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‘Ye Olde Englishe Communists’: Popular Front
Historians and the Left, 1936-1940

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Abstract

This thesis examines the historical practices of the left-wing Popular Front cultural movement in Britain in the late 1930s, as well as their relationship to more established British historical traditions. To achieve this, it draws on a collection of written historical works, public performances and other media that demonstrate the varied aspects of this relationship. The authors and creators of these works existed within a shift toward a more national focus within the cultural expression of the socialist and communist movements, enacted to engage with the growing threat of fascism. These writers and performers reinterpreted the cornerstones of British national myth, from Alfred the Great to Adam Smith, to support notion of a progressive and egalitarian lineage for modern Britons. In doing so, these ‘Popular Front historians’ also revealed the deep rooted Anglocentrism within both the British historical tradition and its socialist movements. At a time when movements for national independence were beginning to stir in Scotland and Wales, the Popular Front historical narrative attempted to cement a notion of a unified, London-centred socialist Britain. This progressive nationalism made its way into the political and cultural mainstream during the Second World War and informed the work of the first post-war generation of Marxist historians centred on the Communist Party Historians Group. This thesis explores the composition, processes and cultural pathways of the Popular Front historical tradition and the contribution these works made to the progressive nationalism of post-war Britain.

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Introduction

On 2nd August 1935, the General Secretary of the Communist International, Georgi Dimitrov, delivered his main report to the Comintern's Seventh World Congress, detailing the challenges facing the global communist movement. In the speech, he broke with established Comintern policy to advocate rapprochement with not only the 'social fascist' social democratic parties, but the entire concept of progressive national identity.¹ This cautious acceptance of the world as it was, divided by competing nations and empires, fundamentally contradicted the foundations of Soviet internationalism. Marx's clarion call of 'Workers of the World, unite!' had been embedded into the new Marxist-Leninist dogma of the Soviet Union in such a way as to all but consign the role of national differences to the 'dustbin of history'. However, since Hitler's rise to power in 1933, some Communists had begun to reconsider the power of proletarian identity against the naked emotional force of nationalism. With Dimitrov's codification of this rapprochement in Comintern policy, party members across the globe were asked to build coalitions around the very national ideas that had been heresy only months prior. The impact of this turn to nationalism can be seen in diverse and surprisingly long-lived ways, in both the specifics of Marxist history writing and the broader scope of British political culture.

This study investigates the impact of the national mythmaking inspired by Dimitrov's 'United Front' and its broader cousin, the 'Popular Front', on the political culture of Great Britain leading up to the outbreak of war and beyond.² It will be necessary to define exactly what is meant by British 'Popular Front' and 'Popular Front history', though this will also become evident in the course of analysis. While the Popular Front found successful electoral expression in France and Spain, the movement only spawned a few unsuccessful by-election candidates in the United Kingdom. Without the official approval of either the Labour or Liberal parties, the coalition lacked any real purchase on the British electorate.³ However, the movement still managed to attract several prominent figures associated with the Labour and Liberal parties, despite dismissal of the project by their party leaders. The focus on this arena

¹ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm> [accessed 23/2/2021]

² The use of 'Great Britain' here is intentional, as the complexities of Irish politics and the weakness of the Communist Party on both sides of the border would require a completely different study entirely.

³ It could be argued that due to the cancellation of the election due by 1940 on account of the war, the Popular Front never had chance to test its national electoral viability. However, there is no indication that the coalition would have seen any success had an election been contested in 1940, lacking any official recognition or a party organisation to mobilise supporters.

of cultural reaction beyond formal ‘politics’ echoes the conception of Lawrence Black and other writers of the ‘New Political History’ who argue that party politics forms only one small part of a broader ‘political culture’.⁴ Black notes in his work on the political culture of the 1950s and 1960s that the advent of television had completed a dislocation of the average voter from the more visceral, in-person politics of the Victorian and Edwardian campaign trail. This resulted in a political experience that was far less participatory on the part of the voter, with debates and speeches broadcast directly to the home.⁵ While the television would not arrive until after the Second World War, mass communication media such as radio, cinema and print may prove an analogue to television in this study of the late 1930s.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, culture and media had undergone a momentous transformation. Daniel L. LeMahieu has placed the driving force of this change in the growing size and importance of the lower middle class in Britain. The number of salaried, white-collar workers had risen from 1.67 million in 1911 to 3.84 million by 1938. This increase created a class of people who, though largely from working-class backgrounds and living in working-class areas, identified culturally with the affluent middle class. This aspiration was coupled with a precipitous rise in real wages and disposable income, as well as increased leisure time, to produce a huge demand for cultural consumption such as daily newspapers, novels and the cinema. This was aided by a relatively low level of educational opportunity, with only roughly 10% of children going on to secondary school, which meant that the lower middle classes were largely divorced from ‘élite culture’. In response to this new market, the cinema and tabloid newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* sought to engage this market at ‘its own level of understanding’.⁶

It was into this fray that the British Popular Front stepped when it emerged in the mid-1930s. The notion of the alliance as at least a partially cultural project was echoed by Hungarian Marxist philosopher, György Lukács, who in 1938 wrote that:

‘The Popular Front means a struggle for a genuine popular culture, a manifold relationship to every aspect of the life of one’s own people as it has developed in its own individual way in the course of history.’⁷

⁴ Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954-1970*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-13

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173

⁶ Daniel L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 7-20

⁷ György Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, *Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Theodor W. Adorno and others, (London: Verso, 2007), p. 57

In Britain, the lack of successful political manifestation meant that the cultural aspect of the movement were its chief achievements. Elinor Taylor has written at length on the development of the 'Popular Front novel' as one of the drivers of this process. In her work, Taylor seeks to look beyond the work of those famed authors who's romance with Communism was, in reality, brief and convenient, such as W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis. This group, she argues, viewed Communism as a 'monolithic ideology to which writers had to capitulate'. In contrast, Taylor champions a collection of writers whose works served as a 'site of negotiation for the imaginative making of a politics'. The group represented a broad coalition of social forces that mirrored the core of the Popular Front coalition itself. Arthur Calder-Marshall, for instance, was an 'archetypal fellow-traveller', educated at public school and Oxford. This contrasted greatly with the variously proletarian upbringings of Lewis Jones, James Barke and John Somerfield, as well as the atypical origins of Australian Jack Lindsay. Together, these men forged a genuine debate and legacy around the aesthetics of Marxist literature, and much of their work reflects a genuinely popular and representative style.⁸

This thesis will seek to accomplish a similar task to Taylor's work on the 'Popular Front novel', but with a focus on the world of non-fiction historical writing. Perhaps more so than its fictional literature, the creation of a 'Popular Front history' expresses the ideological framework of the movement and fulfils Dimitrov's mandate to 'put down roots' in the English mind. The efforts of writers on the Communist and Labour lefts saw the mass production of a new national narrative, one that aimed to instil in the populace a sense of national identity that was fully accommodating of progressive and socialist ideals. Rather than merely celebrating English examples of trends within labour history, the works of the Popular Front historians embedded social progressivism into the heart of English history's most celebrated figures and events, from Alfred the Great to the Chartists. As shall be shown, particular attention was paid to the parts of England's medieval and early modern history that might previously have seemed unusual inclusions into a left-wing, particularly Marxist history. While this certainly fulfilled the need to 'put down roots' in British culture, it required a great deal of historical reinterpretation and, in many cases, selective presentation of facts.

While they share much of their outlook with later Marxist histories, it is argued in this thesis that these historical works published between 1936 and 1940 are distinct enough from other left histories as to warrant their own periodisation, that of 'Popular Front history'. This

⁸ Elinor Taylor, *The Popular Front Novel in Britain, 1934-1940*, (Leiden: Brill, 2017)

can in many ways be seen as a transitional period, in which the left began to grapple with national history in a much more holistic fashion, leading to the birth of academic Marxist history in the aftermath of the war. The ‘Popular Front history’ can be defined against its successors by its amateurism and popular nature, a contrast to the increasingly academic Marxist works of the late 1940s and 1950s. Largely produced by writers with little to no background in academic history, these works should properly be viewed as examples of public history rather than attempts to influence the creation of a new historiographical movement. Despite this, the version of the British national history created by ‘Popular Front historians’ in the late 1930s had a lasting impact on the post-war Marxist history.⁹

It is the assertion of this thesis that the blueprint of ‘Popular Front history’ was at the forefront of an intellectual movement that straddled the Second World War, being informed by that national struggle and a desire to present a Marxist reading of history. What began with the Communist Party’s historical engagement in 1936 was brought into a literary context by A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England* in 1938. At this time, a number of young socialist intellectuals were completing their studies. Amongst these were Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudé, John Saville, Dorothy Thompson and Victor Kiernan. Driven by a desire for change that the Labour Party could not satisfy, many of these young academics turned to the Communist Party as the vehicle for their activities following the war. Along with Morton and other older academics, Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr, they formed the Communist Party Historians Group (CPHG) in 1946. Taking Morton’s *A People’s History* as an example, they seized on the Popular Front blueprint and aimed to explore ‘history from below’. Harvey Kaye describes the members of the CPHG as ‘fanning the spark of hope in the past’ in his retrospective account of the same name. This description, originating in a quote from Walter Benjamin, also neatly describes the mission and *modus operandi* of the Popular Front historical movement.¹⁰ While Morton’s claim to have presented ‘history from below’ in *A People’s History* is dubious at best, his attempt to do so demonstrates a definite continuity between the ‘Popular Front history’ and the development of the post-war Marxist historiography.

The similarities between the Popular Front history and the school that grew up in the late 1940s can be exemplified in contrast with what followed from the late 1950s. As the New Left began to gather steam in the 1960s, the parochial vestiges of the pre-war Popular Front

⁹ Harvey Kaye, ‘Fanning the Spark of Hope in the Past: the British Marxist Historians’, *Rethinking History*, 4:3 (2000), pp. 281-294

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-286

formula present in the CPHG began to come into question. Reflecting on the formation of the movement, influential New Left sociologist Stuart Hall stated his belief that the work of E.P. Thompson had been “too English” in its nature.¹¹ This was echoed by later New Left historians Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, who deemed Thompson’s contributions to be infected with a ‘messianic nationalism’.¹² They argued that instead of a ‘systematic sociology of British capitalism’, the CPHG and earlier New Left writers had ‘tended to rely on a simplistic rhetoric in which the “common people”, “ordinary men and women” were opposed to “interests”, “the Establishment”, etc.’. This, they suggested, made the earlier writers’ work more expressive of left-wing populism than scientific socialism.¹³ Anderson and Nairn opposed the nationalistic tendencies of the Popular Front formula for different reasons; Anderson from a dogmatically Marxist perspective, Nairn as a dedicated Scottish devolutionist. However, what is clear is that the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s was as much of a reaction against the Popular Front formula as the CPHG had been inspired by it.

A key question remains as to where the lines should be drawn between the stated ambition toward popular democracy within the Popular Front movement, and the charge of populism levelled by Anderson and Nairn. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser define populism as an ‘ideology’ that separates society into ‘two homogenous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”’. The ‘general will’ of the ‘true people’ is held to be paramount, a conception of democracy that can trace its origins to a perversion of the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹⁴ Similarly, Jan-Werner Müller identifies that populists claim to uniquely represent the ‘people’ against the ‘other’.¹⁵ As shall be demonstrated below, much of the work of the ‘Popular Front history’ serves to build a narrative that enforces the same dichotomy of ‘popular will’ against the ‘elite’. Müller argues that we can speak of ‘degrees of populism’ rather than a definite and binary characterisation.¹⁶ The Popular Front did not entirely reject pluralism in the same way that many modern populists do, and therefore cannot be considered a purely populist movement. In co-opting many of the national myths held dear by conservatives as much as liberals and socialists, the movement seems to avoid the notion that ‘we, and only we, are the people’. Instead, as expressed by Müller, the Popular Front generally presents a protest for the inclusion of the unincluded into

¹¹ Stuart Hall, ‘At Home and Not at Home: Stuart Hall and Les Black in Conversation’, *Cultural Studies*, 23:4 (2009), p. 675

¹² Perry Anderson, ‘Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism’, *New Left Review*, 1/35 (1966), p. 35

¹³ Perry Anderson, ‘The Left in the Fifties’, *New Left Review*, 1/29 (1965), p. 17

¹⁴ Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

¹⁵ Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*, (London: Penguin Books, 2017), pp. 21-25

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40

that existing notion of Britishness; the idea that ‘we are *also* the people’.¹⁷ Despite this, as evidenced below, the movement may possess some of the characteristics associated with populism and could therefore be said to contain a certain ‘degree’ of populist rhetoric.

The work of the ‘Popular Front history’ certainly seems to defy categorisation as ‘participatory’ or even ‘democratic’. During the 1920s and 1930s, magazines such as *Writer* and *New Writing* encouraged and published the work of working- and lower-middle class writers who would otherwise struggle to find publication in professional journals. The work of these men (largely, though these publications also offered an opportunity to women) often detailed the realities of their working lives and the hardships that they faced daily. These journals tended to focus on discovering nascent writing talent amongst the subaltern classes, rather than having a political interest in the ‘proletarian’ nature of their writers. An attempt had been made to replicate this democratic appeal to writing in the Comintern-sponsored *Left Review*, running from 1934 to 1938, edited firstly by Edgell Rickword and later Randall Swingler. Primarily a vehicle for established Communist writers, *Left Review* initially also ran competitions for workers to send in material on working life in Britain. However, these received less and less of the editor’s attention by 1936 and were stopped entirely under Swingler in early 1938. According to Chris Hilliard, the bulk of the material received not only lacked the sufficient aesthetic refinement, but also failed to live to the expectations that the editors had for the tenor of socialist literature. In January 1938, Swingler had complained that the stories submitted by ‘worker-writers’ were invariably dominated by ‘the constant weight of anxiety and poverty’. The editor found this approach far too ‘defeatist’ and preferred that writers should take a more abstracted view of ““man” as implicated in society’.¹⁸

This experimentation with ‘democratisation’ was not replicated within the Popular Front’s historical writing. Of its principal authors, only two possessed any connection to working-class life, and one of those had long enjoyed waged work within the labour movement. The remainder of the seven writers hailed from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, with some such from an established literary household. While the historical traditions that the movement utilised often sought to emphasise radical or participatory democracy, its historical practice remained largely top-down. Even the large participatory events discussed in Chapter 4 were choreographed to the extent that the input of performers and marchers was essentially

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 72-74

¹⁸ Chris Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 134-135

non-existent. Müller demonstrates that the power within populist movements is usually concentrated in the hands of a few leaders, with no meaningful influence on policy from those who follow them.¹⁹ In this way, the practitioners of the ‘Popular Front history’ can be considered to belong more a ‘democratic populism’ than any popular democratic tradition.

The bulk of this thesis will be dedicated to examining the development of ‘Popular Front history’, its central themes and essential ‘hallmarks’. Through its focus on England’s ‘democratic’ Anglo-Saxon foundations, the movement reaches backward and echoes scholarly debates of the past, notably from the English Civil War and Whig eras. From here, the Popular Front historians duplicate much of the sense of progress and historical determinism that Herbert Butterfield had in 1933 ascribed to the ‘Whig interpretation of history’.²⁰ The question of how this seemingly ethno-nationalistic appeal to constitutional monarchy can be squared with modern Marxism, and what utility that would hold for the Popular Front movement, is one that we will address at length. While the British left had never been averse to national sentiment, for the Communist Party at least, this combination proved to be a perplexingly unique episode. It is certain that the specific conditions of the immediate pre-war years led to a courting of nationalistic sentiments amongst many of the left’s cultural elites. However, the question remains to what extent the broader population had ever completely let go of these notions. While it would be easy to assume that an appeal to nationalistic sentiments was well received amongst local populations, the relationship is seemingly much more complex. This is even more the case when one considers exactly which nation some parts of the United Kingdom saw themselves as belonging to.

In order to complete this research, my primary sources revolved around the history books published by various sources aligned with the Popular Front in the late 1930s. While the earliest of these dates from 1938, they elaborate on the themes established in the earlier CPGB marches and present them in an easily digestible format. Chief amongst these is Morton’s *A People’s History*, the mammoth history that stretches from the dawn of man in England to the interwar period. This work forms a consistent backbone to our study by more or less applying the ‘Popular Front’ formula to every era of English history. Another broad scoped history, Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword’s *Handbook of Freedom*, was published in 1939. This presents the same utility as Morton’s book, though here the authors play editor,

¹⁹ Müller, pp. 36-37

²⁰ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, (London: Bell, 1931)

presenting the same formula through the carefully presented words of primary figures. Other key texts include Hymie Fagan's work on the Peasant's Revolt and early modern works by T.A. Jackson, G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate.

It will prove necessary to explore each of the authors of these key works in detail, examining their social and economic backgrounds and the level of their involvement with the Popular Front left. To this end, Chapter One will serve partly as an extended introduction, explaining in greater detail the context on which we have briefly touched upon so far. To understand the efforts of different groups and individuals, it will be helpful to situate them in a relation to each other and their surroundings. To obtain the most intelligible definition of the British 'Popular Front' as possible, we will also examine organisations that best exemplify the spirit of the movement, aside from the Communist Party. These include the official 'Popular Front' campaign, launched with unofficial representatives from four major parties in December 1936. We will also examine Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club, which provides an illustrative microcosm of the wider movement in its aims and the class composition of its staff and membership. A survey of key authors reveals a startling uniformity of background and location which will come to bear on several of the topics discussed in subsequent chapters. Indeed, both the intellectual leadership of the movement and in large part its membership can be characterised as overwhelmingly middle-class and Home Counties English. When contrasted with the few exceptions amongst their ranks, these dynamics of class and nationality offer avenues through which to explain the way in which each author engages with his topic of choice.

The first of these major topics, that of the Anglo-Saxon Englishman and his subjugation to the Norman landlord, is explored in depth in chapter two. As will be shown, this relationship, often referred to as the 'Norman yoke', lays the foundation upon which much of the Popular Front history rests. Forming a logical start point of any history of the English nation, the Anglo-Saxon period is here idealised as a time of peace, plenty and democracy, particularly in contrast to the time following the Norman Conquest. It will be argued that these dubious claims, made at the start of the two most comprehensive histories surveyed in our study, prepare the ground for the entire late medieval and early modern periods to be seen through the prism of the Norman yoke. As we shall see, this narrative of a native people in defence against foreign oppression found obvious parallels with the threat of German fascism. So crucial was this fact to the writers that great efforts were made to accommodate it with the economic imperatives of Marxism. Until the arrival of bourgeois power in the late eighteenth century, all oppressive forces are dismissed as the inheritors of the Norman Conquest,

oppressing the Anglo-Saxon population. It shall be demonstrated that, through the usage of language and rhetorical devices, the authors of these works attempted to create the image of a resolution, eternal Englishman, stretching from the Anglo-Saxon settlement to the modern day.

The third chapter develops these themes further, exploring the threads of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism to their logical conclusions in the ‘Whig interpretation of history’. I evaluate the term itself and the broadening of its definition since it was coined by Herbert Butterfield in 1931. It then becomes clear that the framework applied by the Popular Front historians fits, at least in part, to most definitions of the Whig historical tradition. Both examples tend toward a teleological view of history, prioritising the political imperatives of the authors over any rigorous factuality. By evaluating the similarities, we approach a view that the Popular Front history can be seen as a kind of ‘Red’ Whig history. By celebrating Britain’s supposedly ancient democratic traditions but pointing to modern socialism as the next logical step, the Popular Front historians utilise the same toolbox to produce an evolution of the Victorian worldview. As with the movement’s notable Anglo-Saxonism, the utility of this framework becomes quite apparent to the modern reader. However, it remains the purpose of our discussion in this chapter to decipher how and why this largely Communist group of intellectuals embraced the methodology of their seemingly anathematic Whig counterparts.

Finally, the last chapter will assess the very nature of the movement itself and its ability to live by its own ideals. Democracy formed a key pillar of the Popular Front, steeped in the notion that through the involvement of the whole populace, better policy would emerge, particularly toward the injustices of the world. However, through its heavy reliance of Communist Party members and ideology, the movement seems to betray a potentially more sinister and elitist attitude toward the general population. While the historical marches and pageants organised by the party often drew huge crowds in inherently participatory forms, the themes of these marches were dictated by a few apparatchiks and applied in blanket form across the country. This is even more jarring when examining the events in Wales and Scotland, which claimed to represent the ‘people’s history’ of those nations but remained largely unchanged from earlier events in England. This glaring Anglocentrism raises several questions, largest of all as to which ‘people’ were actually represented by the Popular Front’s approach to history. Notions of a progressive British citizenship also belie the unavoidable question of Empire, one that is almost entirely absent from the Popular Front’s historical literature. We consider the causes and effects of this centralised vision of socialist Britain, both in London and the regions. The fairly uniform background and political bent of the

contributors may present the most obvious explanation, with exceptions often serving to handily illustrate the rule. However, these attempts form only a part of a larger debate over the relationship between nationalism and social justice which continued to brew until the post-war settlement.

The Historical Context of the ‘Popular Front history’

The nebulous origins of the British ‘Popular Front’ necessitates a broad knowledge of the different social and political influences that contributed to its foundation. It will be necessary to foster an understanding of the individuals involved in its creation and the context within which they worked in order to assess their contributions correctly. While all were driven by a basic belief in anti-fascism and some form of socialism, the education, personal circumstances and party allegiances of the writers influenced the character and quality of their work. Similarly, the efforts of these figures to create a progressive historical tradition for Britain must be understood in the context of previous intellectual movements, the political forces of the time and the impact these works had on the future of British historiography. The creation of ‘Popular Front history’ and its accompanying political culture served as a pivotal moment for the British left. This chapter attempts to establish the catalysts, hallmarks and lasting consequences of the Popular Front history movement, presenting a firm foundation on which to explore the historiographical trends in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Political Origins of the British ‘Popular Front’

The Popular Front era, encompassing the late 1930s and arguably extending into the Second World War, was a highly dynamic period in the history of the political left in Britain. The requirements of global and national politics forced a revolution in traditional social alliances and rivalries. From 1931, Britain had been governed by ‘grand coalition’ of the National Government, firstly under sitting Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and then the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin. The formation of this coalition, following the failure of the previous Labour government to deal with the effects of the Wall Street Crash, created a seismic shift in British party politics. MacDonald initially presided over a government largely consisting of Conservatives, with support from a Liberal Party at war with itself over Protectionism. The vast majority of Labour MPs refused to support the coalition, and

MacDonald, Phillip Snowden and the handful of others who had joined the National Government were expelled from the Labour Party on the 28th September 1931.²¹ This created a great deal of resentment towards MacDonald and Snowden, whom to many already represented a more genteel and moderate Labour Party, detached from its working-class base.²²

Following a general election in October 1931, Labour was reduced to a rump of only 52 seats in Parliament. The Conservatives, by far the largest party in the National coalition, won an astounding 470 seats. A. J. P. Taylor has suggested that the Conservatives benefitted from the perception of the National Government as ‘a demonstration of national unity’ against the disastrous economic conditions of the Great Depression.²³ Andrew Thorpe argues that Labour had also lost much of its credibility in the eyes of its voter base by 1931, having failed to curtail the economic depression that was driving them deeper into unemployment and poverty.²⁴ While the party recovered some of its ground at the next election in 1935, winning 154 seats, this still put them at a great distance from political power. This can be partly attributed to conflicting messages from different factions within the party on rearmament, which allowed the Nationals to variously portray Labour as ‘pacifist’ or ‘warmongering’. Ultimately, Taylor attributes many of the seats regained in 1935 to voters who simply not voted in 1931, having regained some of their trust in Labour.²⁵ This still placed the party outside of the bubble of ‘national unity’, as the political focus shifted from the threat of poverty to the threat of war in Europe.

In France and Spain, the need for national unity was met not by a ‘grand coalition’ of conservative forces, but by one of leftists and radicals. The collapse of the centre-left ‘*Cartel des Gauches*’ government in France had led to right-wing riots and the installation of an authoritarian, right-wing government in 1934. In response, the Communist Party and the social-democratic French Section of the Worker’s International signed a compact, which later also included Radicals and Republicans who had not supported the right-wing government. This grand coalition garnered enthusiastic support in many sections of the French public and won a convincing victory at the May 1936 legislative elections.²⁶ Similarly, in Spain, a coalition of the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party, Communist Party, the

²¹ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, (London: Pelican, 1975), pp. 400-403

²² Humphrey Berkley, *The Myth That Will Not Die: The Formation of the National Government 1931*, (London: Croon Helm, 1978), pp. 13-30

²³ Taylor, *English History*, p. 400

²⁴ Andrew Thorpe, ‘The Industrial Meaning of “Gradualism”’: The Labour Party and Industry, 1918-1931’, *Journal of British Studies*, 35:1 (1996), pp. 84-113

²⁵ Taylor, *English History*, pp. 472-473

²⁶ Julian T. Jackson, *Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy 1934-1938*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

Trotskyist Workers' Party of Marxist Unification and various Republican and regional parties won the election of February 1936, on a platform of civil liberties against an increasingly authoritarian conservative government.²⁷ On the part of the Communist parties in these two countries, these electoral alliances can be seen as direct implementation of Dimitrov's 'United Front' policy against fascism.²⁸

The prospect of a grand coalition of the European left had seemed quite impossible in the late 1920s. The policy of the Comintern's revolutionary 'Third Period' officially held social democrats to be the biggest threat to class consciousness, duly dubbing them 'social fascists' to distinguish them from the real fascists who had held power in Italy since 1922. Social democrats, far from being natural allies, were considered a bourgeois-democratic distraction from the true calling of the proletariat, that of revolution. However, the dire economic consequences of the Great Depression had largely benefitted the far right over the far left in Europe. German and Italian fascists had consolidated their hold on large portions of the working classes by positioning themselves as protectors of nostalgia and tradition. The Comintern had instituted a temporary cessation of hostilities against social democrats following Hitler's ascension to power in January 1933, though this went largely unenforced, often rendered hopeless by bureaucratic inertia. In any case, many social democratic parties (including the British Labour Party) saw nothing to be gained but unnecessary trouble in working with Communists.²⁹

The Communist attitude toward collaboration began to change with the appointment of Bulgarian lawyer Georgi Dimitrov as the head of the Comintern in 1935. He had gained prominence by defending Marius van der Lubbe and other Communists at the Leipzig trials in July 1933, following the burning of the Reichstag building. His appointment as General Secretary of the Comintern signalled the end of the 'Third Period' and beginning of the 'Popular Front' era, a change which would have consequences far beyond the Comintern's orbit. Dimitrov cannot be fully credited with the creation of the Popular Front in its most all-encompassing incarnation, as he remained reluctant to include Liberals in his initial plans. However, the radical policy shift conducted under his leadership made wider political collaboration possible for Communists where it previously would have been near heresy.

²⁷ Stanley Payne, *Spain's First Democracy: The Second Republic, 1931-1936*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 266

²⁸ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*

²⁹ Thomas Linehan, 'Communist Culture and Anti-Fascism in Inter-War Britain', *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Interwar Period*, ed. by Nigel Copsey & Andrzej Olechnowicz, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 37

In his main report to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International on 2nd August 1935, Dimitrov formally encouraged a 'United Front' between Communist parties and other parties of the left. In most of Europe, this alliance was seen as essential to check the growth of domestic fascist movements. In Britain, however, the main aim of the United Front was to oppose the National Government and its lenient attitude toward German rearmament. The Conservative-dominated coalition was also considered to present the most serious embodiment of domestic 'fascism', following the decline of Oswald Mosely's blackshirts. A 'militant united front with the millions of members of the British trade unions and Labour Party' was intended to galvanise the support of progressives and socialists to mount a challenge to the policy of the government.³⁰ The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), as much as any other European Communist party, dutifully undertook the task of courting the other parties of the British left. An agreement was reached early on with the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932. Promising signs of a full 'United Front' came in 1937, when the Socialist League (SL), a caucus of left-wing Labour members, joined the CPGB and ILP to issue a 'Unity manifesto'. This document served to advocate the unity of all forces of the British left, including the Labour Party, in order to oppose fascism, the National Government and restrictions on trade union liberties. However, the leadership of the Labour Party refused any relationship with the CPGB, as had been made clear by the former's rejection of the latter's request for affiliation in 1936. The Socialist League was then disaffiliated in May 1937, and Labour Party members forbidden from joining it.³¹

A separate attempt was made to construct a broader coalition of all groups opposed to fascism, this time from closer to the political centre. This 'Popular Front', in contrast with the CPGB-driven 'United Front', was to include the Liberals and some anti-appeasement Conservatives. The 'People's Front Propaganda Committee' was launched in 1936, with supporters from the Labour Party, Liberals, CPGB and Conservative Party. However, this campaign did not garner official support from any of the parties mentioned and was only able to endorse two unsuccessful by-election candidates in 1938 before fading into obscurity. Once again, the Labour Party was not prepared to work with the CPGB, and this fact alone would have precluded any truly 'grand' alliance. In addition to this, the party distrusted the Liberals and remained sceptical of the idea that Liberal voters would necessarily vote for Labour, even

³⁰ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*

³¹ David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity, 1884-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 147-172

if instructed to by their local Liberal association. The Liberals themselves had the same concern, worried that the ideological gulf between the two parties and their voter bases was too great. For many Liberals, the socialism of the Labour Party was anathema to ‘progressive’ thought and in violation of liberal principles. While considerable pressure was exerted from within both parties, including a petition from Sir Stafford Cripps that saw him expelled from the Labour Party, no agreement could be reached between the two. Peter Joyce argues that it is doubtful whether opposition to appeasement was enough to hold together an alliance of such ideologically disparate groups. Such a coalition would have required a stronger ‘realigning issue’ to function at anything more than an isolated, local level.³²

Due to the political concerns of the major parties involved, neither the ‘United Front’ or the broader ‘Popular Front’ were able to produce any electoral opposition to the National Government and appeasement. However, in his Comintern speech, Dimitrov had also identified the vital importance of combatting fascism on a cultural level, with particular reference to Britain, given its relative lack of domestic fascism. He explained that the far right was ‘rummaging through the entire history of every nation’ in order to co-opt the ‘exalted and heroic’ past to establish wider support for their policies. ‘Hundreds of books’ were published in Germany with the aim of constructing a new national history. These works manipulated the cultural memory and identity of Germany to make it more conducive to fascism and to support the rise of a ‘national saviour, a Messiah of the German people’. Similarly, Dimitrov noted that Mussolini had co-opted the figure of Garibaldi, the French fascists had embraced Joan of Arc and that Bulgarians were invoking their own national liberation heroes, Vassil Levsky and Stephan Karaj. In order to defeat the threat of fascism, he argued, the left must appeal to this same sense of national pride.³³

In his famous essay on ‘The Bent Twig’ of nationalism, Isaiah Berlin explores the very same realisation that Dimitrov had in his 1935 conference report. The doctrine of nationalism had stemmed from the late eighteenth century, when Germans began to react against the universalistic currents of the French Revolution. In particular, the French administrators imported by Frederick the Great instilled in many Germans the sense that their traditions and attachment to national character made them inferior. This resulted in the unleashing of a violent reaction against the values of reason and science, in favour of a romantic nationalism amongst the bourgeois cultural elite. However, by the early twentieth

³² Peter Joyce, ‘The Liberal Party and the Popular Front’, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 28 (2000), pp. 11-16

³³ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*

century, these forces of science and calculated order had claimed victory and established a new world in which utilitarian calculus enforced regimen on all facets of human life. Berlin argues that this led to a new sense of tradition and nationalism as a language of the economically oppressed, as opposed to the bourgeois cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century. With the standardised uniformity of the industrial world taking its toll on the working- and lower-middle classes of the early twentieth century, a new paradigm was born. Nationalist and traditionalist articulations, once the preserve of the cultural elite, were now released against them by the downtrodden within their own universalist order. This manifested itself most notably in the Hungarian rejection of Soviet rule in 1956, the steadfast religiosity of Poles under Communism and growing national independence movements in economically deprived regions such as Scotland, Wales and the Basque Country.³⁴

Even when a person's sense of national identity was wedded to an independent sovereign nation, this sense of 'oppositional nationalism' does not appear to be seriously diluted. This is evidenced by the fascists' successful use of such national myths and legends to generate huge support amongst the working classes. Dimitrov recognised that, in order to compete with the lure of fascism, the Communist parties of Europe would have to infuse their universalist Marxism with sense of unique national tradition. Prior to Stalin's promotion of 'Socialism in One Country', the Marxist left had been characterised by its staunch internationalism. Nationalism, along with adherence to religion, came to be seen as a temporary distraction from the class struggle that would pave the way to socialism. It was under these pretences that the early Bolsheviks justified suppressing minority agitations in the former Russian Empire and Rosa Luxembourge flatly opposed the creation of a state for her native Poland.³⁵ In contrast, Dimitrov rebuked any Communists who suggested that his policy turn had 'nothing to do with the cause of the working class'. While being 'irreconcilable opponents' of 'bourgeois nationalism', he argued that Communists should not fall prey to 'national nihilism'. Citing Lenin's writings on Russian nationalism, he declared that a 'genuine Bolshevik' would never 'sneer at all the national sentiments of the broad masses'. In order to stand a chance of preventing a fascist monopoly over national sentiment, Communists should therefore attempt to create an alternative culture that is 'national in form and socialist in content'.³⁶

³⁴ Isaiah Berlin, 'The Bent Twig: A Note on Nationalism', *Foreign Affairs*, 51:1 (1972), pp. 11-30

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21

³⁶ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*

The sort of national sentiments nurtured by the Popular Front were far from novel to those on the non-Communist left in Britain. Since its birth in the late nineteenth century, British socialism had accommodated a range of positions from paternalistic imperialism to unbridled internationalism.³⁷ For instance, leading socialists George Bernard Shaw, Robert Blatchford of *Clarion*, Henry Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation and union leader Will Thorne all supported the British Empire in the Boer War. Blatchford reasoned his support by stating, ‘I am for peace and international brotherhood’, but ‘when England is at war, I’m English. I have no politics and no party. I am English’. While this exhibits a fair amount of naked patriotism, Blatchford’s rationale also hinged on a belief the British Empire was the most enlightened of colonial powers. Compared with other European imperial regimes, native populations would experience the ‘gentlest’ and ‘wisest’ rulership under the British Imperial state.³⁸

While this might represent the most extreme version of paternalistic socialism, varying degrees of this position can be found throughout the Labour Party in the first half of the twentieth century. Notions of a ‘national form of socialism’ can be found in the ideas of such important figureheads as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald. This logic often extended to a tacit support for, or conspicuous ignorance of the abuses of the Empire.³⁹ On the whole, leftists clung to what Stephen Yeo has called an ‘oppositional Englishness’. They imagined that their national identity was not inseparably wedded to capitalism and imperialism and that the soul of national life could be improved, not destroyed, by socialism.⁴⁰ As the Labour Party gained access to the ancient institutions of Britishness and Empire in the 1910s and 1920s, so its socialism acquired an even more definitively British character. G.D.H. Cole’s ‘guild socialism’, for instance, revolved around an economic relationship between craft guilds and the wider public evocative of an idyllic medieval England. Cole’s conception of socialism bore a deep connection with the realities of British life, past and present, rather than the abstract ideals of Marxism-Leninism.⁴¹ Harold Laski, too, recognised the appeal of a national identity, even as he envisaged national sovereignty subsumed by a European or world

³⁷ Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity and the Break-up of Britain*, (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2013), pp. 27-28

³⁸ Gerry Hassan & Eric Shaw, *The People’s Flag and the Union Jack: An Alternative History of Britain and the Labour Party*, (London: Biteback, 2019), p. 34

³⁹ Marcus Morris, ‘From anti-colonialism to anti-imperialism: the evolution of H.M. Hyndman’s critique of empire c 1875-1905’, *Historical Research*, 87:236 (2014), pp. 293-314

⁴⁰ Stephen Yeo, ‘Socialism, the state, and some oppositional Englishness’, *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. by Robert Colls & Phillip Dodd, (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), pp. 331-388

⁴¹ G. D. H. Cole, *Guild Socialism Restated*, (London: Routledge, 1980)

government.⁴² Despite the Labour Party's dismissal of the project, Cole was among the first advocate in favour of a broad Popular Front.⁴³

Martin Pugh has argued that the intellectual leaderships of the Liberal, Labour and Communist parties were often of a very similar social class and moral foundation. Many Communists had come from Gladstonian Liberal families and the two parties could be said to represent the radical expression of subsequent generations. Stephen Spender even argued that Communism was an essential reinvention of the radical Liberal tradition. After working with the Communist-led Spanish Relief during the Spanish Civil War, Liberal Wilfrid Roberts found many Communists to be 'less troublesome than the left wing of the Labour Party'. Victor Gollancz, who worked very closely with Communists through his Left Book Club (LBC), had been a Liberal until 1929.⁴⁴

Progressive Liberal Richard Acland even better exemplifies this trend. Having spearheaded the Liberal argument for a broad Popular Front, he later briefly fronted his own Popular Front-style 'Common Wealth Party' with J. B. Priestley, before defecting to Labour in 1947. Acland stood with G. D. H. Cole alongside the Communist co-founder of the LBC, John Strachey and Scottish Unionist MP Robert Boothby at the foundation of the Popular Front campaign in December 1936. These four men, spanning almost the entire British political spectrum from Communist to Conservative, could not have better represented the proposed 'rainbow coalition' of the Popular Front. While electoral success eluded the movement, tentative collaboration with Liberal and Conservative elements allowed the left to tap into political and cultural traditions that stretched back much further than socialism. At a time when socialism itself could easily be dismissed as an alien, foreign ideology, the Liberal and Conservative elements offered a germ of continuity and legitimacy to the make-up of the 'Popular Front' political identity.

The 'Popular Front historians'

It is out of this complex milieu of progressive and anti-fascist intelligentsia that the community of Popular Front mythmakers emerged. Many were nurtured under the aegis of the LBC, itself an ideologically heterogeneous organisation set up by Gollancz, Strachey and Stafford

⁴² Matthews, pp. 29-34

⁴³ G. D. H. Cole, 'A British People's Front: Why and How?', *Political Quarterly*, 7:4 (1936), pp. 490-498

⁴⁴ Blaazer, p. 130

Cripps in 1936. The addition of Acland and Roberts as additional committee members in 1937 meant that the LBC reflected the party make-up of the Popular Front movement itself. Indeed, the club has been described as not only an essential part of the movement, but its greatest achievement. The aim of the group, as described by its first head convener John Lewis, was to ‘create the clear understanding out of which alone effective measures such as the formation of a Popular Front could come’. In order to achieve its aim of enlightening the population, the LBC produced and circulated books on a ‘wide range’ of topics for a cost price subscription. These books were by no means limited to political concerns or current affairs; many covered a range of ‘sociological, philosophical and biographical’ interests.⁴⁵

The LBC was undeniably socialist in its outlook during the Popular Front years.⁴⁶ Lewis believed that the LBC’s concern was the ‘the three closely related questions of fascism, the threat of war, and poverty’. In particular, the club saw ‘socialism as a cure for the third’, though clearly its aims were interlinked. Though Gollancz’s politics were rooted in Liberalism, he had no qualms in making the socialists Strachey and Laski responsible for the selection of LBC books. He also quickly found that the Communist Party was very receptive to his appeals for support and published a large number of books by card-carrying members and fellow travellers. Perhaps as a testament to his desire for cooperation, it has been suggested that Gollancz’s final disagreement with the Communist Party may have been as a result of his discovery of their belligerency toward other left-wing parties prior to the mid-1930s.⁴⁷ Regardless, Gollancz, Strachey and Laski all demonstrate Marxist tendencies of one formulation or another, and the list of LBC selections provided by John Lewis demonstrates a consistent skew toward Marxism and the Soviet worldview.⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, the LBC was host to two of the figures who would form the core of the ‘Popular Front history’ and the two who would go on to have the most tangible impact on post-war Marxist historiography. The most famous of these was A.L. Morton, who’s influential work, *A People’s History of England*, was published by the club in 1938. Born into a ‘generally conservative but tolerant farming family’ in Bury St Edmunds, Morton fits well the image of the generation of radicalised middle-class scions who made up the Popular Front. Old enough to be energised by the First World War, but too young to serve, his youthful energies were instead put to a different end. Winning a place at Cambridge University in

⁴⁵ John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Record*, (London: Gollancz, 1970), p. 13

⁴⁶ The LBC would publish books from a wider array of political positions following Gollancz’s break with the Communist Party in 1940, though by this time the war had sent the club into relative decline.

⁴⁷ Gordon B. Neavill, ‘Victor Gollancz and the Left Book Club’, *Library Quarterly*, 41:3 (1971), pp. 197-202

⁴⁸ Lewis, pp. 139-156

1921, he fell into the orbit of Maurice Dobb, economics professor and member of the recently formed Communist Party of Great Britain. Like many others, his conversion to socialism can be seen as being ‘mixed up with protests against [the] social conventions, respectabilities and inhibitions’ that the war had brought into question. However, his radicalism seems to have been far from ephemeral, resulting in his dismissal from a teaching position at Steyning Grammar School for leading the staff in support of local railway workers during the General Strike of 1926. Following this, he spent a brief spell under the progressive educator A.S. Neill at his Summerhill school before settling down as a journalist for the *Daily Worker* and running a socialist bookshop in Finsbury in the early 1930s. Starting in 1937, he spent a year writing his masterpiece, *A People’s History of England*, which would go on to become a classic of early Marxist historiography and a cornerstone of the ‘Popular Front history’.⁴⁹

Morton was joined on the LBC slate by Hyman Fagan, who’s *Nine Days that Shook England*, an account of the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, was selected as the club’s ‘Additional’ choice for August 1938.⁵⁰ An outlier amongst the Popular Front crowd, Fagan was born in an acutely working-class setting, to a first-generation Russian Jewish family in London’s East End. After struggling to maintain employment in the factories and sweatshops of Stepney, the young Fagan decided to dedicate himself to a life of politics. Inspired by the novels of Jack London and Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, he desired to use writing to further the cause of socialism in Britain. He joined the Communist Party in 1925 and attended the International Lenin School in Moscow in the early 1930s. He later served as a director at Central Books Ltd, a Communist Party bookshop, until his enlistment in the British Armed Forces in 1940.⁵¹

Beyond the LBC, the Communist Party’s publishing house, Lawrence & Wishart, also produced two works of considerable importance for the ‘Popular Front history’, both in 1940. The most ambitious of these was a joint effort between poets Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, who produced a collection of annotated primary sources telling the story of English history, entitled *A Handbook of Freedom*. Born in East Melbourne, to the celebrated Australian author Norman Lindsay, Jack was educated in classics, receiving first class honours for his study of Greek and Latin at the University of Queensland. Following his graduation, he narrowly missed out on a travelling scholarship at the university and moved to Sydney to

⁴⁹ Christian Høgsbjerg, ‘A.L. Morton and the Poetics of People’s History’, *Socialist History*, 58, (2020), pp. 6-7

⁵⁰ By this time, the LBC were offering “Additional”, “Supplementary”, “Educational” and “Topical” series, as well as classic reprints and pamphlets, in addition to their standard monthly choices. (Lewis, pp. 139-146)

⁵¹ Hyman Fagan, *An Autobiography*, Unpublished manuscript, Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography, University of Brunel Library, Special Collection, 2:261

write literary criticism. Whilst here, he became an exponent of the Nietzschean philosophy of ‘Vitalism’, which opposed both religious tradition and modernism, instead promoting a lifestyle of atavistic energy and sexuality. After an unsuccessful attempt at founding his own publishing house, he left Australia in 1926, never to return. During his time in England, a rift appeared between Lindsay and his father, and the former began to drift leftward politically. He began contributing to the *Left Review*, where he met Rickword, and became a member of the Communist Party in 1936. Even before the *Handbook of Freedom*, Lindsay’s work had begun to demonstrate a definite trend toward the sort of historical reimagination that was to characterise the Popular Front. In 1937, he had written a psychoanalytical study of Puritan preacher John Bunyan and the following year began a trilogy of English historical novels aimed at reinterpreting key events through the lens of Marxism.⁵²

Born in Colchester to a middle-class family with a servant, Rickword had volunteered for duty in the British army in 1916 at age 18, having been refused a year earlier.⁵³ After returning from the war, overtaken by a desire to write prose and poetry, he enrolled at Oxford in 1919 to read French literature. Not overly attentive to his studies, the men with whom he socialised were to have a much more profound impact on him and his outlook. Oxford was at that time filled with returning officers, hardened by their experience of the war. This led to a radical atmosphere which manifested itself in the ‘new poetry’ of Robert Graves and other ex-soldiers. While not yet radicalised politically, this climate of exploration and modernism led Rickword to sympathise with left-wing politics over the High Tory Anglicanism of his upbringing.⁵⁴ This progressive leaning was further nurtured when Rickword took up work as a literary critic at the *Daily Herald* in 1920, then under the editorship of the Labour left stalwart, George Lansbury. The list of political writers for the *Herald* during Rickword’s tenure includes G.D.H. Cole, Raymond Postgate, Bertrand Russell, Maurice Dobb and R. Palme Dutt, to name a few. However, it was not until the economic crash of 1929 that Rickword would turn to Marxism in earnest, though Lindsay was to note that Rickword’s studies were not even then particularly deep. Indeed, his joining of the Communist Party in 1934 was, in his own admission, simply because it ‘seemed to be the only one that was actually *doing* something’ about the rise of fascism.⁵⁵ In this way, Rickword was perhaps the model of a Popular Front writer, himself one of the many middle-class converts

⁵² Paul Gillen, *Biography – John (Jack) Lindsay* (2012), <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lindsay-john-jack-14177>> [accessed on 2/6/2020]

⁵³ Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword: A Poet at War*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp. 11-27

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-50

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-154

drawn to radical politics by the dangerous political climate. He also relished Dimitrov's call to reclaim the English radical tradition, being identified by Charles Hobday as one of the three writers most productive in this regard, alongside Morton and Lindsay.⁵⁶

The other work of history published by Lawrence & Wishart in 1940 was *Trials of British Freedom*, written by veteran labour activist T.A. Jackson. Born to the family of a senior type compositor and staunch Gladstonian Liberal, Jackson had followed his father into typesetting and became an apprentice in the late 1890s. One senior compositor had given the young Jackson a copy of Robert Blatchford's collection of essays on socialism, *Merrie England*, sparking him to join the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1900. This was the beginning of a long and well-travelled life of activism for Jackson. A founding member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, he served as its first general secretary when it split from the SDF in 1904. After five years in the position, he resigned in order to take up a string of paid speaking positions within the Independent Labour Party (ILP), National Secular Society and the Social Labour Party. In 1920, he became a founding member of a far more consequential and long-lived political party, the Communist Party of Great Britain, his fifth and final political home. Such was his position within the new party that he undertook a visit to Moscow in 1923, meeting with Joseph Stalin and Clara Zetkin. However, he rapidly fell out of favour with Moscow after criticising the inward turn of the movement's 'Third Period' and was eventually removed from the leadership of the party in 1929.⁵⁷ With his history of collaborating in diverse groups and his noted opposition to the 'leftward turn' of the Third Period, Jackson made an easy convert to the cause of the Popular Front in the late 1930s.

Outside of the Communist orbit, the Labour left also contributed two of the Popular Front's key historical thinkers. Already one of the Popular Front's political figureheads, G.D.H. Cole came together with his brother-in-law, Raymond Postgate to author a book entitled *The Common People 1746-1938*, published by Methuen in 1938. By this time, Cole was already a hugely influential economist and political theorist, in a teaching position at Oxford. Born in Cambridge to a middle-class family, he had been hugely successful in his studies at Balliol College, achieving a double first degree. As a proponent of a unique brand of libertarian socialism, he strongly opposed to the authoritarian tendencies of Marxism. While he was also far from a mainstream democratic socialist, his involvement with the Fabian Society at Oxford led him to join the Labour Party, to which he is also said to have recruited

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 209-210

⁵⁷ Vivien Morton & Stuart MacIntyre, *T.A. Jackson: a centenary appreciation*, (London: History Group of the Communist Party, 1979), pp. 2-25

future Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. However, his views contrasted with the Labour Party leadership in a number of ways, a fact that surely contributed to his enthusiasm for the Popular Front. He remained a committed pacifist until 1938, at which point the need to combat fascism by force overcame his aversion to violence.⁵⁸

Postgate, the son of the wealthy Tory classicist, John Percival Postgate, was intimately familiar with Cole due to the latter's marriage to his sister Margaret. He graduated with honours from Oxford in 1917, despite being arrested and imprisoned for refusing to be conscripted during the First World War. His embracing of pacifism and socialism has once again been attributed to a rejection of the tradition and wealth of his family. After his marriage to the daughter of Labour politician George Lansbury in 1918, his father had barred him from entering the family home. He became one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920, quickly becoming editor of *The Communist* and the party's leading propagandist. However, taking umbrage with the excessive influence of Moscow, he resigned and left the party in 1922. He became the first of many high-profile intellectuals to join and quickly leave the party during the 1920s as they discovered its centralised, anti-intellectual culture. Following this, he became a strong non-partisan figure in British socialism, remaining steadfast in his opposition to the Communist Party. As the Spanish Civil War unfolded and the threat of fascism grew, his earlier pacifism was slowly eroded, leading him to lend his support the Churchill government during the Second World War and join his local Home Guard unit in Finchley.⁵⁹

Amongst the seven principal authors of the works that serve as the primary source base of this thesis, there can be said to be a great deal of similarity. However, this group may be separated along several different lines according to class, heritage, education and party allegiance. The majority (Cole, Postgate, Morton and Rickword) were products of a comfortable English middle-class upbringing and, with various degrees of success, a classical English education. Lindsay, though born in Australia, received a classical education and took to his adopted home with such enthusiasm that he can scarcely be considered any less English than his contemporaries. The remaining two authors, Jackson and Fagan, serve as notable exceptions that punctuate the prevailing learned middle-class trend with their working-class autodidacticism. However, between these two outsiders there still remained a dividing line; Jackson was as English as his middle-class counterparts and more so than Lindsay, while

⁵⁸ Margaret Cole, *The Life of G.D.H. Cole*, (London: MacMillan, 1971)

⁵⁹ John Postgate & Mary Postgate, *A Stomach for Dissent: The Life of Raymond Postgate*, (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994)

Fagan's cultural touchstones seem more Russian, both secular and Jewish, than anything else. Even within the in-group of the English middle-class intelligentsia, the difference between the Communist majority (Morton, Lindsay and Rickword) and the anti-Communists (Cole and Postgate) is reflected in their writing.

Morton's work, *A People's History of England*, can perhaps be seen as the most archetypal example of the 'Popular Front history', as well as its most enduring product. The notion of 'history from below' did not begin with this volume, stretching back at least as far as J.R. Green's *A Short History of the English People* in 1874, of which Morton's father is said to have been fond.⁶⁰ However, the first detailed codification of 'history from below' as a mode of writing can be attributed to E.P. Thompson's 1966 essay of the same name, in which he begins to set a 'coherent agenda' for the movement. Given Thompson's membership of the post-war Communist Party Historians Group (CPHG) of which Morton was the inaugural chairman, it would be hard to ignore the likelihood of Morton's influence on Thompson's thinking. Indeed, Christopher Hill recalls that 'The Historians' Group in its infancy spent many sessions discussing with Morton revising the first edition of *A People's History of England*'.⁶¹

Despite this, some have cast doubts on the credibility of Morton's work as a truly popular history. Miles Taylor, for instance, argues that Morton's book reveals 'very little about the "people" making their own history from below'. Rather than presenting any meaningful analysis of the radical English past, Taylor contends that Morton had simply 'inserted the "masses" or "working classes" into a more traditional history of the development of the British State'.⁶² It is true that there is little in Morton's presentation that ascribes any great agency to the common masses. While the popular base for movements such as the Levellers is mentioned when sources are available, most episodes are discussed within the same 'Great Man' framework found in more traditional histories. Considering Morton's CPGB membership, his title may simply be an example of the heavy usage of the moniker 'People's' to denote something 'progressive' or 'socialist' in Soviet jargon. As Steven Fielding notes, previous calls by historians to shake up 'Great Man' history, such as G.M. Trevelyan's 'new method of approach' and Butterfield's 'total history', had failed to manifest themselves in even their progenitor's own works. Indeed, Fielding argues that the political history of the early twentieth century had failed to escape John Seeley's conception that 'history is past

⁶⁰ Hogsbjerg, p. 8

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 2

⁶² Miles Taylor, 'Patriotism, History and the Left in Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 33:4, (1990), pp. 971-987

politics; and politics present history'.⁶³ Regardless of its failings, *A People's History* does offer perhaps the most quintessential example of Popular Front historiography in text. Due to Morton's prominence in nurturing the young post-war Marxist historians through the CPHG, his work casts a long shadow over the later work of E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill and many more.⁶⁴ Harvey Kaye suggests that *A People's History* can be seen as a major influence on the development of that post-war school, and therefore on the development of much of twentieth century Marxist historiography.⁶⁵

Unsurprisingly, due to its claim to represent 'people's history', most other works in the pantheon of 'Popular Front history' bear a great similarity in content to Morton's. Despite their aversion to Marxism, Cole and Postgate's *The Common People* does not diverge considerably from the latter sections of Morton's sprawling history. While focusing on specific episodes from legal history, Jackson's *Trials of British Freedom* shares much with the discussion of the nineteenth century in *A People's History*. The most stylistically divergent of these works, *A Handbook of Freedom*, departs from the trend in that it takes the form of neither analytical prose nor historical fiction. Lindsay and Rickword instead curated hundreds of historical quotations and documents to convey a radical vision of the British past. Spanning the vast period of 700 to 1914, the scope of the work is almost as chronologically broad of *A People's History*. However, aside from a foreword by Rickword, the book contains little direct input from its editors. Each chapter opens with a very brief statement of the central themes contained within and some of the longer quotations receive a brief note of explanation or context. This novel approach likely owes much to Lindsay and Rickword's modernist sensibilities. However, the substance of their narrative, as shall be shown in subsequent analysis, does not differ greatly from Morton's.

The one work that does stand apart from the others in terms of its analytical content is Fagan's *Nine Days That Shook England*. Offering a detailed, play-by-play account of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, it reinterprets the uprising through the lens of Marxist class struggle. When compared to the other sources, Fagan's framework and use of language is notably more dogmatic.⁶⁶ While Morton highlights past radical movements and events in context, Fagan fully commits to a Marxian historical analysis of the Revolt. He frequently relates the happenings of 1381 directly to the present struggles against fascism and quotes at length from

⁶³ Steven Fielding, 'Review: Looking for the 'New Political History'', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42:3, (2007), p. 516

⁶⁴ Høgsbjerg, pp. 2-3

⁶⁵ Kaye, 'Fanning the Flames', p. 285

⁶⁶ Hyman Fagan, *Nine Days That Shook England*, (London: Gollancz, 1938)

Marx and Lenin. Fagan's education at the International Lenin School, founded specifically to further educate working-class auto-didacts in Marxist theory, may be responsible for his more direct approach to historical reinterpretation. Lacking the cultural reference points that the other authors may have gleaned from their heritage and education, he seems almost entirely detached from the sense of Englishness that pervades the 'Popular Front history'. To Fagan, the Peasants' Revolt seems more to represent an English *example* of radical history, rather than as part of any wider history of English radicalism.

Despite its unusually detached manner, Fagan's book seems to have had still enjoyed a noteworthy readership amongst the budding intellectuals of the CPHG. In 1950, Rodney Hilton, group member who would become a respected authority on late medieval history, co-authored a book with Fagan on the Peasant's Revolt, entitled *The English Rising of 1381*. This work is remarkably similar to *Nine Days that Shook England* in its content, approach and form. It seems likely the pair used Fagan's earlier research and framework as a starting point for their collaborative effort.⁶⁷ Hilton himself was educated at Balliol College, Oxford, another example of the highly educated elite of Marxist historiography. It is perhaps possible that Hilton saw the merit in Fagan's work and wished to polish its rough and academically crude presentation by adding his own Oxford sensibilities. The work is not cited as a major work in Hilton's long and illustrious career. However, the very existence of the collaboration further demonstrates the tangible link between the work of the Popular Front historians and the great school of left-wing academics who matured after 1945. It also shows that, despite its pronounced differences from other works of the period, Fagan's book remains an example of the 'Popular Front history'. In many ways, *Nine Days that Shook England* serves as an illustrative exception to the rule, one that demonstrates how deeply the 'Popular Front history' was embedded within the English middle class.

The Political Consequences of the 'Popular Front history'

Many of these attempts to reinterpret British history may seem misguided or tenuous to modern readers. Despite this, the Popular Front 'moment' forms a crucial link in the ever-evolving continuum of British self-image. Many of the notions contained within the movement tap into an established notion of 'oppositional Englishness', a progressive

⁶⁷ Rodney Hilton & Hyman Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1950)

nationalism as old as English radicalism itself. Many of the intellectuals involved in the Popular Front campaign, including G.D.H. Cole, had subscribed to a style of socialism that saw no contradiction between love of country and desire for peace and social change.⁶⁸ In the years following the Bolshevik Revolution, the growing influence of Soviet Marxism and its internationalist outlook began to challenge the parochialism of British socialism, particularly on the left-wing of the Labour Party. However, based on the sources above, it seems that this internationalism was usually incorporated into previous nationally focused worldviews, rather than outright replacing them. Indeed, with Marxist internationalism often simply manifesting itself as a ‘transferred nationalism’ toward the Soviet Union, the synthesis found in British socialism was perhaps more authentically internationalist than its Bolshevik counterpart.

While most Labour politicians had always been willing to accommodate British tradition into their thinking, British tradition had rarely reciprocated this feeling during the interwar period. However, the nature of the relationship between the national political culture and the ideas of the democratic left began to coalesce. In *Which People's War?*, Sonya O. Rose argues that the evocation of Britain's democratic traditions allowed wartime authorities to appeal to citizens on the basis of their civic duty to the nation. Men and women of all classes ‘surrendered cherished rights’ in the name of their duty to the nation, proclaimed one Ministry of Information pamphlet.⁶⁹ The notion of ‘equality of sacrifice’ promoted by the state and private media led to a general unity of purpose for all classes within society. However, as Rose demonstrates, this did not negate pre-war class antagonisms and the desire for social change, and in many ways heightened them. Publications as diverse as the left-wing populist *Daily Pictorial* and the Tory-leaning *Western Mail & South Wales News* ran features attacking those amongst the privileged classes who ‘put their own interests first’. Upper class women who avoided ‘pulling their weight as they should’ were condemned and the *Glasgow Herald* praised the son of the Duke of Buccleuch for working in a factory at the weekends while at Eton.⁷⁰

Similarly, evacuation had brought millions of children from urban and industrial areas to more remote parts of the country, something which has been credited with raising awareness of the need for social support to tackle poverty. This wartime social increase in social awareness culminated in the issuing of the Beveridge Report, which set out the blueprint for

⁶⁸ Matthews, p. 29

⁶⁹ Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 1-28

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-34

Britain's post-war welfare state.⁷¹ However, at least some part of this cultural 'leftward shift', as Rose calls it, can be ascribed to the cultural activities of the Popular Front before and during the war. It may be noted that the wartime atmosphere of patriotic equality described by Rose bears a striking resemblance to the tenor of the 'Popular Front history'. With regard to the Labour landslide of 1945, which enshrined many of these social changes, the change in political culture and national identity was monumental. Ruth Dudley Edwards writes in her biography of Victor Gollancz that 'for an individual without official position, Victor's colossal influence on a vital election remains unmatched in twentieth-century political history'. The historical works within the LBC catalogue, particularly Morton's influential *People's History*, certainly formed a key part in the process of reconstructing many people's idea of Britain and its past. A grand total of eight ministers in the new Labour administration had contributed works to the LBC; Lord Addison, Aneurin Bevan, Stafford Cripps, Philip Noel-Baker, Emmanuel Shinwell, John Strachey, 'Red' Ellen Wilkinson and Prime Minister Clement Attlee. Another six had become Members of Parliament in the general election, including Michael Foot and Elwyn Jones.⁷²

This line of influence is important, as the LBC offers a succinct microcosm of the social appeal of the Popular Front coalition. Its membership was overwhelmingly middle-class, with an estimated 75 percent being self-described 'white collared workers, black-coated professionals, and newly converted left intellectuals'. A.J.P. Taylor claimed that an unusually large portion of these were schoolteachers.⁷³ It was not uncommon for members of the working class or even the unemployed to have a membership, particularly in the industrial areas of Northern England or South Wales. However, levels of disposable income helped skew the LBC toward an audience of the lower middle-classes. This class composition may also reflect the fact that many LBC members were recent converts to political activism. With the looming threat of fascism and the Spanish Civil War raging, many of those usually unconcerned with politics were drawn into a sense of activist urgency. The LBC presented an opportunity to get involved in radical causes without committing themselves to a political party, through reading groups and rallies.⁷⁴ In contrast, the working classes were already more directly affected by the vagaries of political and economic instability in ordinary times. Due to this, those sections of society were generally more likely to be involved with politics to

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 56-70

⁷² Ruth D. Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: A Biography*, (London: Gollancz, 1987), pp. 396-399

⁷³ A.J.P. Taylor, *British History 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 397

⁷⁴ Stuart Samuels, 'The Left Book Club', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1:2, (1966), p. 75

some degree already, whether through a workplace trade union or a political party. Therefore, in appealing to recent converts to the left-wing, the LBC attracted a disproportionate number of members from the previously inactive middle classes.

Richard Acland, the Liberal MP who had helped launch the Popular Front, had been a staple of the LBC speaking circuit since his joining in 1937 and continued in this capacity throughout the war. In 1942, he broke with the Liberals and founded the Common Wealth Party (CWP), which in many ways embodied the ‘oppositional Englishness’ of the Popular Front better than any other political party. The party stood for both full social ownership of production and an aggressive prosecution of the war against Germany. Its members attacked both Labour and the CPGB for side-lining social change in its support for the war, while at the same time accusing the more radical ILP of sabotaging the war effort with strikes. In contrast to most Marxist organisations, the party also appealed to the moral sensibilities of the Christian community, who should ‘in the name of God condemn the private ownership of the great productive resources of our country’. With these arguments, focusing on morality and practicality rather than the language of class warfare, the CWP held a great appeal amongst the schoolteachers and technicians that populated the LBC. The party has, perhaps rather generously, been referred to as ‘the great middle-class socialist party’. While it never offered any real challenge to the Labour Party or even the Liberals, it successfully mobilised some of the political converts drawn to the LBC and similar groups during the Popular Front and perhaps the closest that movement came to political realisation in Britain.⁷⁵

A respect for the British democratic tradition is evident in the party’s commitment that change must come from elected MPs rather than any extra-parliamentary revolution. In complete contrast to Marxist socialism, the theorists of the CWP held that the industrial working classes were too numerically insignificant in a mature capitalist society to bring about change. Instead, the support of the middle class of managers, technicians and teachers was an essential prerequisite for great social change.⁷⁶ This is strikingly similar to the motivation behind the historical revisionism of the Popular Front intellectuals, and even perhaps Dimitrov had thought of the middle-classes when he spoke of socialism ‘putting down roots’ in Britain. Maintenance of Britain’s democratic traditions appealed to many of the middle class, who were not disillusioned with ‘Britishness’ in the same way that some of the working classes were. The CWP duly tailored its vision of social change to appeal to the moderate

⁷⁵ D.L. Prynne, ‘Common Wealth – A British ‘Third party’ of the 1940s’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7:1/2, (1972), pp. 169-173

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174

middle classes; no violent revolution, a preservation of meritocratic pay scales and rejection of workers' councils in place of regional industry boards. The language of class warfare was entirely absent from the communications of the CWP. D.L. Prynne has described the party as the embodying the 'nagging conscience' of the British middle classes and their desire for a "New Society that would be at the same time efficient and humane". Party co-founder J.B. Priestly summarised his political *raison d'être* in 1942; 'I dislike living in a society in which I have a very wide choice of things to buy and the people in the next street have no choice at all. It makes me feel uncomfortable'.⁷⁷

In his 1967 doctoral thesis, Angus Calder argues that the CWP was itself a product of the 'leftward surge of public opinion', attracting a broad spectrum of people who were 'new to socialism'. The party's founding in 1942 followed a period of confusion on the non-Labour left, which saw a slew of 'unpopular freak candidates' running on anti-war platforms at by-elections in 1940 and 1941.⁷⁸ The CWP channelled this anti-establishment energy toward the dual aims of anti-fascism and wide-reaching social reform. Following the 1940 publication of Richard Acland's *Unser Kampf*, a foundational text in the CWP's thinking, a group began to emerge behind him, relying as much on his personality as the ideas contained within his writings. However, Calder notes that many these followers were 'comfortable members of the middle-classes who now found their security threatened by the Gestapo'.⁷⁹ Acland also took pains to maintain his image as a Liberal, rather than a socialist, to appeal to these broad swathes of middle England. Indeed, Calder believes that this decision to initially work within the Liberal Party contributed to the positive reception of the CWP in liberal publications such as *The Economist*.⁸⁰

Ultimately, the membership of the CWP seems to have been so insignificant that in most places the Labour Party entirely ignored it in the run-up to the 1945 general election. At most, small pockets of left unity between the CWP and the CPGB represented a coalition of left-wing intellectuals and recently converted liberal activists.⁸¹ However, the landslide victory of the Labour Party in that election perhaps demonstrates that Calder's 'leftward surge' was a reality. It certainly demonstrated the emergence of a British left that was much more comfortable and skilled at tying itself to British national identity. Labour took not only many Popular Front figures into government with it (including Acland, in 1947), but also the sense

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 174-179

⁷⁸ A. L. R. Calder, 'The Common Wealth Party 1942 – 1945', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1967), pp. 1-15

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 26

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 29-30

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 152-162

that social justice was as natural to Britain as parliamentary liberalism itself. While the economy had been heavily centralised and partly nationalised during the war, many of the Conservative establishment considered this change temporary. Without the presence of the 'leftward surge' and the victory of Labour, the post-war settlement might not have looked as state focused as it did. The writings of the Popular Front era, many of which came from authors later involved in the CWP or the Labour government, certainly played a part in the reshaping of national identity in wartime Britain.

The historical framework created by the writers of the Popular Front in the late 1930s was strongly influential in shaping not only the post-war study of history, but the tenor in which Britain's reconstruction was undertaken. Considering this fact, it will now be illustrative to explore some more detailed examples of the way these men interacted with British history and how, in many cases, historical fact resisted attempts to sculpt the 'Popular Front history'.

2

‘Anglo-Saxonism’ and the Popular Front history

In his introduction to *A Handbook of Freedom*, Edgell Rickword writes of the English sense of liberty as a ‘socially inherited characteristic’; the product of hundreds of years of toil and revolt rather than a matter of inherent racial characteristics.⁸² However, many of the sources included within the early chapters of that same volume exhibit a deep fascination and reverence for the Anglo-Saxon culture that existed prior to the Norman conquest. While none of the writers of Popular Front history can be accused of racialised politics on par with their far-right counterparts, this same fixation with an idealised Anglo-Saxon social order appears in most, if not all of their works in some way. This chapter will explore the complexities of basing such a progressive national myth upon early medieval foundations, as well as the dubious nature of the Anglo-Saxon origin story.

The arrival of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes on the shores of Great Britain in the 5th century makes a convincing start point for any cultural history of ‘Englishness’. At a very basic level, this is true based on the etymological lineage between the words ‘Angle’ and ‘English’. Indeed, the linguistic continuum between Old (Anglo-Saxon) English, Middle English and Modern English perhaps explains why the Anglo-Saxons serve as one of the most potent sources of national myth in Britain. Much of the fascination with the Anglo-Saxon peoples stems from the assumption that most modern inhabitants of England are descended from these Germanic settler tribes, who eradicated the existing Romano-British population. However, despite once being accepted wisdom, this prospect has been thrown into doubt by recent scholarship. It is now widely believed that the Anglo-Saxons established themselves in a position of power and slowly imposed their culture and language on the population, who eventually became as culturally Anglo-Saxon as their overlords.⁸³

Despite the importance of Anglo-Saxon social structures to Popular Front mythmaking, only one of the works surveyed here addresses the arrival of these peoples onto the British Isles, A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England*. Morton presents unchallenged the idea that initial Saxon raids were followed by a mass ‘national migration’ and the slow replacement of the Romano-British with Anglo-Saxon settlers. However, this fact is of limited use to our

⁸² Jack Lindsay & Edgell Rickword, *A Handbook of Freedom*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1939), p. ix

⁸³ Nick Higham, ‘From sub-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England: Debating the Insular Dark Ages’, *History Compass*, 2:1, (2004), pp. 1-29

analysis, as we know this to be the accepted theory at the time. Additionally, Morton alludes to the complete lack of any written sources from Britain during the period between 407AD and 597AD, rendering his analysis educated guesswork.⁸⁴ Even archaeological evidence, which today forms the basis of Anglo-Saxon studies, was far less substantial in the late 1930s. Historians today have benefitted from over eighty years of additional archaeological activity, including the monumental Staffordshire Hoard dig of 2009. Even an Anglo-Saxon hoard discovery contemporary to Morton, that of Sutton Hoo in 1939, would have been too late to provide any useful information for *A People's History*. This example serves to illustrate why it is important to make a clear distinction between the limits and conventions of 1930s historiography and Morton's wilful sculpting of a narrative. The temptation to dismiss episodes within these works as falsified for the sake of presenting a narrative should be avoided, though they may appear ignorant or incorrect in the face of modern scholarship.

Accounting for its flaws, Morton's is an accomplished and scholarly history of Britain. The enduring popularity of *A People's History* throughout the twentieth century serves as evidence of its incredible influence on the development of left-wing historiography. Unlike some of his Popular Front contemporaries, the way in which he weaves his agenda into the historical narrative is far too subtle and skilful to be considered a mere hagiography. The techniques employed generally involve selective uses of language rather than outright falsification. Most notably, throughout his chapter on the Anglo-Saxon period, Morton refers to his subjects as 'English'. For instance, the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon peoples is described as the 'English Conquest', a unique phrase that acknowledges both a connection to the modern English and the aggressive nature of their arrival. Morton excuses his use of 'English' as a matter of convenience, though this explanation seems tenuous at best.⁸⁵ 'Anglo-Saxon' would seem a perfectly apt descriptor for the people in question, at least directly upon their arrival upon the island.

Morton's use of the moniker 'English' can be seen as an attempt to establish a connection between the modern English reader and the medieval Anglo-Saxons.⁸⁶ Being able to identify closely with their medieval ancestors would certainly help convince the reader of their place as heir to a progressive tradition stemming from the Anglo-Saxon era. Morton's dispenses with any notion of cultural or linguistic evolution and largely ignores the essential infusion of

⁸⁴ A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England*, (London: Gollancz, 1938), p. 17

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-22

⁸⁶ Given that England has always contained by far the largest population of the Four Nations, it can be assumed that the average reader was more likely to be English than any of the other three nationalities. The relation of Scottish, Welsh and Irish readers to the Popular Front history will be considered at length in Chapter 4.

Norman French culture that slowly transformed Germanic tribesmen into the modern English. For the sake of the narrative, the Anglo-Saxons *were* 'English', who would be presented as the single, unchanging protagonists of Morton's history of England from this point onward.⁸⁷

This accentuated connection between Anglo-Saxons and the modern English ultimately forms the backbone of much of Popular Front historiography. The theme of 'English' resistance against foreign oppression is consistent through most of the surveyed works. Firstly, the Norse raiders of the late eighth and ninth centuries make a convenient foil for Anglo-Saxon development. The chronicles of this period are replete with heroic tales of bloody resistance that further the idea of a people and nation forged by adversity. While these raids and the later invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries could be seen as a straightforward clash between two neighbouring peoples, Morton and other Popular Front writers seem to reinterpret it as a story of good and evil, one of existential struggle not dissimilar to that of class struggle. In his introduction to the *Handbook*, Rickword writes that 'National independence is an essential guarantee of social freedom'.⁸⁸ In context, it is clear that Rickword is writing in condemnation of later English conquests and imperialism. However, this quotation could easily also refer to England's own quest for national cohesion independence in the eighth and ninth centuries. Indeed, the chapter of the *Handbook of Freedom* that covers most of the medieval period bears 'For National Independence' amongst a list of indicative themes on its title page.⁸⁹

The chapter in question only contains one extract directly related to the Norse invasions, owing to the relative paucity of written sources from this period. This single source is an extract from a famous late tenth-century poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, written to commemorate the meeting of English and Norse forces at Maldon in 991. The extract is given the title 'No Vassal Nation', which heavily reinforces the notion that the English were fighting for national sovereignty against overpowering odds. Further explanation is given in a short editorial note, framing the battle as the English rejection of 'the Vikings' demand for dane-gelt'. While offering no further explanation of the Norse tribute system of *danegeld*, this note provides enough context to establish the idea that the English had fought against exploitation and oppression. The note also specifically describes the defenders as 'English' rather than Anglo-

⁸⁷ Morton, pp. 17-22

⁸⁸ Lindsay & Rickword, p. xvi

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1

Saxon, mirroring Morton's usage in *A People's History*.⁹⁰ By connecting this struggle for 'national independence' to the modern concept of 'English' national identity, the Battle of Maldon takes on a deeper significance for the modern English reader. Given the chronological and evolutionary nature of the *Handbook*, this extract positions the Anglo-Saxons at the foundation of a long history of English liberty.

The emphasis placed upon national independence in these two works would certainly contrast with the reflexive socialist internationalism of the three Communist-affiliated authors. The influence of Dimitrov's pronouncement is clear and it can be judged from Rickword's comments that national self-determination was now seen as a prerequisite for peace and socialism. While the right to self-determination had been discussed by Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks in their writing and was formally enshrined in the Soviet constitution, Communists had always been wary of national independence movements. Socialist arguments for self-determination would later re-emerge in relation to the post-war national independence movements in Asia and Africa, though they remained largely ignored in Popular Front literature. While many socialists had been supporters of Irish republicanism, fewer extended this concern to Scotland or Wales, though discussion had become more positive by the late 1930s.⁹¹ National self-determination for the colonies of the British Empire remained controversial at best. Many British socialists still believed that the empire could and should be maintained, albeit in a more benevolent fashion. This belief was perhaps more widespread in the Labour Party than in the Communist Party, in part due to the former's intimate involvement with the British Empire State.⁹² This issue will form the core of our inquiries in Chapter 4, and it will suffice to say here that the focus on Anglo-Saxon 'national independence' appears notably hypocritical in the face of the near total ignorance of the aspirations of England's subject nations. This hypocrisy was seemingly either ignored by our Popular Front authors or lost on them entirely.

King Alfred the Great

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁹¹ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, 'Communists and the National Question in Scotland and Iceland, c. 1930 to c. 1940', *The Historical Journal*, 45:3, (2002), pp. 602-603

⁹² Hassan & Shaw, pp. 27-47

While the idealisation of Anglo-Saxon nationhood and culture presented complicated questions for the Popular Front historians, the exultation of famed individuals may prove even more problematic. While whole societies can be separated into their appealing and unpleasant aspects, the complexities of human character make deifying past figures a dangerous business, particularly for progressives. However, this pitfall often proves to be an irresistible temptation for historians with a defined agenda. For instance, *A People's History* and the *Handbook of Freedom* both contain sustained attempts to co-opt the figure of Alfred the Great. Alfred's claim to be the first true "King of England" is now often disputed.⁹³ However, as the first in an uninterrupted line of kings and queens who *formally claimed* rulership of the whole country, he is perhaps a worthy candidate for 'founding father'. This naturally makes him a very valuable figure for anybody attempting to create a new national mythology. Alfred also presents a fairly attractive target for progressive reinvention. Believed to be remarkably learned for his time, he has a reputation for improving both the nation's military capabilities and the quality of life of his subjects. He is also said to have understood the importance of education and to have favoured vernacular education over that in Latin.⁹⁴ These different facets to his personality could be reinterpreted to cast Alfred variously as a strong military leader, national father figure and progressive reformer.

Lindsay and Rickword begin their presentation of the medieval period with two quotations demonstrating Alfred's progressive credentials. The first extract, labelled 'On Rank', appears to reveal a surprisingly nuanced opinion of hereditary privilege and nobility. While conceding that high-born men strive to outperform their forebears and therefore often excel, he states that 'A man will not be better [simply] because he had a well-born father'.⁹⁵ This certainly supports the distrust of hereditary privilege that always factored into progressive and radical ideologies. It suggests that Alfred, and potentially the Anglo-Saxon society over which he ruled, was not as dependent on noble privilege as later ruling orders. This claim, which forms a central pillar of the myth of Anglo-Saxon egalitarianism, is dubious at best. Examinations of *wergild*, the Anglo-Saxon legal penalty for damage to a person's being, reveal a culture as divided as any other of the time. In most existing examples of Anglo-Saxon law codes, the prices to be paid for the murder or injury of a man differed most greatly depending on his

⁹³ The Encyclopaedia Britannica states that Athelstan, Alfred's grandson, was the "first West Saxon king to have effective rule over the whole of England". ('Athelstan, king of England', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Athelstan>> [accessed on 21/7/2020]) E.B. Fryde supports this assessment, suggesting that Athelstan's conquest of Northumbria finally gave the Wessex kings full, functional rule over all of England. (E. B. Fryde, *Handbook of British Chronology*, (London: Royal Historical Society, 1996), p. 25)

⁹⁴ Barbara Yorke, 'Alfred, king of Wessex (871-899)', *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and others, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), pp. 27-28

⁹⁵ Lindsay & Rickword, p. 3

social status. In the ‘Kentish Law’, the earliest such example, the life of a member of a noble family commanded a price of 300 shillings, while that of a common freeman cost 100 shillings.⁹⁶ In fact, Alfred’s own law code went some way to formalising *wergild* prices into a rudimentary class system. The by-then common *wergild* divisions of 200, 600 and 1200 are transformed into solid linguistic terms that recur across many areas of the legal code. For the first time, ‘commoner’ (*cyrlic monn*) became a standard term for those lowly freemen who would command a price of only 200 shillings.⁹⁷ Such a robust codification of class seriously challenges the supposition that Anglo-Saxon society and Alfred in particular were by any means inclined against hereditary privilege.

A similar set of contradictions appears in the relation of Anglo-Saxon society to accumulated material wealth. In the second *Handbook* extract, Alfred states that ‘riches are better given than withheld’ and that ‘no man can have them without making his fellowmen poorer’.⁹⁸ To the modern reader, this quote may well appear as an attack on the rich and an endorsement of progressive wealth redistribution. At the very least, Alfred appears to have had some familiarity of the dangers that stem from too uneven a distribution of wealth. M.R. Godden has suggested that the late Anglo-Saxon period saw a rise in questions of morality stemming from the kingdom’s growing wealth. In Old English, the explicit connection between terms for ‘wealth’ and ‘power’ also seem to have come about from the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.⁹⁹ It could be argued that the characteristics of this later period do not accurately reflect earlier stages of Anglo-Saxon England. While this may be true, it does demonstrate that any change in wealth distribution had come about as a result of factors within Anglo-Saxon society itself, rather than the pernicious influence of Norman invaders.

The way in which these two quotations from Alfred have been used demonstrates a willingness on the part of Lindsay and Rickword to play upon a quote, taken out of context, to create to a sense of incipient egalitarianism in the Anglo-Saxon period. While it is not unlikely that Alfred did say write or say something to the effect of these words, the editors give very little evidence or context to support their validity. For instance, the entries are simply attributed to ‘Alfred the Great’, with no date given or document cited. The book contains no academic citations and so it remains difficult to trace the origins of these quotations. Naturally, Alfred’s word would have to have been translated from Latin or Old English

⁹⁶ Lisi Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 161-167

⁹⁷ David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 83

⁹⁸ Lindsay & Rickword, p. 3

⁹⁹ Malcolm R. Godden, ‘Money, power and morality in late Anglo-Saxon England’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 19 (2008), pp. 41-65

before being published in the *Handbook*. However, no other occurrence of these exact translations can be found elsewhere in any text or digital document. This suggests that the translations may have been conducted by the editors themselves, or somebody sympathetic to their endeavour. If this were the case, a looser translation may have been used in order to alter the reading of the quotation.

Regardless of their validity, attempting to extract modern relevance from ninth century quotations ignores the myriad differences in the social function of power and wealth in Anglo-Saxon society and that of the twentieth century. Royal patronage and gifting formed an essential part of the power relation between a king, the court and warriors in early Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁰⁰ It seems more likely that the phrase ‘riches are better given than withheld’ refers to the maintenance of positive relations with vassals and soldiers, rather than alleviating the poverty of peasants. Indeed, Alfred’s own words from elsewhere in the extract suggest as much; ‘A good name is better than wealth’. To Alfred, this ‘good name’ is a form of social currency, one that is ‘not lessened as it goes from heart to heart among men’. Far from supporting charity out of moral duty, Alfred is recommending dispersing one’s wealth in order to gain a reputation for generosity. This certainly falls short of the altruistic social justice that the editors most likely intended their modern reader to gather from this quotation upon first glance.¹⁰¹

Lindsay and Rickword’s approach to historical reinterpretation appears broadly similar to that exhibited by Morton. Both works avoid outright fabrication in favour of telling a selective or interpretive version of the truth. Julia M. H. Smith has described the difficulties faced by the most rigorous of medieval historians, on account of the inconsistent historical records, written, compiled and preserved in ‘generally arbitrary and random circumstances’. While the ability of academic historians to overcome these difficulties has developed with ‘ever greater sophistication’ over the past three-hundred-and-fifty years, the same level of discipline is clearly not observed by politically driven amateurs such as Morton, Rickword and Lindsay.¹⁰² Morton’s treatment of Alfred, for instance, attributes the defeat of the ‘Great Heathen Army’ entirely to Alfred and his ‘military genius’. On account of Alfred’s ‘capacity for learning from the enemy and then going one better’, the Anglo-Saxons managed to gain victory against the invaders in the ninth century and begin to establish a strong English

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁰¹ Lindsay & Rickword, p. 3

¹⁰² Julia M. H. Smith, ‘Introduction: Regarding Medievalists: Contexts and Approaches’, *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), pp. 105-116

kingdom. Morton subtly contrasts Alfred's prowess with the poor condition of his fighting force. The *fyrð*,¹⁰³ which constituted the majority of the fighting force, were armed with only 'spears and leather coats' and usually dispersed after one battle due to poor discipline. Similarly, we are told that the fighting nobility had begun to degenerate into a sedentary landowning class and couldn't be relied upon for a lengthy campaign.¹⁰⁴ With the other elements of the Anglo-Saxon military system so seemingly in disarray, Alfred's military and organisational skill can be the only logical cause of such a reversal of fortunes.

Morton is even more enthusiastic about Alfred's social and economic abilities. His achievements in this area, Morton claims, truly mark Alfred as 'one of the greatest figures in English history'. In order to fully express the magnitude of Alfred's achievements, Morton describes the chaos and deprivation in England directly following the defeat of the 'Great Heathen Army' in 878. Due to almost fifteen years of Viking raids, England had been almost entirely 'stripped of its moveable wealth', causing serious economic depression. This depression in turn resulted in severe cultural decline, with Alfred himself observing that there remained few men in England who could 'translate a letter from Latin to English'. To Morton, this suggests that Alfred not only observed the material damage to the country but also had the ability to diagnose the accompanying impact on learning. Morton credits Alfred's response to both issues with laying the foundation for a strong, English kingdom. To neutralise the element of surprise enjoyed by the Norse raiders, Alfred supposedly constructed a fleet of ships 'full nigh twice as long as the [Norse]... both swifter and steadier and also higher'. This quote is taken from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the age and propagandistic nature may suggest some measure of embellishment on the part of the author. Morton does not raise this issue, as the quotation only serves to reinforce his own heroic image of Alfred.¹⁰⁵

Alfred's attempts to assuage the problems of cultural decay in his kingdom also earn him considerable praise from Morton. He is said to have 'encouraged learned men to come from Europe and even from Wales', eagerly seeking out 'the best knowledge that the age afforded'. Morton marvels at Alfred's written mastery of both Latin and the vernacular, a feat he assures was never achieved by even the equally enlightened Charlemagne. Had Alfred lived in a 'less illiterate time', Morton contends, he would have acquired a 'really scientific outlook'. This purely speculative statement is a naked attempt to invest Alfred with a level of

¹⁰³ An *ad hoc* militia comprising of lowly freemen, used in larger battles to supplement the king's warband and other local landowning fighters.

¹⁰⁴ Morton, pp. 32-33

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35

progressive thought that he simply did not have. While highly intelligent and perhaps enlightened beyond his time, he lived in a time far before the advent of the scientific method and likely viewed his learning in a far more spiritual way than Morton is willing to admit. The intention was likely to enhance Alfred's appeal to modern progressives, to many of whom the choice of science over religion dogma would seem especially praiseworthy. To connect Alfred to the Age of Reason would also make his achievements seem closer in time to those reading in the twentieth century.

Finally, Morton suggests that the magnitude of Alfred's ability as statesman is 'attested to by the long period of peace which followed his death'. The building of a legacy for Alfred seems equally as important to Morton, particularly as some of his greatest achievements, including a fully united England, came to fruition after his death. As if to further accentuate the almost godlike shadow of Alfred over English history, Morton notes that 'three generations after the death of Alfred a clearly marked degeneration of English culture and institutions set in'. While this doesn't explicitly correlate decline with the passing of Alfred and his immediate heirs, the reader is certainly not discouraged from making this association. Morton almost seems to suggest that, from the moment of Alfred's death, Anglo-Saxon society was inevitably facing the 'virtually complete breakup of tribal structure' and sliding toward the dreaded slavery of feudalism.¹⁰⁶

Morton's near deification of Alfred reveals a strong contradiction in *A People's History*. Despite its reputation as an essential forerunner of 'history from below', his work bears little resemblance to that of the post-war Marxist historians. Rather than revealing the popular history of Anglo-Saxon England, *A People's History* simply reinvents the existing framework of 'great man' history to better reflect a progressive worldview. Even after accounting for the comparative lack of primary materials, a thorough study of local and national causes outside of Alfred's direct influence may have been more in keeping with Morton's stated aims. Though this study may have been rudimentary or even speculative, no attempt is made to even address the absence of a popular element in the work. In a kingdom loosely united by the threat of a foreign invader, it seems reductive to suggest that 'Alfred's defensive arrangements' were the sole cause of military improvements. While he may have been the impetus behind such changes, implementation of Alfred's ideas must have required a great deal of input from vassals and regional warlords. While the inclusion of local leaders would

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 36

not have constituted a true ‘history from below’, even this minimal act would have moved the narrative away from a ‘cult of Alfred’.

A sense of reverence for the idyllic ‘Anglo-Saxon peace’ and Alfred the Great in particular has existed in the oral and written traditions of the English lower classes since the time of the Norman Conquest. The disaffected peasantry and those dispossessed by William’s barons often clung to the hope that the traditional Anglo-Saxon law codes could be brought to bear upon their new overlords. However, even so soon after the Norman usurpation, popular memory may have already been idealising the traditional nature of Anglo-Saxon law. The most famous and lasting law code was compiled by Alfred the Great in around 893 and claimed to simply be an amalgamation of three previous Anglo-Saxon law codes. However, recent scholarship casts doubt on the amount of previous legislation actually contained within Alfred’s code, based on examples of the law codes compiled by his predecessors. Therefore, the idea that the laws represented the codification of generations of traditional folk customs can be called into question. It has been suggested that Alfred was actually putting into law an enlightened royal ideology from above, formed through his communication with European intelligentsia. Indeed, there is evidence of his frequent communication with Fulko, the renowned and learned archbishop of Rheims.¹⁰⁷

Whether he is to be seen as a defender of traditional rights or a trailblazer of modern law, however, Alfred and his laws are nearly always referenced fondly. Most commonly, they have served as a figurative tool, evoked to shield the lowly against the excesses of the nobility. In order to make himself more amenable to his new subjects, Henry I is said to have formally incorporated some aspects of the Anglo-Saxon law into his feudal legal system upon his accession. This suggests that the population were sufficiently attached to these laws that Henry’s adoption of them was politically expedient. Morton incorporates this episode into *A People’s History*, assuring the reader that, despite some belief to the contrary, these laws had not been written by Edward the Confessor and were verifiably ‘old laws’.¹⁰⁸

For Morton, these laws are an essential ingredient in the make-up of the English national character. He suggests that the dominance of the Common Law from the twelfth century was in part responsible for the reduced power of Rome over the English church. While the Catholic Church ensured the supremacy of Roman law throughout much of the continent, the Norman barons were able to use the Common Law as a weapon against the Church’s

¹⁰⁷ Stefan Jurasinski, ‘Sanctuary, House-Peace and the Traditionalism of Alfred’s Laws’, *The Journal of Legal History*, 31:2 (2010), pp. 129-133

¹⁰⁸ Morton, p. 52

encroachments on their rights and lands and subvert much of its power. Morton suggests that this had the effect of confining Roman law to purely ecclesiastical matters in England. The English Common Law, he tells us, was based ‘on the principles and practice of the Anglo-Saxon law of pre-Conquest days’. This once again subtly reinforces the legacy of Alfred and the ‘Anglo-Saxon peace’ on the seemingly unrelated topic of social development and class relations in the twelfth century.¹⁰⁹

Lost Rights and the ‘Norman yoke’

If the Anglo-Saxon period is to be conceived of as a period of relative peace and liberty, the Norman conquest is remembered in a very different light. Ending the rule of native Anglo-Saxon kings that had begun with the foundation of the country, this event serves to express feelings of both foreign invasion and class oppression. This is not only true in the works of the Popular Front historians, re-emerging throughout English radical history as a motif of the oppressed. The theory of ‘lost rights’, or the ‘Norman yoke’, first emerged in response to the imposition of French-style feudal relations during the Norman consolidation of power in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Echoes are seen across the broad stretch of English history, becoming particularly prevalent during times of unrest such as the Peasants’ Revolt or the English Civil War.

Modern familiarity with the ‘Norman yoke’ stems from Christopher Hill’s seminal 1958 essay of the same name, though Hill and other left-wing historians were clearly aware of the notion prior to this. While Hill’s work postdates the Popular Front by some twenty years, the above analysis of *A People’s History* and the *Handbook of Freedom* shows a deep understanding of the theory by Morton et al. Indeed, it seems likely that Hill’s later work on the topic was inspired by his involvement in this milieu as a younger man. His summation of the theory runs as follows:

“Before 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of this country lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions. The Norman conquest deprived them of this liberty and established the tyranny of an alien King and landlords. But the people did not forget the rights they had lost. They fought

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 56-57

continuously to recover them, with varying success. Concessions (Magna Carta, for instance) were from time to time extorted from their rulers, and always the tradition of lost Anglo-Saxon freedom was a stimulus to ever more insistent demands upon the successors of the Norman usurpers.”¹¹⁰

Hill rightly criticises this as inaccurate and dishonest account of history. Despite this, his description offers a succinct impression of how the theory was understood by scholars at the time.

The most powerful relay point for the ‘Norman yoke’ theory was likely the tumultuous seventeenth century and its various intellectual currents. Through their study and reverence of the English Revolution of the 1630s and 1640s, modern Marxist scholars appear to have absorbed some of the language associated with the ‘Norman yoke’. The English Revolution saw parliamentary supremacy confirmed, Charles I toppled and beheaded, and the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland declared a republican ‘commonwealth’.¹¹¹ The period was of particular interest to Marxist thinkers as an example of a successful ‘bourgeois revolution’, a key prerequisite to the ‘proletariat revolution’ for which they strived. Indeed, Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky both wrote essays analysing the successes and failures of this tumultuous period.¹¹² Following the Second World War, Christopher Hill wrote several volumes of Marxian analysis on the period of the ‘English Revolution’,¹¹³ as did his student Brian Manning.¹¹⁴

The period leading up to the revolution and the various debates that took place during it exhibit some of the most explicit expression of the “Norman yoke” myth in recorded history. This revival was aided by the rediscovery of an early fourteenth century legal tract, entitled *Le mirrior des justices*, which had been republished in 1642. It was then translated into English and published as *The Mirror of Justices* in 1646, further widening its readership beyond the Latin-

¹¹⁰ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century*, (London: Pimlico, 2001), p. 52

¹¹¹ That this experiment in democratic government was termed a “commonwealth” rather than a “republic” perhaps demonstrates that the movement was almost entirely English in its influences. The later republican thinkers of the United States and Revolutionary France drew heavily on Ancient Greek and Roman precedents to support their philosophical and constitutional developments, leading to heavy usage of the word “republic” (from the Latin ‘res publica’, itself a translation of the Ancient Greek ‘politeia’). This is very rarely the case with regard to the Commonwealth of England, which seemed to look more frequently to the Anglo-Saxon period and Alfred’s laws rather than the ancient republics.

¹¹² Karl Marx, *England’s 17th Century Revolution*, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/02/english-revolution.htm>> [accessed on 1/3/2021], Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism – Chapter 4: Terrorism*, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1920/terrcomm/ch04.htm>> [accessed on 1/3/2021]

¹¹³ Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), Christopher Hill, *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, (New York: Dial Press, 1970), Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 1972)

¹¹⁴ Brian Manning, *The English People and The English Revolution, 1640-1649*, (London: Heinemann Educational, 1976), Brian Manning, *The Far Left in The English Revolution*, (London: Bookmarks, 1999)

speaking clergy. While containing no explicit mention of the 'Norman yoke' by name, many of the key themes contained within the theory are present in the text. Crucially, the author, lawyer and fishmonger Andrew Horne, dates the beginning of law and order in Britain to 'the coming of the English', likely referring the Anglo-Saxon law codes cited above. Horne also praises the principle that all laws were to be available in writing for reference, an innovation regularly attributed to Alfred's legal code. Alfred's supposed execution of forty-four 'unjust judges' in just one year is also noted approvingly, a demonstration the great king's commitment to the rule of law in his kingdom. Even if it lacks a fully formed statement of the 'Norman yoke' as we understand it, Horne's text certainly does express a strong disapproval of the Anglo-Norman social structure and an admiration for pre-Conquest legal practices.

Hill suggests that *The Mirror of Justices* serves as a rare window into what Vivian Galbraith has called 'the underworld of largely unrecorded thinking'. The thoughts and feelings of the common folk were rarely expressed in writing prior to the sixteenth century, due to aristocratic and ecclesiastical dominance over the written word. As Hill notes, opposition to Norman abuses was likely to be strongest amongst the illiterate, and as such the lack of written evidence does not preclude the wide popularity of the 'Norman yoke' theory in the late medieval period. Hill believes that this fetishization of the Anglo-Saxon past first manifested itself amongst the urban artisans of Norman England, who felt their commercial aspirations suppressed by the weight of aristocratic privilege.¹¹⁵ The invention of the printing press and a growing level of education amongst the laity then allowed for the theory to gain traction and greater written expression during the early modern period.

Thus, a combination of technological advancement and political upheaval led the early seventeenth century to become a golden age for the 'Norman yoke' theory. For the radical factions of the English Revolution, the myth of the free Anglo-Saxon served to delegitimise William I and all those who based their claim on his unjust conquest, namely Charles I. The theory upheld that the Norman conquest of 1066 allowed for the illegal imposition of a foreign tyranny upon the Anglo-Saxon population of England. By this logic, the English Revolution was simply a case of that same Anglo-Saxon population reclaiming their lost rights from the descendants of their Norman usurper. Framed in this way, the social and economic conflict between aristocracy and commoner is transformed into a cultural conflict between the native Anglo-Saxons and a foreign invader, the Normans. Therefore, if the monarchy and nobility based their legitimacy on the conquest of 1066, they could forever be

¹¹⁵ Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, pp. 52-54

dismissed by the downtrodden as illegitimate ‘Norman oppressors’. This reading made the ‘Norman yoke’ an almost indispensable tool for the Popular Front historians. Hill neatly summarises the dual character of the Norman yoke theory in that it simultaneously appealed to people on the basis of their own personal grievances against privilege, but also with the ‘far profounder feelings of English patriotism’.¹¹⁶ As a movement attempting to combine social justice with the need for national defence, the Norman yoke was an incredibly potent myth for the Popular Front to perpetuate.

However, the theory was not without its complications. Attacking the legitimacy of the British monarchy came naturally to many staunch republicans on the far-left, particularly those within the Communist Party. However, this would not prove popular with large swathes of the population. Despite the recent abdication of Edward VIII, the monarchy remained a powerful symbol of ‘Britishness’ that enjoyed considerable popularity amongst all sections of the population.¹¹⁷ Directly undermining the legitimacy of George VI as a descendant of Norman usurpers would alienate much of the population and undermine the nation’s patriotism when it was needed most. By situating their discussion of the ‘Norman yoke’ firmly in the past, the Popular Front writers could indulge in the radical and nationalistic sentiments of the theory without politicising the role of the monarchy in modern Britain.

Historical interactions with the ‘Norman yoke’ theory

Perhaps the most illustrative (and suitably remote) example of anti-Norman discontent, the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 fitted this role nicely. As a largely grassroots peasant movement, it had already served as a popular historical comparison for socialist writers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. William Morris, for instance, used the uprising as the setting for his political novel, *A Dream of John Ball*, in which a time traveller from the nineteenth century speaks with the titular priest about the end of feudalism and the Industrial Revolution.¹¹⁸ However, the rising held particular value to the Popular Front historians as a

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 61-62

¹¹⁷ Andrzej Olechnowicz, ‘“A jealous hatred”: royal popularity and social inequality’, *The Monarchy and the British Nation: 1780 to the Present*, ed. by Andrzej Olechnowicz, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), pp. 289-290

¹¹⁸ William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, (London: Reeves & Turner, 1888)

tale of patriotic Englishmen seeking to banish Norman oppression. According to CPHG founder Dona Torr, the Peasants' Revolt can be identified as the moment when 'Englishmen became consciousness of their common nationhood'.¹¹⁹

As with Hill's examination of the myth in the seventeenth century, Torr's conception of the Peasants' Revolt as a quest for the Englishman's 'lost rights' has its antecedents in the pre-war Popular Front literature. In the *Handbook of Freedom*, the rising is placed at the climax of a rising discontent, which naturally contained a strong anti-Norman dimension. The first chapter includes sources from 700 to 1381, clearly defining the Revolt as a release of energies that had been building over the previous six hundred years. The narrative of a disrupted Anglo-Saxon peace is constructed from the very first entry, which dates from the eighth century. Attributed to the early Anglo-Saxon poet, Caedmon, it relates the story of Lucifer's revolt against God in the Book of Genesis. Labelled 'The Free Spirit' by the editors, this entry appears to support the notion that a sense of liberty and freedom existed within Anglo-Saxon society as early as the seventh century.¹²⁰ This is followed by the quotations from Alfred and *The Battle of Maldon* discussed above. This first few pages of the *Handbook* very succinctly establish the image of a progressive, liberty-loving Anglo-Saxon nation.¹²¹

From here, the sources describe the abuses of the Norman barony, struggles for rights between nobles and city-dwellers and Magna Carta. An early 'People's Champion', William Longbeard, is mentioned, with particular attention paid to the fact he wore his beard long (the 'Saxon way') as an affront to his 'Norman oppressors'. A citizen of London who used his intellect to advocate for the 'cause of the poor citizen against the insolence of the rich', he perhaps serves as a useful example of a fledgeling consciousness amongst the city dwellers.¹²²

The pages between Magna Carta and the Peasants' Revolt mainly detail the social injustices of late medieval England. Having read the preceding passages that so consciously associate abuse of power with the Norman barons, further injustices seem inextricably linked to this alien ruling class, despite not being labelled explicitly as such. While the struggle is expressed in more plainly social and economic terms, these pages are still pregnant with a sense of heroic native resistance. The narrative rapidly develops as the philosophy of John

¹¹⁹ Bill Schwarz, "'The people' in history: the Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-56', *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*, ed. by Richard Johnson and others, (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 73

¹²⁰ It is worth noting that, whether wilfully or otherwise, the editors have almost certainly misinterpreted this passage. In relating the fall of Lucifer, the Christian Anglo-Saxon author was unlikely to be extolling the virtues of his free spirit in rejecting the authority of God. More likely, the story served as a warning against the hubris of man in thinking himself greater than God. As both editors had received a classical education, it is possible that their 'mistake' was not an accidental one.

¹²¹ Lindsay & Rickword, pp. 3-4

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-13

Ball is examined in detail, framing the pathway to revolt. The basic framework of Anglo-Norman power relations as established in the first few pages remains unchallenged, allowing the reader to make the necessary subconscious connections. Even the most famous refrain of the rising, John Ball's sermon, can be reinterpreted under these conditions. His rhetorical question of 'When Adam dalf and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?', while reaching back far beyond the Anglo-Saxon period, demonstrates the extent to which the peasants' demands were restorative, rather than progressive. Instead of diagnosing the social injustices facing the peasantry and presenting a novel solution, the Peasants' Revolt clearly strived to restore society to an idyllic past. It may be the case that Ball had couched his argument in a biblical context as the best frame of reference available to him. Whatever Ball's purpose, the editors have arranged his words (attributed as 'The Peasants' Song') in order casting the reader's mind back to a fabled ancient state of peace.¹²³

The restorative nature of the Peasants' Revolt, as well as its popular base, is perhaps what made this episode so attractive to the Popular Front historians. It may be this incorporation of both an idyllic past and a utopian future that makes the Popular Front a truly unique moment in the development of the British left. Prior to Dimitrov's speech, the Comintern-affiliated parties of Europe had a more strictly progressive ideology. While the communistic future may resemble the primitive agricultural communism of the distant past, few Leninist thinkers framed their arguments in terms of a return to this past. This approach is typified by Lenin's famous dictum that Communism was 'Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country'. Taken from a speech promoting the Soviet electrification campaign of 1920, it demonstrates the undeniably future facing tenor of early Bolshevik rhetoric.¹²⁴

As Dimitrov's 'United Front' campaign unfolded in the late 1930s, the evocation of the past to fight for the future became a more acceptable *modus operandi* for European communists. This continued for a time in the post-war period, most notably in the work of the Communist Party Historians Group. Christopher Hill's essay on the 'Norman yoke', for instance, can be seen as a more critical and academic evolution of the Popular Front's approach. Rodney Hilton even directly engaged with the work of the Popular Front historians when he co-authored a work on the Peasants' Revolt with Hymie Fagan in 1950. It was only under the more internationalist and belligerent Marxism of the New Left, which turned a critical eye on British nationalism, that the idyllic past was viewed with suspicion

¹²³ Ibid., p. 28

¹²⁴ Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 31, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 513-518

once again. If we are to view the Popular Front and post-war CPHG as a single movement, interrupted (and in many ways enhanced) by the experience of war, then this broader period can be seen as a uniquely retrospective moment in the history of the British Communism.

This blending of progressive and nostalgic tendencies is perhaps most obvious in Hymie Fagan's *Nine Days That Shook England*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Fagan jumps somewhat erratically between the historical narrative of the Peasants' Revolt and rudimentary comparisons to the modern age. The Peasants' Revolt had been portrayed by other prominent Popular Front writers as a reclamation of 'lost rights' by the Anglo-Saxon population. Unusually, Fagan's account makes very little mention of the cultural differences between commoner and aristocrat or their divergent heritage. His focus appears to be largely on the economic conflicts between the King, his men and the laity. Neither Edward III nor Richard II are ever described as anything but 'English'. While they are accused of placing an undue financial burden on the people of England in order to fund war with France, Fagan treats this purely as a matter of class politics, with none of the historical context required to invoke the Norman yoke theory.

In a chapter entitled 'Class War is Declared', Fagan introduces Edward III's 'Statute of Labourers', legislation that would ultimately lead to much of the discontent in the latter fourteenth century. The chapter title alone should leave little confusion as to the tenor of Fagan's analysis. While the conclusions drawn by Morton, Lindsay and Rickword are clearly supportive of their Marxist outlook, none of these men address the pre-industrial world in such bluntly Marxian terms as Fagan. Despite the anachronistic nature of this assertion, Fagan considers the king's labour legislation as tantamount to the declaration of 'class war'. Viewed in this light, the whole uprising transforms into an expression of proto-proletarian class consciousness, a notion ill-fitted to the transitional class relations emerging in the fourteenth century.¹²⁵

Fagan's assertions often hew to an even more explicitly Marxist-Leninist and pro-Soviet line than this. When describing the unusually organised nature of the peasant groups, he makes a direct comparison with the Bolshevik party in 1917. In the eyes of its supporters, the strict organisation and discipline of the Bolshevik faction helped to distinguish it from the other Russian socialist parties, who utilised a much looser definition of party membership. Indeed, it was the strictness of membership requirements that had precipitated the split of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party into Bolshevik and Menshevik factions in 1903.

¹²⁵ Fagan, pp. 57-78

This distinction formed a core part of future Marxist-Leninist dogma and provided an evidential basis for the tight centralisation of the Soviet system.¹²⁶

Fagan's education may hold the key to his overt reference to Bolshevik in his historical writing. His attendance at the Lenin School in Moscow, rather than a traditional university, gave him a frame of reference much more centred on Soviet policy than other party intellectuals. Additionally, his working-class upbringing and European Jewish heritage would have distanced him from the cultural and historical traditions of middle England present in the work of other Popular Front writers. Aside from Lindsay, all other prominent authors of the associated with the movement were born into solidly English middle- and upper-class families. Even Lindsay, as an Australian of English ancestry and citizen of the British Empire, would have likely benefited from a deeply Anglophile education. Even as modernist poets, Rickword and Lindsay's inclination against tradition seems far less ingrained than Fagan's Soviet dogmatism. This may reflect the greater variety of influences and concerns imparted to them by their upper-middle-class, university educated outlook. In contrast with the more immediate economic concerns that drew the working-class Fagan to the Communist Party, these middle-class poets likely possessed a much more abstract and high-minded relationship with ideology. This either allowed for greater nuance and flexibility in their thinking or may simply suggest that their convictions were more susceptible to the changing winds of fashionable *cause célèbre*.

The ideas contained within the 'Norman yoke' theory, with their appeal to national and cultural identity alongside and often above class, were perhaps beyond the scope of Fagan's rigid, dogmatic view of history. Overall, his writing is far less reinterpreted than that of his Popular Front peers. Whereas other writers grasped established British myths and twisted them to support a form of socialist nationalism, *Nine Days that Shook England* simply conducts a class-based analysis of the Peasants' Revolt. The myth of the 'Norman yoke' creates a fundamental link between English nationhood and the egalitarian sentiments supposedly found in Anglo-Saxon society. Fagan, it could be argued, simply presents English examples of class development that were in many ways mirrored across Europe.

While Fagan was certainly the outlier amongst his peers in his rejection of nationalistic sentiments, the Norman yoke was far from an essential characteristic of Popular Front

¹²⁶ At the Second Party Congress in 1903, Lenin had proposed that a person should have to be an active participant in a RSDLP organisation, while Menshevik leader Julius Martov proposed that only support for party ideals and organisations was a necessary condition. (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, 1903: *Organisational Rules of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party*, <<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/rsdlp/1903/rules.htm>> [accessed on 14/7/2020])

writing. Works that dealt with more modern timeframes tended to include little or no mention of the ‘lost rights’ of Anglo-Saxons. Even the *People’s History* and the *Handbook*, which contain most of the written support for the theory, lean much less explicitly on the theory as they move into the eighteenth century and beyond. However, these later chapters still operate on top of the anti-Norman foundations constructed in their early chapters. Works that begin their analysis in 1746 (Cole and Postgate’s *The Common People*) or 1760 (T.A. Jackson’s *Trials of British Freedom*) naturally do not make reference to the ‘Anglo-Saxon peace’ or the ‘Norman yoke’. Instead, the introductions and prologues of these works speak of the Enlightenment, the birth of the capitalist epoch and the arrival of the proletariat.¹²⁷ That these authors elected to write books that address relatively modern developments in British freedom may reflect a dismissal of the ‘Norman yoke’ myth entirely, or that the Popular Front history was not as homogenous as we may imagine.

Far from being indicative of a divide within the Popular Front, these contrasts are evidence of the essential diversity of the movement. That Morton, Lindsay and Rickword chose to make great use of ‘lost rights’ and the ‘Norman yoke’ does not make their work in any way incompatible with that of Fagan, Jackson, Cole and Postgate. In fact, it could be said that these two approaches performed different functions within the creation of the same Popular Front myth. Those writing on the Norman yoke and the origins of English servitude provide the diagnosis, allowing the modern historians to tentatively provide a solution. Taking only *A People’s History* as an example, it is possible to see the arc of freedom to oppression, and then the emergence of a pathway back to liberty in the Enlightenment. After establishing the inciting incident in which the Anglo-Saxon ‘Englishman’ is robbed of his egalitarian peace, the second half of Morton’s work chronicles the efforts of that same English nation to regain it.

Following the accession of William ‘the Deliverer’ and the subsequent era of Whig capitalism, the cultural elements of the ‘lost rights’ story lose their place to incipient Marxian class struggle. While Rickword explicitly attempted to discount the idea of English exceptionalism in the introduction to the *Handbook*, the ‘Englishmen’ of this shared narrative seem naturally inclined toward freedom. The work of the Popular Front historians all serves to convince the modern Englishman of his historic relationship with freedom, his duty to defend the existing fruits of his struggle against a foreign invader, and to hint at the need for continued progress beyond liberal capitalism. By ceasing to demonise Whig Liberalism and

¹²⁷ Jackson, pp. xvii-xix

instead celebrating it as the logical, if unfinished, achievement of the Anglo-Saxon spirit, the Popular Front historians had created a foundational myth that could potentially appeal as much to ardent Communists as moderate Liberals.

The next chapter will explore the second part of this journey, leaving behind the primordial yearning for lost rights and exploring the long pathway from despotism to the modern age through the eyes of the Popular Front historians.

3

The ‘Whig Interpretation of History’ and the Popular Front

In the previous chapter, we discussed the way in which the writers of the British Popular Front utilised ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ and the myth of the Norman yoke to anchor their reinterpretation of English history. This particular vehicle for mythmaking suited the aims and methods of the Popular Front, allowing for socialist reinterpretation within a framework that was ostensibly liberal. Much of what these socialist and communist writers tapped into served as reinforcement for Britain’s existing democratic traditions, if often accompanied by subtle hints that these traditions could be improved upon in the modern age. This approach helped to draw in the moderate middle classes, who were perhaps more attached to romantic English liberalism than the abstract mechanics of Marxism. White-collar professionals made up a strong majority of the Popular Front’s support base, reflected in the membership demographics of the LBC noted in Chapter 1.

The myth of the ‘Norman yoke’, ‘lost rights’ and the ‘Anglo-Saxon peace’ sought to appeal to these middle-class supporters on the basis of their national identity rather than class concerns. This framework inextricably linked the enduring developments of English democracy to the particular qualities of the Anglo-Saxon culture, despite Rickword’s protestations to the contrary. In this, the conception of British history presented by the Popular Front writers seems remarkably similar, and could ultimately be conceptualised as part of, the long-established ‘Whig interpretation of history’. The relationship of the Popular Front intelligentsia to this traditional historical framework is intriguing and warrants further investigation. While the task of appealing to the broadest possible coalition perhaps necessitated the use of these liberal and nationalist sentiments, the level to which the Popular Front history borrows from the ‘Whig interpretation’ may be so great as to suggest more than mere convenience. It is the work of this chapter to demonstrate the legacy of Whig history on the movement, while also showing what makes the proposed classification of ‘Popular Front history’ a true evolution of historical writing, rather than simply a cosmetic mutation.

The 'Whig Interpretation of History'

First formally recognised by Herbert Butterfield in his 1931 essay of the same name, the notion of the 'Whig interpretation of history' remains a nebulous one and requires clarification. When re-evaluating Butterfield's theory in 2000, Richard A. Cosgrove called into question much of the prescriptive criteria set down by Butterfield in 1931. Generally speaking, the 'Whig interpretation' can be characterised by a selective approach historical fact, intended to fit a broad agenda of liberal British patriotism and Protestant supremacy. This resulted in a teleological narrative that served to render the modern British constitutional settlement historically inevitable. Cosgrove notes that the nineteenth-century Whig historians enjoyed a 'cultural hegemony' that has 'never been replicated since', which may explain the lasting influence of the school over British history writing. Butterfield's original characterisation, already broad, has now become so expansive that it could encompass any history that is either patriotic or teleological.¹²⁸ Veteran historiographer Michael Bentley ascribes this misuse to an overenthusiastic application of Butterfield's 'short meditation' by a slew of 'lesser historians'. To Bentley, Butterfield's definition seems half-baked, little more than an attempt to discredit the style of his personally 'disliked historians'.¹²⁹

While conceding that a general trend of patriotic, teleological history existed throughout the nineteenth century, Bentley challenges Butterfield's assertion that this constituted a single historiographical 'movement'. He suggests that this 'movement' underwent several distinct periods of change, each a reaction against or evolution on a previous trend. This is particularly true with regard to the 'Anglo-Saxon peace' and the 'Norman yoke'. Despite their opposition to David Hume's 'Tory history', the early Whig historians had done little to overturn his presentation of the Anglo-Saxons as 'rude, uncultivated people'. Hallam's 1827 *Constitutional History* traced the lineage of English democracy to the late medieval period, dismissing prior social structures as unworthy of attention. It wasn't until 1849, with John Mitchell Kemble's *History of the Saxons in England*, that an Anglo-Saxon origin for Britain's constitutional settlement was seriously proposed. While Kemble seems to have had little love for the Anglo-Saxons themselves, he proposed that the constitutional developments of the Norman period were in part a codification and acceptance of earlier Anglo-Saxon rights.

¹²⁸ Richard A. Cosgrove, 'Reflections on the Whig Interpretation of History', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 4:2, (2000), pp. 147-148

¹²⁹ Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 63-64

Kemble's framework was accepted and expanded by Edward Augustus Freeman in his 1860 work *Selected Charters*, and in the subsequent work of William Stubbs and John Richard Green. Together, these writers established a consensus on the Teutonic heritage of the English nation, its culture and its institutions. It is this mid-century consensus that perhaps represents the 'Whig interpretation' at its height, and its most consistent with our understanding of the 'Norman yoke'. As with later presentations of the theory, the Tudor state and Stuart absolutism mark the high watermark of unconstitutional rule, though the onset of this consolidation was set somewhere in the late thirteenth century rather than the Norman conquest.¹³⁰

However, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, this framework came under attack from a number of angles. James Anthony Froude, in his work *History of England*, focused heavily (and positively) on Henry VIII in an attempt to defend the Protestant Reformation against Catholic and High Anglican historians. Freeman launched a bitter campaign of criticism against Froude in 1864 that would last for decades, until Freeman's own fall from grace in the 1890s. In turn, John Horace Round systematically exposed the flaws in Freeman's notions of 'connectedness' and 'continuities' between Anglo-Saxon and early Norman England. In the 1880s, the legal scholarship of Frederic William Maitland severely discredited the core of Stubbs's conception of the late medieval English parliament. By 1900, the history of constitutional politics had begun to move beyond the grasp of those who 'regarded them through the medium of their own political struggles' and into the control of a growing number of 'professional' historians.¹³¹

Of these distinct 'movements' described by Bentley the mid-century writers who introduced the notion of Anglo-Saxon continuity represent the 'Whig interpretation' at its most distilled. Thomas Babington Macaulay, father of Whig history, had conceived of the 'great English people' as an 'amalgamation' of the Norman, Saxon and Brittonic cultures that had ruled the island in succession.¹³² However, the works of the later Whig historians such as William Stubbs and J.R. Green place a greater emphasis on the Anglo-Saxon component of Macaulay's equation. It is in these works that the teleological line from the 'Anglo-Saxon peace' to the modern liberal constitutional settlement is most clearly presented. This interpretation bares the most resemblance to the framework used by the Popular Front historians. In his reappraisal of Butterfield's theory, Cosgrove suggests that socialist figures as

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-70

¹³² Catherine Hall, 'Macaulay's Nation', *Victorian Studies*, 51:3, (2009), pp. 505-506

far back as Sidney and Beatrice Webb could be considered ‘Whig historians’, on account of their ‘effort to co-opt [the Whig interpretation] for their own devices’.¹³³ If the Webbs can be considered ‘Whig historians’, then it is possible that this broad historical framework can be entirely detached from liberal ideological considerations. The teleological nature of the framework may have made it particularly amenable to the Marxists within the Popular Front, despite the belligerent opposition of their politics to Whiggish liberalism. In this case, the characteristics that Butterfield attributes to ‘Whig’ history may in fact be more broadly applied to reductive, ideologically driven British history. As Bentley suggests, Butterfield himself seems to largely have used the term to smear the work of historians that he disliked. If historical writing that is totally subservient to a political agenda can be considered ‘bad history’, then the most imaginative ‘Whig’ works and those of the Popular Front can certainly both be categorised as such.

As we have noted in previous chapters, A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England* hews closer to a traditional Whig history than anything that would be recognised as ‘people’s history’ by modern standards. Rather than being an exception, Morton’s work seems typical of the Popular Front approach to building a historical narrative. Even Fagan’s *Nine Days that Shook England*, with its relative indifference toward Anglo-Saxonism, indulges in the Whig tendency to view history through the lens of the present. Many of these similarities may arise from the dialectic approach of Marxist history, which holds many of the ‘bourgeois democratic’ achievements celebrated by Whigs to be necessary precursors to socialism. Marx had first developed his ‘materialist conception of history’ in the mid-1840s, though its most succinct formulation can be found in the preface to his 1859 work, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

‘The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.’¹³⁴

This notion was developed by Marx and subsequent Marxists into a rough trajectory of historical ‘modes of production’, which roughly correlated to eras in social and economic relations. These began with a state of ‘primitive communism’ found in the earliest societies,

¹³³ Cosgrove, pp. 159-162

¹³⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. by Maurice Dobb, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977)

moving through ancient slave societies, the feudal system and the birth of capitalism. These past systems were then joined by the predicted future ‘modes of production’; ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’.

That this system was teleological and essentially served to make the arrival of socialism and communism seem to be a scientific inevitability was not lost on the more critical Marxist thinkers. In his 1940 essay ‘On the Concept of History’, Walter Benjamin compares ‘historical materialism’ to ‘The Turk’, an eighteenth-century automated chess machine that was revealed to in fact be controlled by a human inside the body of the machine. He viewed ‘historical materialism’ as a ‘puppet’ that is ‘always supposed to win’, to the extent that it was treated with quasi-religious reverence by twentieth century Marxists, particularly those under the sway of the Soviet Union.¹³⁵ A similar criticism was later voiced by Leszek Kolakowski in his public response to accusations of ‘revisionism’ made by E.P. Thompson in 1974.¹³⁶ While Benjamin’s essay proved very controversial at the time of its publication, it gives credence to the idea that there may be considerable overlap between the teleology of Whig history and the ‘materialist conception of history’. Indeed, this overlap is essential to the development of the ‘Popular Front history’, an ostensibly Marxist historiographic framework that co-opted the heroes of Britain’s democratic past as evidence of bourgeois class consciousness and the transition from the ‘feudal mode of production’ to the capitalist.

The ‘English Revolution’ of the seventeenth century

The most illustrative example of this entanglement lies in the tumultuous revolutionary period of the mid-seventeenth century. For the early Whig historians, the seventeenth century played host to the two most important episodes in English history; the English Civil War and, more importantly, the constitutional settlement of the Glorious Revolution. The notions of the Englishman’s liberty and parliamentary supremacy over Stuart absolutism are essential pillars in the political framework of Whig history. Similarly, the period is covered extensively by Morton, Rickword and Lindsay, with the period 1610-1690 forming an entire chapter in the *Handbook of Freedom*.¹³⁷ John Lilburne and Oliver Cromwell even graced banners at the

¹³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, <<https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>> [accessed on 8/4/2021]

¹³⁶ Leszek Kolakowski, ‘My Correct Views on Everything’, *Socialist Register*, 11 (1974), pp. 1-20

¹³⁷ Rickword & Lindsay, pp. 107-168

Communist-led ‘Pageant of English History’ alongside Keir Hardie and William Morris.¹³⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the period surrounding the English Civil War held a great mystique for the left-wing writers of the Popular Front. In the context of historical mythmaking, the period held great promise for the writers. The ‘English Revolution’ offered a radical-democratic moment, complete with regicide, over a hundred years prior to the celebrated American or French Revolutions. This era of bourgeois ‘class consciousness’ and its revolutionary assault on hereditary privilege formed a key manifestation of ‘historical materialism’ as described by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*.¹³⁹ While it is hard to discern the extent to which the ‘Popular Front historians’ interacted directly with Marx’s theoretical works; it can perhaps be assumed that most would be familiar with the basic concept of ‘historical materialism’ as expressed in his seminal pamphlet.

The scientific and social progress of the seventeenth century also feature prominently in Popular Front literature. Entitled ‘Toward Political Democracy’, the third chapter of the *Handbook of Freedom* begins with quotations from Francis Bacon on the philosophical implications of scientific progress. Taken from his unfinished utopian novel, *The New Atlantis*, these quotations serve as the perfect framing for a chapter which deals with arguably the greatest concentration of utopian thought in British history. In celebrating ‘the enlarging of the bounds of the human empire’, Bacon’s humanist argument neatly foreshadows the advancements of the next two hundred years and the industrial world. Just as they had neatly laid out the foundations of the ‘Norman yoke’ myth with a few choice quotations from Alfred the Great, the editors’ use of Bacon helps situate the English Revolution in a context of inevitable, epochal progress. His words are even contorted by the editors to advocate for ‘A Planned World Economy’, this title transforming a vague notion of humanist internationalism into utopian socialism. In this quotation from his *Novum Organum*, Bacon suggests that the same men who ‘seek the amplification of their own power in their countries’ and ‘of the power of their own countries amongst other nations’, should surely seek the ‘amplification of the power and kingdom of mankind over the world’.¹⁴⁰ While certainly admiring the power of an international scientific community, Bacon does not dismiss the desires of men and nations to accrue power over others. In fact, he appears to be praising this instinct, with the logical next step from power over other nations being that of human lordship over nature. While the modern socialist application of this ideal may have suggested ‘A Planned World Economy’,

¹³⁸ *Daily Worker*, 21st September 1936, p. 1

¹³⁹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), pp. 218-258

¹⁴⁰ Lindsay & Rickword, p. 107

the title misrepresents Bacon's own conclusions. However, as we have seen, this dubious misinterpretation seems to be entirely in keeping with the recurrent methodology of the Popular Front historians.

This interpretation of Bacon's words helps to establish the framework through which the reader is to view the remaining entries in the chapter. For instance, when learning of the tyranny of King Charles, it is more likely that the reader will read back into this past the 'inevitable' revolutionary conclusions, having been prepared by Bacon's visionary words. Indeed, reading the present into the past is essential for many of these extracts to have the effect intended by Lindsay and Rickword. While much of the subsequent material in the chapter is radical in its own right and thus requires no falsification, it is enhanced by the understanding set down on these first pages.

Much of the prelude to the Civil War is concerned with the persecution of Puritans, to whom no detailed introduction is given. The reader is instead introduced to some of their anti-establishment opinions and the persecution that they faced at the hands of the religious establishment. Perhaps due to the formal qualities of the *Handbook*, the religious ideology of the movement itself is given no real explanation. However, it may also have suited the editors not to delve too deeply into the motivations of the Puritan dissenters. As it stands, they are presented as simply courageous progressives, an interpretation aided by the subconscious framework established on previous pages. Any reckoning with the deeply religious nature of the Puritans' complaints is notably absent from the editors' notes and titles. The reader is therefore directed to focus on the anti-establishment aims of the Puritans during this period, rather than their deeply religious motivations. Within the previously established framework, the implication could easily be that their motivation should matter little to modern readers. While not entirely secularising the Puritan movement, this approach shifts the attention away from their religious fanaticism and toward the progressive nature of many of their demands.¹⁴¹

Given the large Communist contingent within the intellectual leadership of the Popular Front, the strongly religious underpinning of the English Revolution may seem difficult to square with the movement's aims. However, the persecution of religious dissenters by the absolutist Stuart church offers an opportunity for the discussion of basic civil liberties of the kind threatened by the rise of fascism. By championing the winning of civil rights against domestic threats of the past, the defence of those rights against a foreign threat would seem all

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113

the more important. The religious aspects of the Parliamentary cause may even serve as a bonus in more religious corners of the population. The great tradition of liberal nonconformism offered huge scope for the positive co-option of the Puritans' religiosity. In the same way that the writers drew on the nationalistic roots of England's liberty, this association of civil liberties with religious piety may well have held its own appeal within the broad Popular Front coalition. The framing of the chapter is such that a staunchly atheistic reader could easily dismiss religion as an archaic vehicle for modern sensibilities, while also allowing the devout to read their own faith into the extracts. For instance, in the extract entitled 'The Fortitude of the Puritans', a Star Chamber report details the resistance of three prominent Puritans to the inquisition of the court, having been accused of 'publishing arguments against the dictatorial powers assumed by the bishops'. Depending on the reader, this could either be a celebration of defiance against 'Popish' centralism, or against the oppressive nature of organised religion more generally.¹⁴²

The more traditional prose of Morton's *People's History* allows for a greater level of explanation and analysis of the causes of the English Revolution. This allows for a much more direct and expansive reinterpretation than Lindsay and Rickword could achieve in their brief titles and notes. When assessing the Puritans, Morton forthrightly declares that 'in the Biblical language of the seventeenth century, they were conscious of their mission as a historically progressive class engaged in a revolutionary struggle'.¹⁴³ In attempting to categorise the Puritans according to their supposed 'class consciousness', Morton diminishes the sincerity and intensity of their spiritual beliefs. His description retains much less of the religious character of the Puritans than that of Lindsay and Rickword in the *Handbook*. He boldly claims that the conflict between James I and the Puritans was 'not theological, [...] but political'.¹⁴⁴

With regard to James, it may be correct that personal power was his primary concern. The King himself is usually characterised as either a Calvinist or a closeted Catholic. Either affiliation would have given him plenty of theological disagreements with the Church of England, making his strong support of the Church of England a matter of political

¹⁴² Naturally, neither angle would appeal to a Catholic reader, for whom 'Popish' centralism was a desirable function of their religious organisations. However, some evidence suggests that even Catholic socialists were more politically conservative than their Protestant or atheist counterparts. For instance, Labour Party branches in areas with high concentrations of Irish Catholics, such as Liverpool, were notably less inclined toward working with Communists. This may have been apparent to the Communist Popular Front writers and resulted in Catholics being at least partially dismissed as a potential audience. (Nigel Copsey, "Every time they made a Communist, they made a fascist": The Labour Party and Popular Anti-Fascism in the 1930s', *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, p. 58)

¹⁴³ Morton p. 186

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187

expediency rather than religious fervour. However, the reduction of the Puritan cause to bourgeois class struggle seems to be wilfully ignorant on Morton's part. While some who moved within Puritan circles may have been more concerned with their own financial and social power than religious piety, it would be unfair to characterise the entire movement in this way. At the very least, Morton's assertion that the reader should view the Puritan movement in purely political terms can be considered incredibly reductive. For Morton, the religious nature of the Puritans' demands was simply a product of the religious and intellectual framework of their time, just as Alfred the Great had been hampered by his 'unscientific' age.

Notwithstanding his Marxian terminology, Morton's Puritans are presented as a group of progressive Protestants, pushing history forward out of the decaying remains of feudal absolutism. In this way, his analysis of the political origins of the English Revolution is remarkably close to that of the broad Whig tradition. For many Whig historians, the absolutism that led to the English Revolution is inextricably tied to the Stuart kings. Despite the considerable centralisation of the Tudor state, the Elizabethan era is often imagined in contrast to the Stuarts as a 'Golden Age', and the queen herself seen as a 'defender of English liberties and Protestantism'.¹⁴⁵ While he does indulge in some patriotic nostalgia for 'Old Queen Bess', Morton refrains from attaching too much progressive power to the Tudor ruling class. Predictably, his reasoning for this seems to stem from the dialectical relationship between the decaying 'military feudalism' of the early modern period and the burgeoning commercial bourgeoisie. He dismisses the Elizabethan state as 'an absolutism by consent', one without sufficient income or military power to sustain itself without support from the 'powerful and progressive classes'. This 'temporary balance of class forces' can be seen in the friendly relations between the crown and the growing commercial and financial sectors, as well as progressive elements of the gentry. Morton suggests that the monarchy still had 'a positive historical role' to play in the 'destruction of the remnants of military feudalism'. Despite this, the monarchy itself was 'too much the product of feudalism' to spearhead the change, very quickly becoming 'the main obstacle to the bourgeois revolution'. It was this shift in social forces, situated around 1600, that forced the Stuart kings to adopt a more 'French' style of absolutism, creating the conditions for the English Revolution.¹⁴⁶

Morton's description is broadly typical of Marxist approaches to the upheaval of the seventeenth century. However, despite its Marxist content, the form and methodology of his

¹⁴⁵ John Seed, *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) pp. 43-44

¹⁴⁶ Morton, pp. 190-191

work is strikingly similar to that of many Whig historians. The chief amongst these similarities is Morton's tendency to project his modern political framework onto the social conflicts of the seventeenth century. As demonstrated above in Walter Benjamin's description of the 'puppet' of historical materialism, Marxist histories can tend toward overemphasising certain trends in order to better support the dialectical progression of history as much as those that are Whiggish. The reduction of the entire period to a climactic struggle between feudal and bourgeois powers ignores the complexity of social and economic relations in the early modern period. Margaret C. Jacob argues that, prior to the 1960s revolution in social history, scholarship of the early modern upheavals was characterised by its oversimplicity and 'Great Men'. She contrasts this with subsequent work, which has placed much greater focus on the complex beliefs and social relations of the broader mass of people living during that age.¹⁴⁷

It could be argued that Morton's analysis of the early modern upheaval contains a rudimentary turn away from the 'Great Man' narrative, in that he addresses broad social forces such as 'the monarchy' and the 'bourgeois commercial interests'. However, these categorisations are lacking the complex internal 'diversity' that Jacob ascribes to later histories. While it seems that Morton is making an attempt to incorporate 'historical materialism' into the existing Whig narrative, his class analysis lacks the sophistication needed to be considered 'scientific'. Indeed, except for Fagan, none of the authors invest their analysis with any real reference to Marxist theory. Fagan, for his part, applies Marxist historical theory in such a way that he misses the historical differences between the feudal society of 1381 and makes too direct an application of Marxist-Leninist writings on the social struggle of the proletariat. It is in this way that the 'Popular Front history' begins to differentiate itself from both the orthodox Whig interpretation and the post-war Marxist social history. It could instead be considered a kind of developmental, 'Red' Whig history; a co-option of the basic framework of Whig history writing, with a veneer of socialist language applied on top.

This becomes more apparent when you consider the treatment of the more left-wing Parliamentary groups by the Popular Front historians. Discussion of the even the most famous of these groups, Lilburne's Levellers, is far more muted than would be expected of a 'people's history'. For the most part, the Levellers are dismissed as an idealistic, but ultimately doomed movement. Criticisms usually hinge on the idea that the social base for such a

¹⁴⁷ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 215

leftward extension of the revolution did not exist in the 1640s. Morton stresses the fact that the Levellers were a movement of lower-middle-class independent farmers and not wage labourers. However, far from condemning their limited democratic aims, he affirms that the Leveller cause was right to withhold the democratic franchise from the lowest classes at that time. He justifies this defence by citing the political immaturity of the wage labouring class of the seventeenth century, who lacked sufficient class consciousness to challenge the political opinions of their employers.¹⁴⁸

By virtue of its formal differences from *A People's History*, the *Handbook* approaches the Levellers with a slightly different attitude. Consisting in large part of inspiring quotations on the topic of freedom, Morton's criticisms are not echoed in the *Handbook*. The idealistic principles of the Levellers are preserved without challenge, leaving documents such as the 'Agreement of the People' as shining examples of seventeenth century democratic thought.¹⁴⁹ Even the suppression and failure of the Leveller cause is imagined as a heroic 'Levellers Last Stand' against the conservative turn of the army grandees.¹⁵⁰ Due to the limited space dedicated to context and explanation, the failure of the Leveller cause is not linked to a lack of social base and remains the victim of Cromwell's conservative authoritarianism.

As with most works of traditional Whig history, there is little to no discussion of the popular base of the Parliamentary left-wing in the Popular Front histories. Both *A People's History* and the *Handbook of Freedom* focus largely on the arguments of the Leveller leaders in comparison with other groups at the time of the English Civil War. This leads to a focus on the success or failure of certain philosophies over time that is very similar to the way in which Whig history views the inevitable march of liberalism against feudal privilege. Morton compares the Levellers' demands with those of the Jacobins in France, with both groups ultimately going beyond the sustainable advances of their time and safeguarding more moderate achievements in the process. The idea that social change has a time and a place in which it is almost predestined to take place, as part of a logical progression, is a theme common to both Whig and Popular Front histories. Given the Communist sympathies of Morton, Lindsay and Rickword, both works could have easily focused on the more progressive nature of the Levellers and the communistic Diggers. Instead, they accept the largely Whiggish demands of the prevailing moderate Parliamentarians as part of the inevitable march of progress.

¹⁴⁸ Morton, pp. 214-219

¹⁴⁹ Lindsay & Rickword, pp. 131-133

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-143

While there is perhaps truth to the belief that the peasants and labourers of the seventeenth century lacked political consciousness, the modern implications of this argument are curious. The implied rejection of working-class political consciousness, though not ever explicitly applied to the modern ‘proletariat’, may have nonetheless served to soothe the worries of middle-class members of the Popular Front coalition. It may also reflect a social bias, conscious or otherwise, within the group of ‘Popular Front historians’. Aside from Fagan and Jackson, this group was composed of solidly middle- and upper-middle class intellectuals. Much has been written in the modern press about the prevalence of a ‘liberal elite’ amongst the political left, who are said to barely contain their distaste for the reality of working-class culture. While much of this rhetoric originates in publications of the populist right, it may contain some kernel of truth, particularly when examining the British left of the 1930s. A dismissive attitude toward to lives of the subaltern is clearly present in the work of Morton, Rickword and Lindsay, whose narratives deal almost entirely in ‘Great Men’ or amorphous class groupings.

This can be related to the fact that, while all classes and peoples should theoretically have the right to democratic citizenship, many were often considered too politically immature for fulfil this right. For instance, many Whigs considered the Great Reform Act of 1832 to be a ‘cautiously constructive reform’ to placate demands for further democratisation, rather than the starting point for universal suffrage.¹⁵¹ Even within Marxism, the notion that the working classes must achieve ‘class consciousness’ before they are ‘mature’ enough to seize power exhibits a naked paternalism and distrust of working people themselves. Indeed, this historicist attitude is similar to that explored by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his influential 2009 work, *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty describes how British colonial authorities set a benchmark of modern statehood for national independence that effectively consigned many nations a historical ‘waiting room’, so assured were they that all nations were destined to follow the same developmental path as Europe.¹⁵² While this may be seen as a cynical attempt to justify imperial subjugation, it is an attitude that is also seen in many Marxist writings on imperial nations in the early twentieth century. This is evidenced by Lenin’s promotion of national independence movements as a necessity for ‘feudal and patriarchal’ nations to achieve the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ stage of development.¹⁵³ Indeed, the entire theory of ‘historical

¹⁵¹ D. C. Moore, ‘The Other Face of Reform’, *Victorian Studies*, 5:1, (1961), pp. 7-34

¹⁵² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 27-46

¹⁵³ Vladimir I. Lenin, ‘Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Communist International’, *Collected Works*, 31, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), pp. 144-151

materialism' is replete with the kind of historicism that excludes subaltern classes and nations from active citizenry. Much of the work of the 'Popular Front history' reflects this same prejudice, perhaps inherited dually from the Whig historical tradition and its authors' Marxist political worldview.

The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 and Whig Supremacy

The 'Red' Whig history differs most notably from its traditional counterpart with regard to one of the most crucial events of the seventeenth century; the Glorious Revolution of 1688. As previously mentioned, this event was of great importance to the early Whig historians, whose primary aim as historians was to combat the criticism of William III's ascendancy presented in David Hume's *History of England*. Melinda Zook suggests that early Whig historians like Thomas Babington Macaulay and Henry Hallam were responding to demand from a public who were eager to hear the tale of the 'heroic saving of England's constitution' from Stuart absolutism.¹⁵⁴ This fits neatly with Cosgrove's assertion that, up until the twentieth century, history-writing was ultimately an exercise in popular storytelling and reinforcing national mythologies. Considering this, it seems logical that the epoch-defining success of 1688 would prove a more popular tale than the tumultuous capitulation of the Civil War and Restoration. The broad popularity of the Glorious Revolution and its resulting constitutional settlement are evident in the fact that David Hume's highly critical *History of England* caused such controversy for decades after its release in the mid-eighteenth century. Zook argues that the idealisation of the 1688 settlement and adulation of William III by the early Whig historians led subsequent schools to focus on the complex conflict of the Civil War.¹⁵⁵

In contrast to the likes of Macaulay and Hallam, the Popular Front writers dedicated little time to the events of 1688. Compared with his two full chapters on the causes and effects of the revolutionary period of the 1640s, Morton gives only a seven-page subchapter to the preparation and execution of the 'Compromise of 1688'. Half of one of these pages is consumed by a lengthy quote from Karl Marx, in which he derides the event as a 'colossal

¹⁵⁴ Melinda Zook, 'The Restoration Remembered: The First Whigs and the Making of their History', *The Seventeenth Century*, 2 (2002) pp. 213-214

¹⁵⁵ Zook, p. 229

theft of statelands' without the 'slightest observation of legal etiquette'. The Glorious Revolution certainly represents the point at which the Popular Front history diverges most strongly from the Whig narrative. For the first time, the Protestant middle-classes, who only a chapter earlier were the heroes of the English Revolution, now serve as the enemies of 'the people'. William's arrival as ruler of the Netherlands may have contributed to this *volte face*, as the Anglo-Saxon masses of Britain had merely traded the feudal oppression of Stuart absolutism with the commercial oppression of Dutch constitutional monarchy. Having fulfilled their 'historically progressive role', the Protestant bourgeoisie at once became a regressive obstacle to the wellbeing of the masses. From this point onward, the Popular Front history escapes the alien past and largely sheds its reliance on 'blood and soil' nationalism, finding itself on the more familiar ground of class struggle.

Tellingly, Morton's assessment of religious issues in the English Civil War is almost entirely reversed when applied to the Glorious Revolution. He informs the reader that the immediate cause of the Glorious Revolution was James II's toleration of Catholics in the 'Declaration of Indulgence'. While this was a considerable factor in the forming of both Whig and Tory opposition to James, the same religious element had been almost entirely ignored in Morton's discussion of the English Civil War.¹⁵⁶ The *Handbook* is, in a sense, more nuanced on this issue. The extract used, a bishops' petition, focuses largely on the 'arbitrary power' used by the King to force bishops to read his Declaration in churches, rather than simply the act of toleration. The inclusion of this extract without reference to the revolution itself captures some of the opposition to James II's absolutism without necessarily invoking the Glorious Revolution itself. This approach also allows for recognition of the positive role played by the clergy in opposing absolutism, much in the same way as the Puritans earlier in the chapter.¹⁵⁷

Whatever the impetus behind these movements, the way in which they sought to leverage change remained largely consistent across the decades and centuries. Legal rights, both novel and ancient, have held the focus of English radicals since the Norman conquest, as we have shown. Unsurprisingly, the Whigs made great effort to record the great legal battles of English constitutional history, as was Hallam's aim in his *Constitutional History of England*. Similarly, some one-hundred-and-thirteen years later, T.A. Jackson set out to achieve the same task with his *Trials of British Freedom*. A founding member of both the Socialist Party of

¹⁵⁶ Morton, pp. 238-245

¹⁵⁷ Rickword & Lindsay, pp. 167-168

Great Britain and its successor Communist Party, Jackson held a respected position as party functionary and socialist lecturer. Having joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1900 at the age of twenty-one, he was deeply embedded in the tradition of English socialism. *Trials of British Freedom* examines the legal freedoms that had to be won in order to make this twentieth-century labour movement possible. While workers in the 1930s still faced dire working lives, Jackson argues that earlier precedents had allowed space for modern workers to at least protest about their poverty and organise to challenge it. Concerned in large part with questions of the free press, freedom of assembly and political representation, Jackson's book focuses more on the democratic prerequisites for proletarian socialism than socialism itself.¹⁵⁸

Beginning in the late eighteenth century with censorship battles over the work of John Wilkes and Thomas Paine, Jackson presents an image of the pre-Reform Act era that is very congenial to Whig sensibilities.¹⁵⁹ Even the Peterloo Massacre, that great act of popular protest in this era, is viewed through the trial of one its leaders, 'Orator' Henry Hunt. These early trials can be said to represent a shared heritage for both liberal constitutionalism and gradualist socialism.¹⁶⁰ In contrast, the examples given for the years 1832 to 1925 are of a decidedly more 'popular' and radical nature. The demands of the People's Charter and the Chartist movement perhaps represent the most radical and programmatic of these, seeking to ensure the participation in democratic life for all working-age males. Jackson bemoans the unfair treatment of the most radical organisers such as Bronterre O'Brien, often dismissed as rash and overly radical in traditional histories. Jackson places the blame for this on the jealous accounts of less oratorically gifted moderates such as William Lovett, said to have exaggerated the negative aspects of O'Brien's character.¹⁶¹ In celebrating the most radical faction of the Chartist movement, Jackson departs from the content of the Liberal Whig remembrance of the movement. However, it is this broad sense of radical democracy, characteristic of the entire Chartist movement, that perhaps encompasses the ideology of the Popular Front better than any other episode in history.

This is perhaps indicative of Jackson's more nuanced approach to the practice of 'Red' Whig history. He addresses the question of historical relativity more directly than other writers, noting the ideas of 'patriotism', 'nationalism' and even 'democracy' had changed

¹⁵⁸ Jackson, pp. xi-xxiii

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-36

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-97

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-161

since the late eighteenth century. While this certainly serves to make his own eighteenth-century examples seem more palatable to a modern audience, it demonstrates a greater level of contextual analysis than is present in Morton's treatment of the Anglo-Saxons. Jackson's rendering of these stories remains situated firmly within the Popular Front framework, though in a more intellectually honest fashion than we have encountered so far. His scope is not as broad as other writers of the movement, focusing on events that already exist with the modern radical tradition. Because of this, his selected case studies require far less reinterpretation to be fitted to the Popular Front pantheon. While his attention is more often than not given to the 'great men' within these movements, these radical figures remain largely uncontroversial amongst progressives to this day. Ultimately, Jackson's focus on legal precedent works to highlight the often-symbiotic relationship between parts of the Liberal movement and the development of socialism in Britain. This demonstrates the impact that the historical efforts of the Whigs, Radicals and Liberals in opening the political and cultural space for trade unionism and a politically active working-class, furthering the notion that socialism was merely the next step in a long tradition of British radicalism.

The 'March of English History' and the Labour left

One thing that is also common to most movements within the British radical tradition is an appeal to more democratic and participatory forms of expression. While much of our focus so far has been on the written presentation of history, the most illustrative and distilled instances of Popular Front history took place off the page. The 'March of English History', a large historical pageant held by the Communist Party on 20th Sept 1936, presented a formula of 'Popular Front history' so distilled that it is hard to believe it took place prior to the formal consecration of the movement. While the term 'pageant' suggests a highly choreographed performance, these events more closely resembled an ordinary Communist Party march. However, nestled amongst the familiar sea of red flags, branch banners and campaign slogans, sat a surprisingly broad range of historical figures. Many represented the immediate ancestry of the British Communist movement and other household socialists. The Invergordon Riots, General Strike, 'Hands Off Russia' campaign and the Shop Steward's Movement were joined by foundational figures of modern British socialism, Keir Hardie and William Morris. Traditional ancestors such as the Chartists, Tolpuddle Martyrs and the victims of Peterloo were represented, as well as the Radicals, Robert Owen, John Wilkes and

Charles James Fox. These figures align, to a certain extent, with our expectations of the lineage claimed by the modern Communist movement, if encompassing deviations on the radical or socialist ideal. At the very least, they all inhabit the modern industrial world, in which the growing tensions between owner and worker can be seen at its clearest.¹⁶²

As with many of the written histories, the cast of characters stretches back much further than the early nineteenth century. The figureheads of the Peasants' Revolt, John Ball and Wat Tyler, are included, as well as the 'followers of Cromwell' and their Leveller rivals. The signing of Magna Carta finds a home in this progressive history, despite being dismissed by Morton as 'not a "constitutional" document'.¹⁶³ Simon de Montfort, the Norman baron held to be the progenitor of parliamentary democracy in England, complete this line-up of suitably pre-Marxian heroes. Settling a formula that would be echoed in the later written works of Popular Front history, these marches suggest an early and surprisingly spirited adoption of Dimitrov's cultural policy by the leadership of the CPGB. Little over a year since Dimitrov's revolutionary speech, the 'March of English History' had already established a formula for the British Popular Front history that would remain largely unchanged over the next four years. The procession of the first march even concluded with a tribute to recent Spanish Civil War martyr and party member Felicia Browne.¹⁶⁴ At a similar march in Manchester in July 1937, a placard of another Civil War casualty, George Brown, was placed at the head of the procession.¹⁶⁵ This method of adding the recently fallen to a long list of ancient martyrs served as a particularly evocative way of cementing the historical importance of the current struggle and connecting the spectators to their radical heritage, a recurring hallmark of the Popular Front history.

This formula did not go without criticism by members of the broader left. The absurdity of the Communist Party's turn toward Whiggish constitutional history was recognised at the time, in a *Daily Herald* article published the day after the march. The author, an anonymous 'Special Correspondent', referred derisively to the spectacle as the 'Pageant of Merrie England', mocked its organisers as 'Ye Olde Englishe Communists'. Excoriating the nationalism displayed by the procession, the correspondent notes that aside from Marx, Engels and de Montfort, the event was an incitement to 'Buy British'.¹⁶⁶ This demonstrates

¹⁶² Antony Howe, 'Red History Wars? Communist Propaganda and the Manipulation of Celtic History in the Thirties', *Journal of the Sydney Society for Scottish History*, 13 (2010), p. 73

¹⁶³ Morton, p. 65

¹⁶⁴ *Daily Worker*, 21st September 1936, p. 1

¹⁶⁵ *Daily Worker*, 12th July 1937, p. 1

¹⁶⁶ 'Pageant of Merrie England', *Daily Herald*, 21st September 1936, p. 3

that the ‘democratic populist’ historical project being undertaken was not uniformly supported across the British left. It may also reflect the fact that the impetus behind this element of Popular Front cultural activity was driven largely by the Communist Party. Given that the formation of G.D.H. Cole’s Popular Front campaign did not occur until 16 months after Dimitrov’s Comintern Congress, the dominance of the Communist contingent could perhaps be considered inevitable. This was only compounded by the absence of any official endorsement from the leaderships of the Labour, Liberal or Conservative parties.

This is not to suggest that representatives from the anti-Communist left were entirely absent from the process of Popular Front mythmaking. Two such figures, G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate engaged with the movement to great extent, with Cole spearheading the launch of an official Popular Front campaign in December 1936. Both were well-heeled members of the ‘Labour aristocracy’, Postgate being married to the daughter of George Lansbury and Cole to Postgate’s own sister. After a brief flirtation as a founder member of the Communist Party, Postgate broke with the party over its growing loyalty to Moscow. Cole offered his own theory of libertarian ‘guild’ socialism in opposition to Marxism and as such stood strongly opposed to the CPGB. Published at the height of the Popular Front in 1938, their collaborative work *The Common People, 1746-1938* perhaps accomplishes the aim of presenting a ‘people’s history’ much more effectively than Morton or any of his Communist contemporaries. Cole’s vast economic knowledge is combined with Postgate’s flair for narrative storytelling to present a picture of popular life and freedom that is both educative and engaging.¹⁶⁷

The work opens with conclusion of the Battle of Culloden, consciously chosen as the final death knell of ‘the old order’ of feudal patronage and the beginning of the ‘modern’ world. Individualism clearly emerges as a key feature of this new era, contrasting the collective clan graves of the Stuart soldiers with those of the professional, individually enrolled and waged Hanoverian troops.¹⁶⁸ Such an emphasis on individualism shows both a deep understanding of the economic forces that were to revolutionise Britain over the next hundred-and-fifty years, but also an appreciation of one of the core pillars of liberalism. The severely limited nature of British democracy prior to the Reform Act of 1832 is explored in detail, with the radical causes of Wilkes and Paine championed in a similar fashion to Jackson’s *Trials*. While noting the veiled disenfranchisement contained within the Reform Act, Cole and Postgate

¹⁶⁷ G.D.H. Cole & Raymond Postgate, *The Common People 1746-1938*, (London: Methuen, 1938), p. xi

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3

accept this as progress nonetheless, part of the teleological march that is the characteristic of the Whig framework.

In discussing Chartism, Cole and Postgate demonstrate how few socialists (at that time mostly Owenites) there were amongst a movement which often sits at the head of nineteenth-century radical history.¹⁶⁹ As with most Popular Front writers, Cole and Postgate seem to admire the radical Chartist factions not for any proto-socialist pretensions, but rather because of the lengths to which they were prepared to go to achieve victory against the corruption of the British establishment. Arguably, it was this same radical energy that gave birth to British radical socialism in the late nineteenth century. In this way, a direct, teleological continuity between the two movements is created. This work, as much as any of the others surveyed here, seems to dismiss unsuccessful historical movements as simply lacking in the political maturity to drive lasting change. Morton's dismissive treatment of the Levellers is echoed in Cole and Postgate's attitude toward Chartism, both laden with a Whiggish notion of gradual and ordered progress over centuries. Ironically, it is with this very same temporal condescension that the burgeoning was to dismiss the Popular Front and CPHG historians in the 1960s.¹⁷⁰

The basic conceptual framework of *The Common People* deviates little from the 'Red' Whig formula, though the analysis and writing are of much greater quality than most of the Communist-penned works. In contrast, none of the Communist-affiliated authors mentioned here were professionals in the field of history. Cole and Postgate are also far less sympathetic toward the development of the Communist movement in the latter part of their work. Despite this, their approach to radical history still follows the inevitable thread of progress common to all Whiggish historians, even if their presentation is more popular in nature. The 'cultural hegemony' of Whiggism over British history seems to be demonstrated by the inability of successive schools of historians to escape from its politically teleological framework. Indeed, it is hard to argue that any British historical tradition succeeds in establishing itself outside of this Whiggish paradigm. Outside of Britain, the French *Annales* school offers an illustrative counterpoint, with its focus on economic and sociological changes over a long stretch of time ('*la longue durée*') rather than short-term political events.¹⁷¹

Whatever their cause, the formal and methodological similarities between the Whig tradition and the Popular Front history engaged are beyond doubt. Michael Bentley's

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 276

¹⁷⁰ Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', pp. 3-18

¹⁷¹ Michael Bentley, pp. 103-115

assessment of Butterfield may have been correct, and the latter may have simply recognised the characteristics of a sculpted, politically driven historiography. That these aims be Whig or Marxist matters little. The 'Red' Whig history attempted to harness the power of the nation's liberal and democratic traditions for the furtherment of socialism, absorbing more of the former than its authors may like to admit. Given the strong Communist involvement at all levels of the project, the 'spirit of the English tradition' may have been invoked as part of an exercise in Stalinist 'doublethink'. Whatever the inconsistencies of its logic, the 'Popular Front history' succeeded in creating a synthesis between England's Whiggish traditions and the ideals of the socialist movement. The lengths to which ardent Communists were able to bend their ideological orthodoxies and embrace the very foundations of capitalist society itself demonstrates the truly unique nature of the Popular Front historical project. Communists in France had adopted 'bourgeois' nationalist positions, including outward displays of respect for veterans, officers and the nobility of national service. However, while Young Communists had dressed in Revolutionary era clothing and party propagandists emphasised the Jacobins as ideological precursors, there existed no concerted effort to reimagine other parts of French history as with the British movement. Similarly, there appears to be no deeper connection between this carnivalesque foray into the past and the future of French historiography.¹⁷²

The 'cultural hegemony' of the 'Whig interpretation' cast a long shadow over subsequent schools of British history writing. The 'Popular Front history' exists well within this influence, making use of the familiar teleological framework and key episodes. What differentiates the 'Popular Front history' from its Whig influences lies in the conscious attempt of its creators to produce something new. Despite the almost total lack of 'history from below' in *A People's History*, the title signifies Morton's desire to at least attempt a departure from the 'Great Man' narrative. Similarly, the tangible connection of the movement to the post-war Marxist school demonstrates the utility in setting the 'Popular Front history' apart from its Whig antecedents. The same 'Red' Whig themes detailed in this chapter were taken by the post-war CPHG and later the New Left, who added a much greater level of academic analysis and critical weight.

The notions of democracy contained within this 'Red' Whig history were often just as limited and qualified as those found in the traditional Whig ideology. Many of the attempts at building a 'democratic populism' themselves tapped into forms of history telling that were more participatory and popular than that of the written word. Chapter 4 will develop this

¹⁷² Jessica Wardhaugh, 'Fighting for the Unknown Soldier: The Contested Territory of the French Nation, 1934-1938', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 15:2 (2007), pp. 185-201

point, as well as exploring further Chakrabarty's notions of restrictive citizenship and the imperial subaltern, with a particular focus on a 'Four Nations' history of the British Isles.

4

Democracy and Nationality

Enshrined within the ideological core of the Popular Front's 'democratic populism' was a sense of the need for a vital, participatory democracy. Even if the heavy involvement of the Communist Party reveals a troubled relationship with this notion in practice, the works assessed in the previous two chapters demonstrate a strong preoccupation with popular sovereignty. Whether it be the hazy utopia of pre-Conquest England, the English Civil War or the nineteenth-century struggles for fully franchised democracy held centre stage in the Popular Front telling of history. In direct contrast to the dictatorships of Germany and Italy, idealistic evocations of democracy served to bolster the fight against fascism and remained a useful tool for even the most hardened Stalinists within the movement.

It was to this end that the 'Popular Front history' borrowed parts of the temporal framework of the existing Whig democratic tradition. H. A. L. Fisher argued in 1928 that the 'Whig historians' had, in fact, been largely apolitical and subscribed to detached 'centrist understandings' of British political culture. It was this that allowed them to write 'good history' despite their Gladstonian or Liberal Unionist beliefs. However, Michael Bentley argues that William Stubbs and J. R. Green were far from politically dispassionate and this deeply coloured by their beliefs.¹⁷³ John Burrow included Stubbs, a lifelong Tory and Anglican bishop and far from dispassionate, as a central figure in the development of Whig historical thought.¹⁷⁴ It can be shown by this that the Whig framework was far from wedded to the Liberal political cause by the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a testament to the 'cultural hegemony' of the movement that its approach to history has never faced a British *Annales* and remains influential to this day.

One of the ways in which the 'Popular Front historians' differed most greatly from the political philosophies of the Whiggish liberalism is in its conceptions of sovereignty, democracy and participation in political culture. The cause of this change can be at least partially located in the changing face of that political culture itself, as well as the evolving connotations of the 'masses' in politics. Despite being in common usage in social description, Raymond Williams has demonstrated that the word 'masses' has a long and complex history.

¹⁷³ Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 171

¹⁷⁴ John W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 126-151

Originating in the 15th century to describe something ‘amorphous and indistinguishable’, first gaining widespread social context during the ‘mass’ upheavals and ‘mass’ levies of the French Revolution. From here, both positive use in revolutionary traditions (‘the working masses’, ‘mass-democracy’) and negative uses by conservative ones (‘unwashed masses’). In many cases, what differentiates nineteenth-century Whig democracy and that espoused by the Popular Front is the latter’s enthusiastic and revolutionary usage of the ‘masses’. What remains true, however, is the conception of the ‘masses’ as a ‘amorphous and indistinguishable’ group within society, whether it be in disgust, or as an attempt to label something as popular or befitting all sorts within a society.¹⁷⁵

With the coming of the twentieth century, the place of the ‘masses’ within political culture undertook another transformation. With the arrival of popular and widely consumed market media, such as cinema and the peak of the daily newspaper trade, terms such as ‘mass society’, ‘mass taste’ and ‘mass market’ came into use. Much like the fears of ‘mass-democracy’ that came with universal male suffrage in 1918, these terms denoted ire amongst the cultural and political elites, becoming a byword for the unrefined and unguided tastes and opinions of the lower classes.¹⁷⁶ However, as Daniel L. LeMahieu demonstrates, ‘mass media’ offered a method of ‘mass communication’ with the new voting masses of the interwar period. The growth of an aspirational lower-middle class, with disposable income but little classical education created a marketplace for new forms of media and new ideas.¹⁷⁷

Both Labour and the Conservatives were forced to shape their conceptions of the British polity to appeal to the newly enfranchised ‘masses’ in the interwar period. For Labour, this manifested itself in Ramsay MacDonald’s ‘moderate, progressivist’ strategy, with its focus on a ‘workerist’ appeal to all labourers, whether they worked ‘by hand or brain’. As part of this process, the Labour used ‘the people’ interchangeably with ‘workers’ as a marker that they intended to appeal to the broadest possible coalition. This helped to maintain their traditional appeal to the unionized working-classes, whilst also garnering support from the growing middle class. For the Conservatives, the task was reversed; to maintain the support of the affluent middle classes whilst adding more moderate workers to their fold. They attempted to unite the nation against the growing threat of political extremes, epitomised by the ‘positive anti-socialism’ of Stanley Baldwin. This emphasised the social commonalities of British society; a non-denominational appeal to Christian faith, evocation of the country’s rural

¹⁷⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 136-138

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139

¹⁷⁷ LeMahieu, pp. 7-55

charm as an antidote to the ugliness of urban life and a strong ‘sense of place’.¹⁷⁸ These broad images of national unity, particularly the Conservative vision, bear striking resemblance to the appeals to British heritage contained within the ‘Popular Front history’, as detailed in the previous two chapters. It may be that all three reflect a populist attempt to appeal to the ‘mass tastes’ of the lower-middle class. What is clear is that the expanded franchise, combined with more effective methods of ‘mass communication’ precipitated a shift to political messaging that was, in form and in content, reflective of the ‘amorphous and indistinguishable’ nature of ‘mass’ political culture.

Mass demonstration, performance and cinema

Written communication media have always been naturally limited in impact to that portion of the population that were willing and able to read them. Literacy had grown exponentially since the mid nineteenth century and literacy was almost universal in Britain by the 1930s.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, a great deal has been written on the link between mass literacy (and therefore, literature) and the spread of nationalism, from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* to the work of Brian Street.¹⁸⁰ While organisations such as the Left Book Club and *New Writing* magazine had gone some way to enhancing the accessibility of the written word in the interwar period, other media still offered greater popular appeal. In order to capture the widest possible audience, the Popular Front extended its activities into broader, often more ‘democratic’ forms of communication. With the arrival of cinema, radio and the peak of mass journalism, the interwar period offered a greater number of avenues to reach hearts and minds than any previous age. Together with more immediate forms of expression such as group performance and recitation, these innovations gave public historians of the 1930s a sizeable arsenal of tools. Each of these held their own benefits and challenges for the efforts of the Popular Front.

Jack Lindsay, familiar to us as the co-editor of the *Handbook of Freedom*, produced several ‘mass declamation’ poems during the late 1930s and the post-war period. Amongst these, ‘On Guard for Spain’ was published and performed by the Unity Theatre in 1937 to raise money

¹⁷⁸ Laura Beers & Geraint Thomas, *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars*, (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2011), pp. 8-9

¹⁷⁹ William B. Stephens, ‘Literacy in England, Scotland and Wales, 1500-1900’, *History of Education Quarterly*, 30:4, (1990), pp. 555-570

¹⁸⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983); Brian Street, ‘Literacy and Nationalism’, *History of European Ideas*, 16:1, (1993), pp. 225-228

for Medical Aid for Spain.¹⁸¹ However, his first foray into mass poetry remains his most striking and emotionally charged. ‘Who are the English?’, published in 1936, attempts to reclaim the pride and vitality of the English people, having been robbed by the ruling class. Lindsay’s words very clearly touch upon the themes of the ‘Norman yoke’, which he and Rickword would go on to use to great effect in the *Handbook*. He reasserts the connection between the modern Englishman and these historical heroes, most notably expressed in the lines; ‘I talked with John Ball, I was out with Jack Cade, I listened to Wicliffe, I was burned as a Lollard’. The first-person perspective and martyrdom of the narrator works to viscerally connect the modern Englishman the oppression of his imagined ancestors. This theme is further developed with the inclusion of recent events; ‘You spoke at Glasgow and the Clyde when terrorism was jailing all men in the roaring jail of war’. Spanning nearly six centuries, the same ‘you’ and ‘I’ are recurrent in each of England’s historical moments, answering, for Lindsay at least, the question of “Who are the English?”. When recited by a group, in unison, the answer seems beyond doubt.

Lindsay attempts to marry this ancient heritage of freedom with his own twentieth-century socialism. Toward the end of the poem, having delved deep into this history, he proclaims; ‘Albion or Land of Brut or Avalon, coal-ghetto that was once the Isle of Apples, so call it what you will, there must be in it a Socialist Republic’. While such mythical elements would ordinarily contrast with the modern socialist republic, in Lindsay’s poetry their connection is logical and inseparable. A socialist republic could perhaps be imagined as a restoration of the ‘utopia’ of pre-Conquest Britain, that had been replaced by the ‘Norman yoke’. Indeed, the final lines of the poem bluntly confirm this; ‘The disinherited are restored, our mother, England, our England, England our own’.¹⁸² These words, which could easily be those of the far-right, demonstrate Lindsay’s willingness to harness such naked nationalism. So strong is his idea of Englishness and his desire to engage with national sentiment that it is hard to believe that his socialism did not incorporate these thoughts prior to Dimitrov’s official sanction. ‘Who are the English?’ serves as one of the single most evocative examples of Popular Front history, with group performance only enhancing the power of its historical and democratic parallels.

By the mid-1930s, individuals and groups outside of the tightly controlled studio system had also begun to experiment with a rudimentary form of independent cinema. Usually

¹⁸¹ Jack Lindsay, *Who are the English? Selected Poems 1935-1981*, (Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 2014), p. 136

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-35

originating from the political left, these shoestring newsreels and short films operated in a legal grey area, often exhibited in unlicensed premises and constantly harassed by the authorities. While mainstream cinema was often populist, the films created by members of the Communist Party and adjacent groups shed a light on huge popular demonstrations in a way that ordinary films would not have done. More often than not, these rudimentary films focused on campaigns such as relief for the Spanish Civil War or hunger marches. These were then distributed to workers' film clubs, which eluded attempts at censorship by charging membership fees rather than ticketing for public admission. The September 1936 'March of English History' had been documented by the CPGB-affiliated Kino Films and distributed as a newsreel entitled, *We Are The English*. However, due to the excessive costs of producing even the most basic independent films in the late 1930s, the historians of the Popular Front struggled to take full advantage of this most popular of media. One organisation, the Worker's Film Association (WFA), did succeed in creating a filmed historical recreation in 1939, under the impetus of the Co-operative movement's propaganda figurehead, Rev. Joseph Reeves. The WFA, created as a joint production unit for the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress and Co-operative movement, is once again representative of the kind of broad left cultural collaboration emblematic of the British Popular Front.¹⁸³

The film produced, *The Voice of the People*, is a largely uncomplicated history of the Co-operative movement and its antecedents, rather than an attempt at reinterpretive mythmaking. The film covered episodes such as the Peterloo Massacre, the experiments of Robert Owen, Chartism and the foundation of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. The concluding section, entitled 'Today', demonstrates the modern efforts of the movement in education, health services and housing. The narrow scope of the film is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that it served more to educate and inspire existing co-operators than as part of a broader historical exercise.¹⁸⁴ This lone example mostly serves as the exception that proves the rule with regard to Popular Front film. The prohibitive cost of independent film, coupled with limited interest from party leaders, precluded any further use of film in service of the Popular Front.

The Co-operative movement found greater success with a much larger form of popular engagement which left a notable footprint on the late 1930s; live performance and pageantry. On 2nd June 1938, the London Co-operative Societies staged a huge display of Co-operative

¹⁸³ Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929-1939*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986)

¹⁸⁴ Alan G. Burton, *The British Consumer Co-operative Movement and film, 1890s-1960s*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 156-160

and progressive history at Wembley Stadium, entitled *Toward Tomorrow: A Pageant of Co-operation*. An elaborate eight-act performance charted Co-operative history in a similar manner to *The Voice of the People*, this time to a live audience of roughly 60,000 people. Three thousand Co-operators performed a story of historical conflict between the forces of capitalism and the wellbeing of the workers. Much of the idealisation of pre-industrial society found in the written histories of the Popular Front is also contained within the narrative of this performance. The opening act establishes a stereotypical image of 'Merrie England', complete with Morris dancing and Punch-and-Judy stalls. This gaiety was swiftly eclipsed by mechanical musical rhythms and dance, intended to represent the coming of the Industrial Revolution. This atmospheric contrast emphasises the destruction of the peaceful and natural order of the pre-industrial world to make way for the machines of regimented industrialisation. Mass recitations of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy' and 'Men of England' further accentuated the chaos these changes wreaked on the lives of the working men of Britain.

From here, a series of episodes demonstrated early attempts to better the living standards of workers, after each of which the 'capitalists' return to feed workers into their merciless machines.¹⁸⁵ Mass recitations of Thomas Paine and Robert Owen precede the arrival of the Rochdale Pioneers, the first Co-operative society, formed in 1844. An actor portraying Sir Rowland Hill, father of the modern Penny Post system, then entered the arena trailed by fourteen postmen. Together they circuited the performance area, each introducing one of fourteen moments in Co-operative history. This including broader influences such as the Chartists, Christian socialists, Thomas Paine, William Cobbett and William Godwin. This broad array of figures and movements celebrates the democratic aspects of Co-operative ideology just as much, if not more than its socialistic ones. Paine, Cobbett and Godwin could all be described by varying degrees of classical liberalism. While these do not form too much of a contrast with the embryonic socialism practiced by Robert Owen, the socialist elements of the movement's makeup are conspicuously overshadowed by those of radical democracy.

The performance neared its conclusion with a ballet performance dedicated to the mourning women of the Great War dead, extended to include the victims of the recent episodes at Guernica and Almeria. This creates an emotional parallel between the martyrs of the past and those currently giving their lives in service of freedom and democracy in Spain.

¹⁸⁵ This is not a poetic flourish; the performers playing the capitalists literally dragged a number of 'workers' away from the main group at the conclusion of each act, symbolising the continued struggle of the labour movement.

The final act also pays tribute to the future of the Co-operative movement and its youth organisations, in the form of a ‘Ballet of Young Workers’. This firmly established the current crop of Co-operators as the inheritors of the long tradition that had been detailed in the previous few hours. In this sense, *Toward Tomorrow* covers much of the same ground as *The Voice of the People*, though its extension over two-hours allowed for a much more detailed presentation. Co-operative history remained the focus of the performance and the movement is clearly presented as an important part of the solution to modern social ills.

However, the inclusion of such a broad range of historical figures not strictly associated with the Co-operative movement perhaps hints at a broader progressive purpose. With the inclusion of the Spanish Civil War dead, one of the aims may have been to present the Co-operative movement as an effective vehicle to combat the threat of fascism. With the inclusion of the recurring cast of Hunt, Paine, Owen and the Chartists, *Toward Tomorrow* certainly bears all the hallmarks of Popular Front history. It also featured the talents of radical theatre director Andre van Gyseghem, who masterminded not only *Toward Tomorrow*, but a concert entitled *Music for the People* and a further pageant in South Wales in 1939. Gyseghem petitioned the Co-operative movement to create a permanent ‘Workers’ Theatre’ to host further events, though his request was denied, likely due to economic constraints. Gyseghem’s initiative clearly hints at an adherence to the same notion of popular history as a means to attract the public into active participation in the struggle against fascism and toward socialism used by the Popular Front.¹⁸⁶ Transported to such a large and participatory form, these ideals of democracy took on an even more evocative potency and demonstrate the popular support for such ideals amongst the left-leaning population at least.

These large public performances elaborated on the basic democratic energies of mass demonstration, the mainstay of left-wing agitation. Historical pageantry had been used since the turn of the twentieth century in service of a variety of causes, from straightforward patriotism, women’s history¹⁸⁷ and the high-profile ‘Pageant of Labour’ held by the TUC in 1934.¹⁸⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Communist Party had utilised large marches as a platform for the ‘Popular Front history’ September 1936. Following the original London march, 1937 saw several such events held across the country. These were generally

¹⁸⁶ Angela Bartie and others, *Towards Tomorrow: Pageant of Co-operation - The Redress of the Past* <<http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1406>> [accessed on 05/09/2020]

¹⁸⁷ Zoë Thomas, ‘Historical Pageants, Citizenship, and the Performance of Women’s History before Second-Wave Feminism’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 3 (2017), pp. 319-343

¹⁸⁸ Angela Bartie and others, *Pageant of Labour - The Redress of the Past* <<http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1152/>> [accessed on 10/3/2021]

clustered in districts with strong party support, or areas targeted for expansion. London, with roughly 40% of the party's national membership, was the focus of these creative efforts. Scotland, holding 20% of all members, was also a priority area, though there the drive was met with limited success as we shall see. Districts with smaller membership clusters, such as Lancashire, Yorkshire, South Wales and the Midlands also held a number of events over the period 1937-39. Some smaller areas, such as the Sussex District, seem to have held events of their own based on special interest from local activists and historians. However the impetus behind many of the larger marches betrays a distinct lack of democracy in the organising of the events themselves.

Despite the enthusiastic celebration of democracy within the Popular Front ideology, the ideal itself raises difficult questions about the historical basis of the movement. We have already drawn attention to the contradiction between the CPGB's celebration of British democratic traditions and the realities of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union. However, the true extent of Soviet repression was not widely known outside of the USSR in the 1930s and nonetheless the true believers in the CPGB often dismissed these tales as propagandistic slander. The more pertinent question emanates from the conception of democracy which the movement sought to promote. This may naturally vary slightly from one writer to another, as the unofficial British Popular Front coalition possessed no strict 'party line'. Despite this, as demonstrated in the above chapters, the fundamental characteristics of the 'Popular Front history' remained consistent across the range of works produced. Two statements can be applied to broadly describe the outlook of the movement. Firstly, that it was surprisingly class-agnostic, with the implications of the Norman yoke theory dividing the nation into a 'foreign' aristocracy and 'Anglo-Saxon' common folk. The middle classes, usually reviled as 'bourgeoisie' in socialist literature, are instead presented as the defenders of 'Englishness' in the face of aristocratic, 'Norman' oppression.

'South Wales in the March of History'

The second characteristic of the Popular Front narrative is less inclusive and far more damaging to the movement's democratic self-image; that the Popular Front suffered from a barely veiled Anglocentrism. The works that we have studied thus far have dealt almost entirely with England and were indeed mostly written by authors born and raised in England. Even Jack Lindsay, the sole immigrant amongst them, acclimatized himself so well to

Englishness that he never returned to his native Australia. Beyond this, those English-born authors we have examined were drawn exclusively from London and the Home Counties. It is perhaps for this reason that the greatest number of historical examples chosen by these authors also took place in south east England. For instance, while the Peasants' Revolt did have documented nationwide repercussions, the most famous figures such as John Ball and Wat Tyler were active in East Anglia. The presentation of this event in both Morton's *People's History* and Lindsay and Rickword's *Handbook* focuses largely on these figures and as such the event becomes particular to the area surrounding London. Even Hymie Fagan's treatment of the revolt is focused narrowly on the events in the south of England, despite his immigrant background and strongly Communist education. Similarly, Cole and Postgate's decision to set the Battle of Culloden as their benchmark for modernity reveals a disregard for the fact that this victory of 'English' modernity encapsulated by the Duke of Cumberland's army came at the price of total cultural defeat for the Scots. What has been therefore lacking in our discussion is any mention of efforts to reinterpret the national histories of Scotland, Wales or Ireland. These attempts are not without evidence and there is clear debate surrounding the idea, particularly with regard to Scotland. Unfortunately, as we shall see, these examples largely serve as exceptions that prove the rule of Anglocentrism within the Popular Front.

The first pageant to take place outside of England was 'South Wales in the March of History' on 21st March 1937, seven months after the inaugural London march. Beginning in Tonypany, 2,500 marchers carried 80 historical placards on a five-hour circular journey through the Rhondda valley, the crowd swelling to 3,500 by the time of their return. The purpose of the march, according to the *Daily Worker*, was to 'rouse the mining villages to the great part they have played and are still playing in the moulding of working-class history'. Despite this claim, the contributions of the Welsh miners did not feature heavily in this display. Of the 80 banners, fewer than 10 were created especially for the Welsh march, with the rest being held over from the previous London and Sheffield events. These were made by the London-based Artists' Studio, limiting local involvement in the selection of figures. Even the organisation of the event itself was mostly coordinated by the Labour Research Department, from its offices in London. Of the new figures mentioned by the *Daily Worker*, the Chartist John Frost was the sole Welshman. He joined Robert Owen, the only Welsh figure at the London march, as well as the Keir Hardie, the Scotsman who had represented the Merthyr Tydfil constituency. These three men represented the entirety of the even tangentially Welsh cohort at the march intended to honour that nation's history. As if to encapsulate the alien nature of this event to the Welsh miners, the official programme for the

march used an identical front cover to that which had been used in London and Sheffield. Of the fourteen images featured, only Owen and Hardie demonstrate any connection to those Welsh workers whom the programme claimed to place at ‘the very forefront of the worker’s fight since 1800’.¹⁸⁹

The aftermath of this march gives us some indication that it had been either forced upon the local population, or that a strong resentment had emerged in its wake. Despite the South Wales District’s position as a Communist Party stronghold and some indication of positive overtures towards the Welsh nationalist movement, the Welsh valleys did not play host to another historical pageant until 1939. The nature of this event made it naturally more inclusive of local history, being organised to commemorate the centenary of not only the Chartist movement, but the Newport Rising in particular. While ostensibly organised by the South Wales Miners Federation, the Labour Research Department had once again been enlisted to assist in the organisation and promotion of the event. Bill Williams, the Department Secretary and a Welshman living in London, describes the great effort required to encourage the local population to participate in the event. Williams himself admits that the initial reluctance may have stemmed from a sense of being dictated to from London. While born in Wales, Williams expressed his belief that many people were ‘suspicious of local boys who had got the coaldust off their hands’, seeing in him just as much of an alien as the party leadership. Despite the initial struggle to garner support, the event appears to have been more successful than the 1937 march, and certainly contained a greater local ‘flavour’.¹⁹⁰

While a more convincing focus on local events likely attributed to greater participation, the nature of the event itself may have contributed to its success. In the two years since ‘South Wales in the March of History’, the level of performance contained within the CPGB’s ‘pageants’ brought them closer than ever to living up to that flamboyant name. While the events of 1937 had been little more than a themed variation on the party’s usual street protests, 1938 had seen the introduction of scripting and costume in some English pageants. The introduction of these elements, which had previously been the preserve of more conservative village fetes, drove the party further from both its usual street practices and the democratic spirit contained within them. As these events had to be carefully planned and choreographed, there was little room for the kinds of *ad hoc* participation that had swelled the 1937 march by a thousand on its trail throughout the valley. Nonetheless, these staged

¹⁸⁹ Even the title of the march, “South Wales in the March of History”, contains a subtle qualifier that the region only formed part of a larger picture, while the “March of English History” suggests an intention to represent the totality of a national history. (Antony Howe, pp. 78-79)

¹⁹⁰ Howe, pp. 68-93

pageants still included a great deal of participation by rank-and-file activists and the grandeur of the event may well have held more appeal than the proletarian austerity of the 1937 march.

By some accounts, the 'Pageant of South Wales' was the grandest and most ambitious event ever staged by the Communist movement in Britain. This was no doubt aided by the direction of Andre van Gyseghem, the helmsman of the Co-operative movement's massive performance, *Toward Tomorrow*. The theatrical sensibilities of that performance were evidently mirrored here, with an even greater number of performers spread over four locations. Gyseghem estimates that a total of 6,000 people took part, performing and singing at sites in Abertillery, Pontypool, Ystradgynlais and Caerphilly. Though some evidence suggests that not all of these performances went ahead as planned, the scope and pageantry of the occasion was certainly greater than that of the 1937 march from Tonypany. The content of the performances was also far more tightly focused, addressing only the events and impact of the 1839 Chartist rising. The events of the Newport Rising, the trial of John Frost and the foundation of the South Wales Miners Federation formed the core of this socialist history in Wales. It also seems that some small efforts were made to link the religious nonconformism of South Wales to the development of socialism in that area, demonstrating the extent of the pragmatism that had gripped the staunch secularists of the Communist movement.¹⁹¹

While the title of this event made no specific mention of 'Welsh history' as the previous event had, the lack of any specifically Welsh content is still noticeable. The industrial unrest and growth of the workers' movement served more as a local example of a nationwide process, rather than an example of any uniquely Welsh. In keeping with the focus on the Newport Rising, no effort was to include medieval figures as had been done in the English pageants or the 1937 march. This seems to suggest that the Communist Party was comfortable exploiting history only as long as it was the history of a united Britain. If this meant imposing a medieval history foreign to the Welsh component of that union, then this seems to have been of little concern. To include any medieval and early modern examples of Welsh history would force the party to confront the ugly reverse of the very English consolidation on which they had built much of their historical narrative.

Antony Howe has suggested that the turn toward nationalism was, in any case, received with mixed feelings outside of England. He argues that some East London Jews may have

¹⁹¹ Bartie, Angela and others, *Pageant of South Wales - The Redress of the Past* <<https://historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1315/>> [accessed on 23/4/2021]

accepted the promotion of Oliver Cromwell, who had overturned the Edict of Expulsion which had banished Jews from England over 350 years prior. However, Irish and Scots members of the party may have felt decidedly less enthusiastic about the celebration of their vicious subjugator. There is some evidence to suggest that several Irish members of the British Battalion fighting in Spain voted to leave and join the American Battalion as a result of such a growing anti-English sentiment, to which the content of these marches may well have contributed. Similarly, while Cromwell may have been an amenable figure to the Jewish community, the arrival of a 'March of English History' in the East End, a few weeks prior to the infamous march of Mosely's Blackshirts and the Battle of Cable Street, must have made some uneasy. It is difficult to discern the extent of the resistance to this nationalist turn at the street level, as much of the supporting evidence comes from the *Daily Worker*, unlikely to print any such negative reactions. However, with the scant evidence available and a general sense of cultural dynamics with the nation, the project of Popular Front history can quickly become one of a thinly veiled English chauvinism, dictated to the provinces by the party centre in London.¹⁹²

Scotland and the 'Popular Front history'

Scotland was one locality in which the question of embracing nationalism was particularly fraught. The Communist Party's only MP in 1935 had been William Gallagher, a Scot representing the Scottish constituency of West Fife. In light of this, to focus so strongly on English history could be considered imprudent at best and outright insensitive at worst. Yet, it is worth noting that the first attempt at a historical pageant in Scotland had taken place in 1938, two years after the practice had begun in England and Wales. This may betray a hostility within the Scottish party, not only to Anglocentric nationalism, but any attempt to synthesise socialism and nationalism. Indeed, Howe notes that the Scottish District Committee had long been hostile to Scottish nationalism as 'just another plan to do down the common folk [...] in kilts [...] with bagpipes playing and a blether about Wallace', to quote former Scottish party member Lewis G. Gibbon.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Howe, pp. 82-83

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 83

Much of this reticence can be related directly to the political character of the Scottish nationalist movement in the interwar years. Prior to the first Labour government of 1924, the Scottish Home Rule Association had existed as a pressure group, committed to advancing their cause through Labour and Liberal party candidates. However, its first brush with governance had put Scottish home rule low on Labour's list of priorities. By the late 1920s, the party opposed devolution on the grounds that poverty reduction in Scotland would require a co-ordinated state effort at a British level. This severed the movement's connection between Fabian socialism and spurred a split into fundamentalists and moderates. The fundamentalists, who sought to imitate the radicalism of the Irish republican movement, eventually lost out to the moderates, including the 'right-leaning' Scottish Party. When the Scottish Party merged with the big tent National Party of Scotland to found the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 1934, the resulting party was one that sought respectability above all. Though several by-elections in the early 1930s allowed the movement to demonstrate its potential, by the mid-1930s it had shrunk under the weight of internal disputes. However, throughout the 1930s, the SNP remained a force that served more to complicate the left's activities in Scotland than to assist them.¹⁹⁴ While the famous moniker of 'Tartan Tory' was not to be used widely until the 1960s, it was this mix of rightward leaning and opposition to Labour centralism that drove a wedge between the socialist movement and Scottish nationalism.¹⁹⁵

The relationship between Scottish nationalism and the Communist Party was one of even greater animosity, leaning heavily on the perceived right-wing position of the SNP, particularly against the backdrop of Hitler's rise to power. The issue had first been addressed in print in the *Communist Review* in 1932, with the journal publishing a series of three articles that discussed the relationship between Scottish nationalism and the communist movement. Two of these took a decisively negative stance on nationalism, openly denouncing the 'Fascist demagoguery of the Scottish nationalists'. 'The Dumbarton by-election' by Scottish CPGB leader and future MP William Gallacher addressed the movement as part of a wider summary of that by-election, which had seen the National Party of Scotland poll considerably higher than the CPGB. Robert MacLennan's article, 'The national question and Scotland', dealt with the question more directly, offering a broad assessment of the threat of nationalism. Ragnheidur Kristjánsdóttir, in her essay comparing Scottish and Icelandic communist

¹⁹⁴ Richard Finlay, 'The Early Years: From the Inter-War Period to the Mid-1960s', *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed. by Gerry Hassan, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 19-25

¹⁹⁵ Gerry Hassan, 'The Auld Enemies: Scottish Nationalism and Scottish Labour', *The Modern SNP*, pp. 147-161

reactions to the Popular Front, remarks that the Communist Party had clearly never considered the Scottish nationalist movement any cause for concern prior to the early 1930s, these articles being the first time that any member of the party had formally addressed the question. Prior to 1932, most communists, following Lenin's example, supported a unified communist movement throughout the United Kingdom. This reveals a hostile attitude toward Scottish nationalism, in principle, from the foundation of the CPGB.¹⁹⁶

However small the appetite for accommodation with Scottish nationalism, it found an outlet in a third article, published in the *Communist Review* in February 1933. Written in direct response to MacLennan's article, author Helen Crawford argued for a much greater appreciation of 'Scottish circumstances' within the party. The main pillar of MacLennan's argument had been that Scotland was not an oppressed nation, that its economic issues did not stem from an unfair relationship with England. According to Lenin's thesis, adopted by the second Comintern congress in 1920, communists should only entertain nationalistic movements if the nation in question was oppressed, dependant or had not completed their 'bourgeois revolution'. It was under these stipulations that support was offered to the Irish liberation movement, the largely agricultural nation being considered 'semi-feudal' and 'backward'.¹⁹⁷ MacLennan argued that Scotland did not meet these criteria and as such Scottish nationalism should be treated as a wholly reactionary force. While it was true that Scotland had suffered more hardship than many other regions during the Great Depression, he argued that this had been due to the area's dependence on ailing heavy industries. MacLennan ultimately identified nationalism as a threat to socialism in Scotland, owing to its ability to distract working-class voters away from class consciousness and the Communist Party.¹⁹⁸

Crawford's rebuttal centred on the essential question of Scotland's status as an oppressed nation. She argued that Scotland's economic problems could to some extent be blamed on the advantageous position of English capital over Scottish workers. This position, leveraged through their domination of Parliament, had been made more acute during the economic calamity of the Great Depression. England, she argued, attracted a greater proportion of subsidy and unemployment benefit, despite the higher rate of unemployment in Scotland.

¹⁹⁶ Kristjánsdóttir, p. 608

¹⁹⁷ Kristjánsdóttir also suggests that supporting the Irish nationalists was a matter of political necessity for communists, as their own movement had virtually no support in either the Irish Free State or British Northern Ireland. This was likely due to the fact that many Republicans at the time incorporated calls for an Irish Republic with that for a Socialist one, thus eliminating the appeal of a dedicated communist party. (Kristjánsdóttir, p. 607)

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 609

She also claimed that grants to Scottish universities were lower on average than those given to universities in England and Wales. As such, the Scottish nationalist movement should not be considered entirely reactionary, even if it did some possess tendencies in that direction. She concluded by referring to Lenin, quoting Engels in his work *State and Revolution*, who claimed that the national question had not yet been overcome in the United Kingdom and that a federal republic of the four nations should be considered a 'progressive' step. Despite this, the Communist Party's disapproval of Crawford's argument can be evidenced by an editor's note affixed to the beginning of her article, explaining that the article had been published despite its inadequate assessment of "class forces" in Scotland. While the subsequent issue of *Communist Review* ran a further discussion of the national question in Scotland, no response to Crawford's argument was offered. After a brief nod to diversity of opinion, it seems that the CPGB's belligerent stance toward Scottish nationalism remained unchanged.¹⁹⁹

This position would bring the Scottish party leadership into conflict with Moscow and the London party centre in 1935, when Dimitrov encouraged the adoption of national histories in his 'United Front' policy speech. While the London District Committee had wholeheartedly embraced English national icons as demonstrated in the 'March of English History' in September 1936, the Scottish District was much more cautious. The issue was once again addressed in the press, this time in a special feature for the *Left Review* in late 1936. Two contributors, one nationalist author and one more staunchly communist, were enlisted to present both sides of the debate. Neil Gunn, the nationalist contributor, framed his argument in the familiar terms of cultural distinction, going as far as to suggest that Scottish culture was inherently more radical than English culture. It was therefore natural that Scottish proletarians would choose to support a movement for their national liberation. Jimmy Barke, presenting the communists' argument, suggested that the ultimate goals of Scottish nationalism would all anyhow be achieved through socialism. He agreed that Scotland had a unique cultural heritage, though as this was largely based in the culture of peasants and workers, it too would be preserved by socialism. Due to its proletarian nature, it would be impossible to preserve this Scottish culture under capitalism and it was therefore necessary to subsume the nationalist cause into the communist one.²⁰⁰ However, he urged caution in adopting a model of Scottish nationalism 'largely inspired by the superior-race-theory of the Gael'. Howe suggests that this reflected a difficulty amongst many within the communist

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 610-611

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 615

movement in separating national identity from the ‘blood and soil’ nationalism of Hitler and Mussolini.

Judging by its lack of engagement in national mythmaking, it is clear that the majority of the Scottish District Party still agreed with Barke’s assessment in 1936. By 1937, the London party centre expressed concern about the failure of the Scottish District to respond to the issues facing Scotland. The Scottish District Party was in a particularly unstable position on nationalism, having to contend not only with the birth of the Scottish National Party, but the rival conception of a Scottish Social Republic advocated by devotees of the late John Maclean. The London party leadership urged the Scots to adopt a more conciliatory approach with the nationalist movement, or else lose control of the national question and lose supporters to either nationalist rival. They pointed toward the creation of special action plans for districts such as Lancashire and Wales, which took into account the regional peculiarities of those areas in order to better appeal to the workers there. After much reluctance and delay, it seems that the Scottish District Party finally agreed to a platform that would incorporate elements of the nationalist agenda in January 1938. The official party line of the CPGB then shifted to support Scottish Home Rule as advocated by the Liberal and Labour parties. The Scottish District Party was also expected to form an alliance with the Scottish National Party to campaign for Home Rule, bringing the party closer Engels’s envisioned Federal Socialist Republic of Britain.²⁰¹

Once the political aspects of the nationalist agenda had been accepted by the Scottish District Party, the work of national mythmaking became more politically tenable. As if making up for lost time, the annual May Day celebration in 1938 was replete with the now familiar signs of historical reinterpretation. In a similar manner to the ‘March of English History’ held 18-months earlier in London, the traditionally red flags were joined by placards bearing icons of Scottish history. In addition to Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Hardie, historical nationalists such as Robert the Bruce, William Wallace and Robert Burns joined the communist pantheon. Robert Owen, a feature of English and Welsh events, also took pride of place in the Glasgow march.²⁰² A bewildered journalist for the ILP-affiliated *Forward* sarcastically noted the inclusion of ‘well known members of the proletariat’ such as Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson and Adam Smith.²⁰³ The formula of this line-up, with its mixture of medieval freedom fighters, classical liberals and modern socialists, is once again

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 615-616

²⁰² *Programme of the pageant of Scottish history*, (Glasgow, 1938)

²⁰³ *Forward*, 7th May 1938

incredibly similar to that used in England. Given that the policy had been imposed by the London party, it is entirely possible that this formula had also been passed down from their more enthusiastic English comrades.

This May Day parade appears to be the only such example of ‘Popular Front history’ being applied in a Scottish context. Unlike the English movement, Scotland produced no written works of history. However, the figures included in the ‘pageant of Scottish history’ were of a surprisingly Scottish nature. William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, for instance, are remembered chiefly for their resistance to English domination over Scotland. The inclusion of these figures precludes any attempt to create a unified ‘British’ Popular Front history, at least for the medieval era. While enlightenment figures such as Adam Smith and Robert Owen offer more in the way of Scottish examples of British trends, medieval history remains a powerful component of the Popular Front historical toolbox. This period usually served to connect modern citizens to an ancient notion of their nation. In the English context, this allowed for a greater evocation of ‘blood and soil’ nationalism than the modern socialist context would usually allow. As the shared history of Scotland and England only dates back to 1603, the inclusion of medieval history necessitates either ignorance of Scottish independence, or the creation of a separate and contradictory branch to that of English Popular Front history. It was perhaps due in part to this logical hurdle that a specifically Scottish Popular Front history never took root, and the Scottish District Party remained reluctant to engage more than necessary with nationalistic sentiments in the 1930s.

Empire

The Anglocentric attitude of the Popular Front toward the other two nations of Great Britain betrays a very narrow and prescribed relationship with the notion of democracy. In Scotland, at least, this lack of appeal to Scottish nationalism appears to be the will of the local communist movement as a whole. In Wales, the Anglocentrism of the Popular Front history may have contributed to a greater extent, turning an otherwise enthusiastic population off the idea of a progressive national history.²⁰⁴ However, the populations of these two regions had been given the right to engage with this debate and partake in events, at the very least. There remained a vast population under British rule that existed entirely outside of the ‘British’

²⁰⁴ Howe, p. 79

history of the Popular Front, the inhabitants of Britain's global empire. The question of the empire was still a complex topic for the British left in the 1930s. This quandary is reflected in an almost complete ignorance of not only the right to national independence, but even the existence of the empire. Within the extended pantheon of Popular Front history and its heroic figures, only Ireland receives any mention, as what could be considered Great Britain's first colonial venture. As martyrs of the 1916 Easter Rising, James Conolly and Patrick Pearse were included in the initial 'March of English History' in September 1936. However, even then these figures seem to be a token gesture to acknowledge the socialist aspects of the Irish Republican movement. Ironically, one suspects that these two men would have been dismayed at being included in a march of 'English History', alongside no less than Oliver Cromwell.

Beyond Ireland, the Popular Front's treatment of Britain's empire further afield in Asia and Africa is non-existent. This could perhaps be expected, as the movement's historical reinterpretation sought to create a national pride in the population of the British Isles. However, the complete lack of any attempt to address the empire while simultaneously celebrating Britain's progressive democratic tradition seems short-sighted and ignorant, not to mention incredibly galling for the peoples of those subject nations. While the incorporation of freedom fighters from around the empire would perhaps have been beyond the purview of the 'March of English History', other forms of dialogue with the democratic desires of the empire were possible. Morton dedicates a chapter in his *People's History* to 'Colonial Expansion' and its consequences. He details the history of colonial North America with little reference to the decimation of the native population that resulted, instead focusing on the political and economic concerns of British and French Canada. More attention is paid to the hardships wreaked on the peoples of Africa and Asia, detailing the ways in which the very essence of Britain's imperial strategy decimated traditional economies, with particular attention paid to India. However, for all that, little mention is made of nationhood, independence or any iconic figures relating to these countries. While lending his sympathies, Morton views these regions primarily through their role as victims of British imperialism, rather than as nations and people in their own right. He makes no reference to the kind of stolen nationhood and lost freedoms that he relished upon the nascent English kingdom.²⁰⁵

Morton's attitude toward the British Empire is demonstrative of an attitude prevalent amongst British leftists in the early part of the twentieth century. Those in the orbit of the

²⁰⁵ Morton, pp. 397-421

Labour Party in particular had a cautious attitude toward national independence movements within the Empire. Harold Laski, chief amongst Labour theorists, was generally hostile to the nation state as an organising principle, preferring instead a global socialist government. This was the stated aim of most socialist internationalists, though Laski was particularly attentive to the issue. This approach naturally negates the need for national independence in the developing world, as a socialist order would put paid to aggressive imperial exploitation. Labour could not ignore the risk that if India in particular were to gain independence, then the living standard of all strata in British society would decline, workers included. Many avoided the issue or moved to create a more paternalistic form of imperial rulership as an alternative to independence.²⁰⁶ These currents were only compounded by Labour's growing acclimatisation to the institutions of power, and the need to prove itself capable of governing the country.

On the other hand, Marxist-Leninists had been formally encouraged to support the independence movements of oppressed nations since the adoption of Lenin's thesis on nationalism by the Comintern in 1920. In practice, this stipulation often took a backseat to the exigencies of global politics. This no clearer than in the case of the Popular Front historical project, which offered little consideration of the ways in which imperial history might intersect with that of England or made no apology for its absence in their works. It seems that the issue of imperial self-determination was made subservient to the creation of a middle-class coalition in the metropole.

With regard to India in particular, the lack of a pan-Imperial element to the Popular Front publicity project seems to belie evident connections that had existed for the purpose of fighting fascism. From around 1934, the CPGB had begun building a relationship with certain key figures in the Indian National Congress, namely Jawaharlal Nehru. The CPGB could not rely on the Communist Party of India, which was still vehemently opposed to engaging with the nationalist Congress. Nehru, as the leader of the socialist faction within the Congress, offered a compromise between harsh internationalism and bourgeois nationalism that appealed to the CPGB leadership. The Gandhian faction of the Congress was both more committed to resistance against British influence and opposed to socialism in India. While the question of Indian support for the war in 1939 created complex fractures both within the Congress and in its relationship with British leftists, there had been a tentative courtship

²⁰⁶ In response to the strength of right-wing elements in the Indian National Congress, future Labour MP Patrick Gordon Walker even argued that a socialist British government should "proclaim its right to remain in India in the interests of the [Indian] working class". (Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism 1885-1947*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 236-237)

between left-wing Indian nationalists and the left in Britain. Leader of the London-based Indian League and a close friend of Nehru's, Krishna Menon had appeared alongside Harry Pollitt at the 1937 May Day parade. With such a visible public connection between the CPGB and the Indian independence movement, the almost complete ignorance of India in the Popular Front history seems like a wasted opportunity. If the party were to become committed to an anti-fascist alliance in India, a broader notion of Britishness that encapsulated the liberal ideals that it had exported across the Empire could be explored. This could have had the possible effect of creating a global 'British' community, imbued with the democratic and socialist ideals of the Popular Front.²⁰⁷ Indeed, this internationalist vision would later form the basis of support for the Non-Aligned Movement in Britain following the onset of the Cold War.²⁰⁸

That this did not happen during the Popular Front era may also be indicative of a limitation in the concept of Britishness, as much as the movement's failure to properly utilise it. Britain (and by extension, Britishness) had grown out of the expansion of the English state and English culture into Wales, Scotland and Ireland over the course of hundreds of years. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the concept of a 'British' nationality results from the combination of English culture with that of its subject neighbours. Even today, the constitutional arrangement of the United Kingdom reflects a state that exists more as an extension of England than a partnership between four nations, with the English parliament remaining the highest democratic body in the land.

Britishness has its foundation in a nationalism that is tied to ideas about the Anglo-Saxon people and their land. By tapping into a national spirit that is fundamentally grounded in the Englishness of the British nation, the Popular Front created a vision of a democratic past that did not fully represent all of the peoples of Britain equally. This is not to even mention the peoples of the British Empire, not connected to the metropole by an equal brotherhood of liberal commerce but subjugated by British (or 'Greater English') masters. This can be viewed in stark contrast to the colonial policy of 'assimilation' pursued by France, which formally recognised the belief that by embracing French language and culture, even non-Europeans could become 'French' and enjoy all of the rights of citizenship. In practice, this notion was merely a part of the French *mission civilisatrice*, which sought to rid the peoples of the empire of their own language and customs as a means of 'civilising' them. However, originating in the

²⁰⁷ Owen, pp. 235-270

²⁰⁸ Hill, Christopher R., *Peace and Power in Cold War Britain: Media, Movements and Democracy, c.1945-68*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 57

universalist language of the French Revolutionary constitution, assimilation gave the French a seemingly ‘noble’ and benign purpose in their colonialism.²⁰⁹ The lack of a similar thread in British imperialism of any meaningful strength made it hard for the ‘Popular Front history’ to appeal to a sense of liberal universalism that could include the empire in a socialist conception of British citizenship.

Ultimately, the Popular Front had attempted to create a legacy of democratic tradition in a nation whose foundational myths, despite their superficial appeal to democracy, were fundamentally anti-democratic. Existing within this flawed logic, the attempts of the movement to capture the English middle-class had not been entirely unsuccessful. It is perhaps telling that as Britain’s post-war social democratic consensus broke down in the 1970s, nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales began to emerge onto the electoral landscape. Similarly, most of the British Empire had gained independence by the late 1960s, the consequence of Britain’s declining global power and a disinclination to fight a series of colonial conflicts like that of France’s in Algeria.²¹⁰ The vision of a left-wing, progressive nationalism like that of the Popular Front would survive into the early post-war years, as the main policies of the Attlee government went largely unchallenged by successive Conservative governments. However, by the early 1960s, political thought had begun to move beyond the evocation of Britain’s ‘glorious’ past. As mentioned previously, this can be partly attributed to a shift in the work of left-wing academics, who deemed the writers of the CPHG to be ‘too English’ and sought to question this Anglocentrism. Even on the centre-left, Harold Wilson’s appeal to the ‘white heat’ of technology at the 1963 Labour Party conference demonstrates a political culture that was fundamentally future facing.²¹¹ While the use of the Union Jack and the deference to the Queen remained fairly uncontroversial until very recently on the centre-left, the campaigns of Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair focused on social mobility and the progressive future of ‘Britishness’, rather than evoking the triumphs of the past. Indeed, Kinnock would even use the injustices of the past as a foil to his vision of progress, as highlighted by his question of ‘Why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to get to university?’ at the Labour Party conference in 1987.²¹² In addition to this, from the 1970s onward, ‘progressive Britishness’ began to be channelled into a dual identity as

²⁰⁹ Martin D. Lewis, ‘One Hundred Million Frenchmen: The ‘Assimilation’ Theory in French Colonial Policy’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4:2, (1962), pp. 129-153

²¹⁰ Wm. Roger Louis, *The Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Africa, Suez and Decolonization*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), p. 46

²¹¹ *Report of the 62nd Annual Conference of the Labour Party 1963*, (London: Labour Party, 1963), pp. 139-140

²¹² ‘Neil Kinnock’, *Oxford Essential Quotations*, 4th Edition,

<<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00006315>> [accessed 30/3/2021]

both British and European, something that Kinnock and Blair embraced wholeheartedly, as well as Roy Jenkins and other earlier figures.²¹³

The ‘Popular Front history’ may then be a national myth suited to a particular time and atmosphere in global relations, namely the period of suspicion and conflict in the years surrounding and encompassing the Second World War. While democracy and progressive social policy would remain a core pillar of left-wing politics throughout the twentieth century, the historical framing of these goals appears to have reached its zenith with the ‘Popular Front’ period. This could perhaps be related to several social and cultural factors; the decline of Britain’s global power, the stagnation of the British economy, the youthful cultural currents of the 1960s, as well as the gestation of academic post-modernism. To chart the decline of this ‘progressive nationalism’ in British left culture and academia would be beyond the remit of this thesis. David Edgerton, to name a more recent examples, has addressed the social causes and consequences of British declinism and the ‘nationalisation’ of its political culture in much greater detail than would be possible here.²¹⁴ However, the above analysis helps to define this political era as one heavily influenced by the works of the ‘Popular Front history’, produced between the years 1936 and 1940.

²¹³ Josh Cole, ‘UK Labour and the EU Single Market: “Social Europe” or “Capitalist Club”?’ *The Political Quarterly*, 91:2, (2020), pp. 430-441

²¹⁴ David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History*, (London: Penguin, 2018)

Conclusion

By analysing the characteristics of popular historical works produced by the British left in the late 1930s, this essay has sought to establish the characteristics of a defined 'Popular Front history'. While the examples selected may not be exhaustive, they serve to illustrate the hallmarks of this unique and influential moment in British historiography. The blending of historical nationalism and socialism had been present in Labour histories from the late nineteenth century. However, in the period of the Popular Front, the call to 'put down roots' had focused the energies of Communist intellectuals on the same task after the years of 'class against class'. This infusion of ideas helped to produce a Communist intelligentsia that was more open and attuned to the national sentiments of the public. This resulted in a movement, in the immediate post-war years, that was much more comfortable with British (or English) history as a vehicle for socialist interpretation. The Communist Party Historians Group of the late-1940s and 1950s produced a great deal of seminal work in this vein and the 'Popular Front history' had clearly laid the groundwork for this expansion. This thesis has demonstrated the creation of a unique brand of 'popular' historiography that, though drawing on previous schools, stands as a defined moment against what came before and after it. In turn, the influence of this framework can be seen in the aforementioned work of the left-wing intellectuals of the 1950s.

One of the most extraordinary examples of this can be seen in Christopher Hill's work on the 'Norman yoke' theory. Despite criticising the oversimplicity of the framework, Hill finds some truth in its overarching assumptions about class conflict. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the theory of the 'Norman yoke' plays a vital role in the framework of the Popular Front historians. The supposed robbing of peace and democracy from the Anglo-Saxon by invading Norman barons serves as the 'original sin' of British inequality. This assumption underscores the entire history of class relations directly until the Industrial revolution and, by implication, to the modern day. By connecting this millennia-long national struggle to the progressiveness of figures like Alfred the Great and John Ball, the Popular Front campaign added a sense of social reform to their defence of British sovereignty. This can be contrasted with other efforts to combat appeasement of Hitler, such as Winston Churchill's 'Focus' group, which later developed into the 'Anti-Nazi Council'. The composition of this group was almost as broad as the Popular Front, in some ways broader. Though not including any Communists or

sympathisers, key Labour figures such as Hugh Dalton and Philip Noel-Baker, along with TUC leader Walter Citrine, were board members of the group. Along with Churchill himself, they joined Liberal leader Archibald Sinclair, women's activist Eleanor Rathbone and former editor of *The Times*, Wickham Steed. This group no doubt enjoyed a great deal more high-level influence and endorsement than the Popular Front and was closely connected to the League of Nations Union.²¹⁵ However, the Focus group existed as a narrowly single-issue organisation, directed solely at goading the governments of Baldwin and Chamberlain into action over Hitler's violation of the Treaty of Versailles. The Popular Front campaign was truly unique in marrying belligerent anti-fascism with the need to 'win the peace' and achieve radical social change.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that, save a few small differences, the Popular Front history stuck remarkably close to the direct Whig narrative up until the nineteenth century at least. Particularly when compared with the mid-nineteenth century 'Anglo-Saxonist' Whigs, the fascination of the Popular Front historians with the 'Norman yoke' theory seems very familiar. As show in our analysis, the main difference between traditional Whig history and its 'red' variant is the question of the 'English Revolution'. For traditional Whigs, this meant the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that resulted in Protestant supremacy and firmly established Britain's constitutional monarchy. The 'red' Whigs, however, preferred the regicidal radicalism of the 1640s as their 'English Revolution', likely deterred by the over-deferential approach to benevolent monarchy in the traditional Whig reading. This is not so insurmountable a difference as it may initially appear and can largely be attributed to ideology.

The biggest difference between 'red' and traditional Whig history ultimately lies in the unifying cause behind their creation. The nineteenth century 'Whig interpretation of history' had been entirely in the service of Whiggism, that developmental liberalism that had developed in opposition to Stuart absolutism. While it borrowed much of its framework from the earlier tradition, the socialist 'red' Whig history eschewed enlightened monarchy for the actions of more popular radical movements. As established in Chapter 2, this led the two toward a virtually indistinguishable view of the pre-Revolutionary development of English democracy. However, as Chapter 3 shows, once the progressive upper middle classes had fulfilled their historically progressive role, they became the antagonists of the 'red' Whig story. Even then, many of the radical democratic movements of the nineteenth century are

²¹⁵ Roy Jenkins, *Churchill*, (London: Pan Books, 2001), pp. 494-495

portrayed positively in both later Whig histories and those of the Popular Front. The break can only be seen to be final with the arrival of socialism as a major component in the demands of radical movements.

As shown in Chapter 4, the ‘red’ Whig history of the Popular Front suffered many of the same progressive failings as the traditional variety. Democracy formed a key pillar of both ideologies, though in both cases this support was qualified and problematic. Many old aristocratic and wealthy Whigs felt that the English democratic tradition did not apply to the lower rungs of society. To them, the Great Reform Act of 1832 had achieved a serviceable settlement by abolishing ‘rotten boroughs’ and breaking the hold of big landowners over politics. Though operating in a considerably more democratic era, the Popular Front had a similarly rocky relationship with democracy. This largely stemmed from the dominance of the Communist Party, for many of whom British parliamentary democracy was simply a necessary compromise for the furtherment of their cause. The engagement of the Popular Front with democracy, particularly its non-Communist elements, was certainly more genuine than that of the old Whigs. However, the suspicious motives of the CPGB and their loyalty to Moscow casts serious doubt on the democratic credentials of the movement. Even the most seemingly democratic of performances, the great marches and ‘pageants of history’, were in reality heavily stage managed by loyal party figures, a fact demonstrated by their virtual identical composition at sites across the nation.

The most flagrant anti-democratic element of both traditional and ‘red’ Whig history can be seen in their barely veiled Anglocentrism. By the time of the earliest Whig historical writings, the British state had not only successfully integrated Wales and Scotland but held a fragile administrative control over Ireland as well. Despite this, the teleological evolution of British democracy contained within the Whig reading of history was one that drew its power almost entirely from England. In this interpretation, it is perhaps only by virtue of being absorbed into the English state that the provincial regions of the British Isles gained the same level of democratic development. Very little agency is given to the other national cultures, serving only as an example of archaic resistance to the progress of English liberalism. The linguistic conflation of ‘England’ with ‘Britain’ throughout the Whig period and up until at least the mid twentieth century demonstrates the way in which many historians viewed the Whig constitutional settlement. As highlighted by John M. MacKenzie in his essay on ‘Four Nations’ history, this conception of the United Kingdom as either a harmonious whole or one of English imperial domination robs the Scots, Irish and Welsh peoples of their agency and complicity in the British Empire. MacKenzie argues that the relationship between the four

nations of the British Isles was one of mutual cultural exchange and shifting integration and disintegration, rather than an English hegemony that erased the cultural independence of the 'Celtic' nations. In many ways, the English saw themselves as cognate with 'Britain', an attitude that diminished and subsumed 'English' cultural iconography into their role as leaders of 'Britain' and the British Empire. However, as MacKenzie demonstrates, the 'Celtic' nations forged colonial identities and networks of their own, within the framework of the 'English' British Empire.²¹⁶

In the case of the 'Popular Front history', this Anglocentric understanding of the histories of Scotland and Wales is self-evident. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the only attempts at Popular Front mythmaking in Wales and Scotland came in the form of a handful of Anglocentric pageants, more or less exact copies of their English counterparts. This does not demonstrate a lack of desire from the leaders of the movement to engage with these areas, as South Wales was the third venue for such historical pageants after London and Sheffield. However, the paucity of Welsh historical representation at the 1937 event seems to demonstrate a genuine lack of understanding amongst the organisers of any unique Welsh national character and history beyond its subjugation to England. To the Welsh workers, notably more amenable to the nationalist turn than their Scottish counterparts, the imposition of English nation heroes into 'South Wales in the March of History' seems to have been cause for only more distrust of the Anglocentric left.²¹⁷

This approach would have proved more palatable during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the Anglicization of subject populations was considered a political and moral good. However, given the support for Scottish home rule by the Communist Party discussed in Chapter 4, this oversimplified version of history seems ill-suited to the context of modern Britain. Fortunately for the Popular Front historians, the outbreak of the Second World War resulted in a political culture that centred on patriotic citizenship and 'equality of sacrifice'. Though this official narrative was contrasted by antagonisms between classes, genders and the four nations, the vision of an idyllic past to which Britain should live up to allowed the experience of war to become a driver of change. The reality of British inequality contrasted with the vision presented by the 'Popular Front history' and state propaganda, highlighting the need for sweeping social reform.²¹⁸ This enduring utility of the Popular Front narrative

²¹⁶ John M. Mackenzie, 'Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English Worlds? A Four-Nation Approach to the History of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 6:5, (2008), pp. 1244-1263

²¹⁷ Howe, pp. 68-81

²¹⁸ Rose, pp. 1-28

can be seen in much of the work of the CPHG in the 1940s and 1950s, which we have suggested may constitute only a minor variation on the Popular Front formula. In the foreword to his seminal 1960 work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson explained that his title *did* refer only to the English (and Welsh) working class, and that the process of industrialisation in Scotland would essentially be ignored. It would take until the late 1970s for the writings of the New Left to adopt a more critical view of 'British' history as a whole. In 1977, Tom Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain* finally broached the question on the left,²¹⁹ after P.G.A. Pocock's 'plea for a new subject' had set the movement in train in 1975.²²⁰ It was only at this point at which the left began in earnest to move away from the legacy of the 'Red' Whig Anglocentrism contained within the 'Popular Front history'.

It seems that, despite the ideological differences between the two, the Popular Front history bore more resemblance to the Whigs than it did than of the New Left. The same deterministic teleology is present in both of the former, and they are both guilty of simplifying historical fact to better suit their political ends. Both Butterfield and Bentley would agree that this puts the Popular Front history, methodologically, firmly within the broad classification of 'Whig history'. It could then be argued that the Popular Front history was in fact a very late variation on the long Whig tradition. However, given the lack of Whig political conviction amongst its authors, the movement seems to defy this categorisation. At the same time, the work lacks the scientific approach of the Marxist school that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than a complex study of class relations of the course of history, the Popular Front history more closely resembles a confused grab-bag of English nationalism and radical democratic history. The efforts to marry the two together are admirable, particularly in the more well-rounded works. As an exercise in propaganda, the logical inconsistencies of the Popular Front formula can and almost certainly were overlooked. However, as an effort at serious academic history, the legacy of the movement is largely in its inspiration of others.

The evidence given in this analysis suggests that the Popular Front history could instead be seen as a transitional prehistory to the Marxist school, stretching from 1936 until the end of the war. Indeed, as Perry Anderson argued in 1965, this transition could be considered to have extended well into the 1950s and encompass the work of the CPHG, which Anderson deemed 'too English' in its outlook.²²¹ Only the higher level of professional employment and standards of the post-war CPHG may work to distance it from cruder, more haphazard pre-

²¹⁹ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*, (London: New Left Books, 1977)

²²⁰ P. G. A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 47, (1975), pp. 601-21

²²¹ Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', pp. 3-18

war efforts. The efforts of the Popular Front historians ultimately better represent the tradition of public history than any attempt to create a lasting academic school. The work conducted in this period was performed largely by enthusiastic amateurs and aimed to educate and mobilise the masses to the cause of radical socialism. As much of the working was undertaken by card-carrying Communists, the aim of cultural infiltration also cannot be forgotten. With the threat of domestic fascism largely subsided, Dimitrov's own stated aim for the 'United Front' in Britain was to help socialism 'put down seeds' in the national consciousness. Even though the movement developed greatly from 1936 onwards to include many with a genuine interest in the prosperity of Britain, its ultimate goals should perhaps be viewed with a healthy scepticism.

To build a greater picture of the place of the 'Popular Front history' established here, it may have proved useful to compare the works surveyed here with those of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Whigs. A detailed comparison of the treatment of individual episodes by various authors may elucidate a greater similarity, or further differences spawned of ideological divergence. Similarly, it may be of use to compare the historical understanding of the Popular Front writers to other popular works written in the late 1930s, such as Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.²²² It is sadly beyond the scope of this work to delve into these comparisons at any depth. However, I hope that my research and analysis has succeeded in establishing the 'Popular Front history' as a unique and influential moment in the historiography of Britain. I believe that there are now sufficient grounds for further research to expand on the cultural pathways of the movement and its main contributors.

²²² Though published in four parts from 1956 to 1958, much of the writing was done in 1937 and 1938, including sections on the Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods. (Jenkins, pp. 505-529)

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