.<sup>105</sup> My argument suggests that in Morris we see resistance to, and a negotiation of, the emergence of socialist modernity. His self-conscious, romantic yearnings reflect a new, defensive and self-marginalizing politics of the past. It was a political form that deployed the creative and the aesthetic (and, hence, the anti-political) as a way of allowing loss to be expressed within and against the forward-looking culture of the left. And yet it also disturbs and excites that culture, leaving a sense of discomfort and longing.

### **Robert Blatchford: The New Life and Old Traditions of Socialist Fellowship**

With Robert Blatchford we meet another radical nostalgic. And we again encounter the negotiation of the dilemma of expressing a sense of loss in an increasingly anti-nostalgic political milieu. Blatchford saw himself as a follower of Morris. When Morris died Blatchford wrote in the paper that he edited: ‘I cannot help thinking that it does not matter what goes into *The Clarion* this week, because William Morris is dead . . . he was our best man.’<sup>106</sup>

The Morrisian themes that thread their way through the *Clarion* movement, that Blatchford presided over, include anti-parliamentarianism, anti-reformism, a focus on ‘making socialists’ rather than participation in party politics and a semi-spiritual sense of solidarity. *The Clarion* used Morris’s slogan for its banners: ‘Fellowship is Life: Lack of Fellowship is Death.’ Morris’s assertion of socialism as a politics of beauty was also important to Blatchford. In *Merrie England* he demands a country where all can enjoy ‘beautiful fields, woods and gardens’:

And let me ask you is any carpet so beautiful or so pleasant as a carpet of grass and daisies? Is the fifth-rate music you play upon your cheap pianos as sweet as the songs of the gushing streams and joyous birds? And does a week at a spoiled and vulgar watering-place repay you for fifty-one weeks’ toil and smother in a hideous and dirty town?<sup>107</sup>

The querulous tone Blatchford adopts in this passage is found throughout much of his work. This defensive stance also suggests that, like *News from Nowhere*, *Merrie England* is self-consciously situated against the spectre of more technocratic forms of socialist reasoning. The ‘ugly, disagreeable, and mechanical’ factory system is a target throughout Blatchford’s novels and journalism.<sup>108</sup> However, Blatchford was not anti-modern. Indeed, he looked forward to the total resources of the country being run efficiently and effectively by a central socialist state. In-between railing against the factory system Blatchford sets out a model of a bright, clean new society, in which national ownership and public control will sweep away the past and ensure decent housing and living conditions for the working class.

Moreover, unlike Morris, Blatchford was a populist. The dilemmas of radical nostalgia that he negotiated were approached within the context of a unique mass movement that he inspired and helped lead. The ‘*Clarion* movement’ remains the largest extra-parliamentary socialist movement in British history (the movement may be dated from the first issue of the magazine around which it centred, *The Clarion* in 1891). Joyce suggests that the *Clarion*

movement was ‘perhaps the single greatest source of mass inspiration in early socialism’.<sup>109</sup> For Preben Kaarsholm,

The movement surrounding the socialist weekly *Clarion* was probably the most peculiar and original left-wing organisational milieu of the period. It was also without doubt the most influential socialist movement; whereas the significance of the ILP and the SDF was surely restricted to their approximate 7,000 and 3,000 members respectively. *Clarion* with its sale of about 40,000 a week and wide-range of cultural activities was in contact with a much wider range of working-class and ‘plebeian’ opinion.<sup>110</sup>

It is intriguing therefore, that the *Clarion* movement is little more than a footnote in many histories of the early years of British socialism. The movement’s ‘Bible’, *Merric England*, appears indigestible to later critics. Following a well-trodden tradition of casual dismissal of the book, Roger Ebbatson refers to it as ‘socialist-inclined’ and is clearly bemused by its ‘paradoxical popularity’.<sup>111</sup> Once claimed as ‘the most widely read man in the world’, by the late 1910s, Blatchford had lost much of his former appeal.<sup>112</sup> There may be good reasons for this. Blatchford’s favoured rhetorical mode is bluff banter; a barrack-room form that alternates between the whimsical and the hearty and is both too arcane and self-consciously ingratiating for twentieth-century tastes. Moreover, he combined this backslapping mode of address with a deep sense of patriotism. As the title of *Merric England*, as well as its follow up volume, *Britain for the British*, attest, Blatchford offered an insular vision of a self-supporting country. This sentiment also found expression in the familiar radical *cri de coeur*: ‘the land of England should be restored to the English people from whom it was stolen.’<sup>113</sup> Laurence Thompson’s biography *Robert Blatchford: Portrait of an Englishman* pinpoints Blatchford allegiance: ‘It was this loved England, then that was to be merry, Great Britain possibly as an afterthought, but not the British Empire, and certainly not the united workers of the world.’<sup>114</sup>

There is a defensive and peevish quality to Blatchford’s patriotic attachments. His nationalism was stubborn and often belligerently resistant to the internationalism that he considered was coming to typify the mainstream and radical left. Offering himself as ‘an ancient and quiet watchman’ in the mid-1920s, he complained,

In these days of the cosmopolitan cult it is bad form to think nationally, but I am an old dog and cannot easily learn new tricks.<sup>115</sup>

Somewhat confirming his suspicions, Blatchford’s patriotism has meant that, despite his ultra-left utopianism, his trenchant hostility to eugenics (as seen in *Not Guilty: A Defence of the Bottom Dog*, 1906)<sup>116</sup> and prominence as a campaigning atheist (*God and My Neighbour*, 1903),<sup>117</sup> he has long been treated as a compromised and conservative figure.<sup>118</sup> The idea that Blatchford was right wing may be supported by reference to the fact that even his friends regarded him a patrician moralist (he was, said Lyons ‘spiritually – a Tory’).<sup>119</sup> Moreover, his controversial pro-British position in both the Boer War and First World War, and his movement to the right in later life (Blatchford voted Conservative in 1924), also lend credence to the label. Indeed, his journey to the right might be seen to put him in the company of socialist conservatives, such as Pentley and Chesterton.<sup>120</sup>

However, both the urge to locate Blatchford as really a Tory or, indeed, really a revolutionary, miss what is interesting about him as a political figure, for Blatchford cannot be

understood in isolation. The Clarion movement surrounded and sustained him and it is through an understanding of this movement that he must be approached. What appeared to later eyes as the oddity of the movement – notably its idealization of a jovial ‘clubbiness’ – provides us with an example of a popular form of nostalgic radicalism.

The Clarion movement was an attempt to *create a sense of community around political ideals and social bonds*. In sociological terms it appears as a response to *Gesellschaft* and a recreation of *Gemeinschaft*. This portrait also implies that the informality of the Clarion movement, its lack of official structures, membership or leadership, should not be understood as a failure of organization but a conscious attempt to enable an organic and spontaneous social form. Another aspect of Clarion politics was the movement’s *emphasis on the political transformation of the clubbable individual*. This emphasis allowed Blatchford and the wider Clarion movement to both assert a revolutionary message while laying claim to a national tradition of popular conviviality. Within the Clarion movement the agent of revolution, the point of change, was the individual who, coming together with like-minded people in bonds of friendship and loyalty, entered into a ‘new life’ of ‘socialist fellowship’. The Clarion Fellowship, formed by Blatchford in 1900, centred on active identification with other readers of *The Clarion*. The Clarion Fellowship offered the socialism of friendship to Clarionettes. However, unlike the Australian model of socialist ‘mateship’, the Fellowship was not entirely dominated by models of masculine comradeship. Indeed, it attracted a significant following among socialist women. From 1896 a number of Clarion Women’s Vans toured the country promoting socialism. They were one part of an elaborate network of largely autonomous Clarion social organizations. The Handicraft Guilds, Field Clubs, Rambling Clubs, Camping Clubs and Camera Clubs of the Clarion movement are a reminder just how social socialism once was.<sup>121</sup> The movement also incorporated Clarion Glee Clubs and the philanthropic activities of Cinderella Clubs (the latter provided food and entertainment for poor children and pre-dated *The Clarion*, being started by Blatchford in 1890). However, the most popular Clarion clubs were the Clarion Choirs and Clarion Cycling Clubs. There were 32 Clarion Cycling Clubs in 1895 and 70 by 1897. Cycling was a natural form of affiliation, in part, because it was the favoured means of travel for the propaganda and fly-posting activities of the Clarion Scouts (formed in 1894; by 1895 there were 38 Scouting ‘Corps’).

Keir Hardie, who disliked Blatchford, surely had the Clarion movement in mind when he noted, in 1903, that ‘For a time in England, the fibre of the Socialist movement was almost destroyed by a spirit of irresponsible levity.’<sup>122</sup> For his part Blatchford argued that he regarded Hardie and his followers at the *Labour Leader*, as ‘Puritans; narrow, bigoted, puffed up with sour cant’. He contrasted *Labour Leader* with *The Clarion* which ‘loved the humour and colour of the old English tradition’.<sup>123</sup> ‘There never was a paper like it’ agreed Margaret Cole,

[I]t was not in the least the preconceived idea of a socialist journal. It was not solemn; it was not highbrow . . . It was full of stories, jokes and verses – sometimes pretty bad verses and pretty bad jokes – as well as articles.<sup>124</sup>

Bernard Shaw described *The Clarion* as ‘a very good family joke’ and the circle which surrounded Blatchford appear to have approached it in similar vein.<sup>125</sup> A list of the pen names used on *The Clarion* – Nunquam (Blatchford), The Bounder (Edward Fay), Dangle (A. M. Thompson), Mont Blong (Montague Blatchford) and Whiffly Puncto (William

Palmer) – indicates much about the tone of the paper. The *Clarion* movement was understood by Blatchford to sustain the ‘old English tradition’ against the alienating forces that beset the nation. Humour was central to this endeavour precisely because it was irrational, non-instrumental and created bonds among strangers. The *Clarion* movement offered political education and transformation within a spirit of friendship. Blatchford’s hazy summation of the Fellowship explained that,

[T]he *Clarion* fellowship [should] be an association for social intercourse, and for the realisation of *Clarion* ideals. It is necessary that we should not be tied up in cast-iron rules, and this resolution is both clear and vague. The *Clarion* ideals belong to *Clarion* readers, and as ideals change it is thought best not to define what they are. . . . the Fellowship exists to promote social intercourse, and to work for whatever is thought desirable at the time.<sup>126</sup>

In 1910, Albert Lyons offered a portrait of the Fellowship that fleshes out Blatchford vision, while maintaining his contrarian manner.

The *Clarion* Fellowship is absurd and inexplicable, and – wholly charming. It is Socialism – real Socialism – this bond of genuine sympathy and kindness which exists between the readers of the paper which Mr. Blatchford edits. A stranger entering almost any town in England has but to proclaim himself a *Clarion* reader (‘*Clarionette*’ is a popular phrase) to be assured of welcome and hospitality in the houses of friends whom he has never seen before. This is not practical; but it *is* Socialism.<sup>127</sup>

The Fellowship was understood to create socialists and make socialism, to bring it into being in microcosm. It offered and enabled a new community based not simply on political activism but also on traditional bonds of intimacy and pleasure. Thus the challenges of modernity – of deracination and revolution – could be both accommodated and refused. The transformation that needed to happen could be imagined to be created and managed within and through the enthusiasm of individuals acting together.

John Trevor, describing the ‘*Clarionettes*’, explained that,

[I]t has not been to a new economic theory, merely, that these converts have been introduced. It has been to a new life. Their eyes shine with the gladness of a new birth.<sup>128</sup>

In a section of *The Clarion*, from February 1896, titled ‘How I Became a Socialist’, readers wrote in with their personal narratives of how, as one put it, they had ‘found salvation’.<sup>129</sup> As another reader writes, ‘I found our chief’s articles, read them, took the *Clarion* (good old *Clarion*) from the first number, and finally found salvation.’<sup>130</sup> In many ways the *Clarion* movement is an excellent example of the kind of ‘religion of socialism’ Stephen Yeo has charted in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>131</sup> However, Yeo’s suggestion that, from the mid-1890s, the *Clarion* movement ‘gradually became what is now remembered as – a recreational society’ is doubly misleading.<sup>132</sup> For not only do the reminiscences of those who knew the movement show that it was recalled as both a social and political phenomenon, but the splitting of the two forms was what the *Clarion* movement brought into question.<sup>133</sup> The offer of a ‘new life’ within the *Clarion* Fellowship cannot be properly understood without a political appreciation of the convivial pleasures it also offered.

## Conclusion

*I have been encountering the paradox that many of the people whom 'reality' has proved to be wrong, still seem to me to have been better people than those who were, with a facile and conformist realism, right.*

*E. P. Thompson*<sup>134</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, those forms of radicalism that claimed to be rooted in the history and the natural rights of the people were being displaced by modernist radicalisms that viewed nostalgia with intense suspicion. It was awkward moment. But the power of the modernist imagination was, if not overwhelming, the stronger force. Before long the radical nostalgia of William Morris would be treated as a charming contradiction in terms and the convivial socialism of the Clarion movement a whimsical footnote in the story of mainstream socialism.

This chapter has offered portraits of three English radicals. Two of the three (Morris and Blatchford) are commonly portrayed as nostalgic radicals. Yet it is precisely the emergence of self-consciousness around a sense of loss and attachment to the past that has provided the focus of this chapter. Spence escaped being labelled as a nostalgic only by being translated into the progressive language and ambitions of state socialists with whom he had little in common. In this way Spence's parochialism and traditionalism were stripped away and an image of a honest proletarian, a forward-looking if embryonic communist, offered in their place.

Since this book has claimed to be reading nostalgia against the grain of socialist history my decision to explore the work of Morris and Blatchford may be judged an evasion of duty. However, my reading of both men has been designed to emphasize the difficulty of articulating nostalgic radicalism in an age of progress. It has not been my intention to offer Morris or Blatchford simply as nostalgics, even less as politically confused or 'mixed-up'. Rather, what is revealed in their work is the management or negotiation of nostalgia and modernity. In both men we find a relatively self-conscious defence of tradition within and against a socialist movement that appeared to them to be turning away from such themes. With Morris I highlighted how he offered a distinct, aesthetic and cultural, radical sphere for the development of increasingly suspect nostalgic themes. In the previous chapter I identified the transgressive nature of the avant-garde's use of nostalgia. The portrait of Morris offered in this chapter suggests that he could be claimed as an early incarnation of this counter-cultural tradition. This interpretation would also accord with the extensive deployment of Morris's ideas within the environmentalist and anti-authoritarian movements of the last century.

After his death, in 1943, Robert Blatchford suffered no radical reincarnations. This is, in part, a reflection of the fact that it is easier to appropriate and reinvent the vision and spirit of intellectuals, such as Morris, than of historically specific and tub-thumping populists, such as Blatchford. However, if we broaden our view of Blatchford to place him within the Clarion movement we find one of the more intriguing moments in British socialist history. Deeply conservative in many ways, the Clarionettes also spoke in the language of transformation, revolution and salvation. By making the self – not the isolated self but the social, clubbable self – the axis of change, the Clarion movement combined nostalgia and anti-nostalgia, modernity and anti-modernity. It appears, with hindsight, a strange combination. It was also the last major effusion of radical nostalgia within British socialism. For the rest of the century, the most significant forms of radical nostalgia were to be found well beyond the shores of 'merrie England'.

## Notes

1. *Property in Land Every One's Right, Proved in a Lecture Read at the Philosophical Society in Newcastle, on the 8th of Nov. 1775*. In later editions Spence's first work was titled 'The Rights of Man' or 'The Real Rights of Man'. It can be found in T. Spence, *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982). The original pamphlet had been presumed lost for many decades but was rediscovered in 2005. For a report of the discovery see Alastair Bonnett, 'Thomas Spence, *Property in Land Every One's Right* (1775)', *Labour History Review*, 74, 1, (2009).
2. R. Blatchford, *Merrie England*, (London: Clarion Press, 1908).
3. A. Lyons, *Robert Blatchford: The Sketch of a Personality: An Estimate of Some Achievements*, (London: Clarion Press, 1910), 5.
4. Cited by A. Thompson, 'Preface', R. Blatchford, *My Eighty Years*, (London: Cassell and Company, 1931), xiii.
5. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.
6. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 836.
8. E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 2.
9. Dated by Hobsbawm to 1880–1900. Hobsbawm, *Labour's Turning Point*.
10. E. Jones, *Notes to the People: Volume I*, (London: J. Pavey, 1851), 245.
11. 'An aristocrat traveller who visited the Yorkshire Dales in 1792', cited by Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 207. Thompson asserts that 'the outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of "the working class"' (212).
12. Max Beer identifies its first use with Robert Owen: the word 'socialism', he notes, 'is found for the first time in *The Co-Operative Magazine* of November, 1827'. M. Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, (New York: Ayer Publishing, 1979), 187.
13. J. Mill, *Socialism*, (New York: John B. Alden, 1886), 260.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Poor Man's Guardian*, (19 November, 1831), 174.
16. W. Cobbett, 'To the Blanketteers', *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, (27 March, 1819), 830–1.
17. W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, Volume 1, (London: J. M. Dent, 1917), 6.
18. J. Derry, *The Radical Tradition: Tom Paine to Lloyd George*, (London: Macmillan, 1967), 46.
19. R. Johnson, "'Really useful knowledge": radical education and working-class culture', in J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson (Eds), *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 89.
20. L. Colley, 'I am the watchman', *London Review of Books*, (20 November, 2003), 17.
21. Dyck, *William Cobbett*, 214.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 147.
24. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 231.
25. *Ibid.*, 231.
26. C. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 55.
27. *Ibid.*, 60.
28. *Ibid.*, 55.

29. C. Calhoun, 'The radicalism of tradition: community strength or venerable disguise and borrowed language?', *American Journal of Sociology*, 88, 5, (1983), 911.
30. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle*, 140.
31. P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8.
32. *Ibid.*, 9.
33. *Ibid.*, 77.
34. See, for example, Marc Steinberg, 'Culturally speaking: finding a commons between post-structuralism and the Thompsonian perspective', *Social History*, 21, 2, (1996), 193–214. Neville Kirk, 'History, language, ideas and post-modernism: a materialist view', *Social History*, 19, 2, (1994), 221–40.
35. E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90. The Muggletonians were a millenarian free-thinking non-scriptural English sect of Dissenters. Thompson argues they were influenced by Blake.
36. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 915.
37. Cited by P. M. Ashraf's *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence*, (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1983), 287.
38. *Ibid.*, 128.
39. The full title of Spence's journal was *Pigs' Meat; or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude: Collected by the Poor Man's Advocate (an Old Veteran in the Cause of Freedom) in the Course of His Reading for More than Twenty Years*.
40. Cited by Ashraf, *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence*, 81.
41. House of Commons, *An Act for the More Effectually Preventing Seditious Meetings and Assemblies*, 17 March, 1817. The Act further explains that,
 

certain Societies or Clubs calling themselves *Spenceans* or *Spencean Philanthropists*, hold and profess for their Object the Confiscation and Division of the Land, and the Extinction of the Funded Property of the Kingdom . . . it is expedient and necessary that all such Societies or Clubs as foresaid should be utterly suppressed and prohibited.
42. T. Malthus, *Additions to the Fourth and Former Editions of an Essay on the Principle of Population*, (London: John Murray, 1817), 40.
43. T. Spence, 'The rights of infants written in the latter end of the year 1796', in T. Spence, *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982), 116.
44. *Ibid.*, 115.
45. T. Spence, 'The restorer of society to its natural state (1803)', in T. Spence, *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982), 163.
46. T. Spence, 'The rights of man', 61–2.
47. Cited by G. I. Gallop, 'Introductory essay: Thomas Spence and the real rights of man', in T. Spence, *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982), 33.
48. H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 268.
49. T. Spence, 'The rights of man', 63.
50. T. Spence, 'The restorer of society to its natural state', 146.

51. C. Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century*, (London: Pimlico, 2001), 49. The lines are from T. Spence, 'The rights of infants', 120.
52. T. Spence, 'The rights of infants', 111.
53. T. M. Parssinen, 'Thomas Spence and the origins of English land nationalisation', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34, (1973), 139, 135–41.
54. M. Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775–1840*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 51.
55. T. Spence, 'The rights of man', 59.
56. T. Spence, 'The rights of infants', 121.
57. T. Spence, 'The restorer of society to its natural state', 144.
58. T. Spence, 'The rights of infants', 114.
59. *Ibid.*, 115.
60. Chase, *The People's Farm*.
61. A. Gray, *The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin*, (London: Longmans, 1963), 257.
62. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 177.
63. G. D. H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners 1789–1850*, (London: Macmillan, 1959), 25.
64. T. Knox, 'Thomas Spence: the trumpet of jubilee', *Past and Present*, 76, (1977), 98.
65. K. Marx, *Theories Of Surplus Value*, Volume 1, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), 382.
66. The idea of land nationalization was popular in the 1880s, influenced by the work of, among other, Alfred Russel Wallace, Henry George, The Land Nationalisation Society and the English Land Restoration League. However, it is also pertinent to be reminded that the association, so important to Spence, between freedom, independence and land ownership also remained in the mind of some labour leaders. For Keir Hardie speaking in 1909,
 

the peasant who has even three acres of land, a well filled pig sty, a cows grass on the common and a cottage which is his to use and hold so long as he pays the rent, is to all intents and purposes a free man. He cannot be starved into submission nor be coerced by eviction. It is an ideal worth fighting for. (Cited by Michael Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the land: the response of the Labour Party to the Land Campaign of Lloyd George before the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 8, 2, 1997, 127)
67. H. Hyndman, *The Nationalization of the Land in 1775 and 1882: Being a Lecture Delivered at Newcastle-upon-Tyne by Thomas Spence, 1775* (London: E. W. Allen, 1882). Hyndman later noted the pamphlet 'has sold to the number of many thousands'. (Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, 448)
68. Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, 409.
69. *Ibid.*, 448.
70. The letter is reproduced in Ashraf, *Thomas Spence*, plate XIX.
71. Beer continues, 'and to the end of his days took part in all revolutionary Labour movements at the cost of heavy sacrifices and sufferings'. M. Beer, *Social Struggles and Thought (1750–1860)*, (London: Leonard Parsons, 1925), 27.
72. Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, 409.
73. Ashraf was a researcher at the Institute for Marxism-Leninism in Moscow, where she undertook a study on the history of black radicals in Britain. She then moved to a university post in the GDR.

74. See Ashraf, *Thomas Spence*, 141, note 2 (1), 143, note 18.
75. Ashraf, *Thomas Spence*, 121.
76. *Ibid.*, 139–40.
77. See, for example, Brian Morris, ‘The agarian socialism of Thomas Spence’, in Brian Morris, *Ecology and Anarchism* (London: Images Publishing, 1996); see also the website which I run <http://thomas-spence-society.co.uk>
78. W. Morris, *The Pilgrims of Hope and Chants for Socialists*, (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), 57.
79. M. Bevir, ‘William Morris: the modern self, art, and politics’, <http://repositories.cdlib.org/postprints/1097/>, accessed 09.09.2009.
80. Cited by Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 476.
81. Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 124.
82. R. Williams, *Culture and Society, 1790–1950*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 159–60.
83. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).
84. MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 605.
85. Kinna, *William Morris*.
86. W. Morris, *News from Nowhere; or, an Epoch of Rest* *News from Nowhere*, (London: Routledge, 1972).
87. E. Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
88. W. Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to ‘Justice’ and ‘Commonweal’ 1883–1890*, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 425.
89. *Ibid.*, 419, 420.
90. *Ibid.*, 493.
91. *Ibid.*, 420–4.
92. Cited by Kinna, *William Morris*, 150.
93. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 80.
94. *Ibid.*, 16.
95. *Ibid.*, 179.
96. *Ibid.*, 146.
97. *Ibid.*, 45. The dream land described in *News from Nowhere* is not entirely without the possibility of change, although the prospect is an ominous one:

people are too careless of the history of the past – too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men . . . Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid. (167–8)

98. Cited by MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 598.
99. Cited by MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 595.
100. W. Morris, *The Wood beyond the World*, (London: Kelmscott Press, 1894); W. Morris, *The Well at the World’s End*, (London: Kelmscott Press, 1896); W. Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, (London: Kelmscott Press, 1897); C. Silver, ‘Socialism, internalised: the last romances of William Morris’, in F. Boos and C. Silver (Eds), *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,

- 1990). See also Christine Bolus-Reichert, 'Aestheticism in the late romances of William Morris', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 50, 1, (2007), 73–95.
101. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 1.
  102. P. Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 387.
  103. Another outlet was Morris shop. Shaw called it 'a highly select shop in Oxford Street where he sold furniture of a rum aesthetic sort and decorated houses with extraordinary wallpapers' (cited by MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 471).
  104. Cited by John Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*, (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1921), 32.
  105. Cited by MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 644.
  106. Cited by MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 672.
  107. Blatchford, *Merrie England*, 27.
  108. *Ibid.*, 25.
  109. Joyce, *Visions of the People*, 83.
  110. P. Kaarsholm, 'Pro-Boers', in Raphael Samuel (Ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity: Volume I: History and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 116. In the 1908 edited version of *Merrie England* a circulation of over 80,000 was being claimed for *The Clarion* (back inside cover).
  111. R. Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England: Nation, Landscape and Literature, 1840–1920*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 10.
  112. L. Thompson, *Robert Blatchford: Portrait of an Englishman*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), 224.
  113. Blatchford, *Merrie England*, 68–9. Despite the rupture within the politics of the past, the natural and historical right of the people to the common ownership of the land was still considered important within the more class conscious popular radical/socialist constituency of the decades spanning the turn of the nineteenth century. *The Clarion Song Book* offers the typical refrain, 'The People to Their Land', by Edward Carpenter, with its chorus of 'A robber band has seize'd the land, and we are exiles here'. The song contains a set of images that could have been chosen by Spence:

The cattle in the sun may lie  
 The fox by night may roam  
 The lark may sing all day on high  
 Between its heaven and home;  
 But we have no place here, to die  
 Is the one right we need not buy:  
 Then high heaven our vows be given,  
 We'll have our land or die.

(*The Clarion Song Book*, London: Clarion Press, undated, 19).

114. Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, 111.
115. R. Blatchford, *As I Lay A-Thinking: Some Memories and Reflections of an Ancient and Quiet Watchman*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926), 114.
116. R. Blatchford, *Not Guilty: A Defence of the Bottom Dog*, (London: Clarion Press, 1906).

117. R. Blatchford, *God and my Neighbour*, (London: Clarion Press, 1903).
118. For example, see H. Cunningham, 'The language of patriotism', in Raphael Samuel (Ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity: Volume I: History and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1989).
119. Lyons, *Robert Blatchford*, 186.
120. Arthur Penty, *Old Worlds for New: A Study of the Post-Industrial State*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917). Penty and G. K. Chesterton's 'redistributionist' theories for a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism were disseminated in, among other places, Chesterton's journal, *G. K.'s Weekly*.
121. For further reading see David Prym, 'The Clarion Clubs, rambling and the Holiday Associations in Britain since the 1890s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11, 2/3, (1976). Denis Pye, *Fellowship is Life: The National Clarion Cycling Club 1895–1995*, (Halliwell: Clarion Publishing, 1995).
122. Cited by Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, 117.
123. Cited by Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, 230.
124. Cited by Martin Wright, 'Robert Blatchford, the Clarion Movement and the crucial years of British socialism, 1891–1900', in Tony Brown (Ed.), *Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism*, (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 75.
125. Cited by Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, 166.
126. Cited by Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, 159.
127. Lyons, *Robert Blatchford*, 112–3.
128. Cited by Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, 101.
129. *The Clarion*, 'How I became a socialist', (February, 1896), available at: <http://www.wcml.org.uk/group/scout.htm>, accessed 07.09.2006.
130. Ibid.
131. S. Yeo, 'A new life: the religion of socialism in Britain, 1883–1896', *History Workshop Journal*, 4, 1, (1977), 5–56.
132. Yeo, 'A new life: the religion of socialism in Britain', 38.
133. For example, Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*. It is also pertinent to note that the *New Clarion*, published from 1931, was dominated by serious socialist commentary and activism while maintaining Clarion Fellowship ideals and social activities, notably the Cycling clubs and Choirs. Moreover, even in the early 1890s *The Clarion* combined its socialism with non-political and humorous work. See, for example, the collection offered by The Staff of the 'Clarion', *Contraptions*, (London: Walter Scott, circa 1895),
134. E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, (London: Merlin, 1978), 109.

