

Radicalism for dummies?

A Radical History of Britain

Edward Vallance

London: Abacus, 2010.

639 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographies, index.

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This is certainly a radical history of Britain, certainly for one that proclaims itself to be a study of the 'Visionaries, rebels and revolutionaries — the men and women who fought for our freedom' (OK, I know that's not the book's subtitle and is only on the front cover, but presumably Vallance gave it the nod). Yes, radical, because there is nary a mention of the last armed revolutionary uprising in this country. I'm referring to that in the Kentish countryside in 1838 when the charismatic Cornishman John Tom, who styled himself 'Sir William Courtenay', led a band of farm labourers into battle with soldiers of the 45th Regiment of Foot that left many dead and wounded. You'd think that would get in, wouldn't you? Somehow it doesn't. I'm not an historian but I wonder what else Vallance has left out?

One of the problems with this study is that the author keeps to a narrow furrow that has been ploughed oft times before. So, all the major subjects are covered – the Magna Carta, the Peasants' Revolt, the Civil War, the Levellers, Tom Paine, Chartism and so on; but one keeps wishing he had been a little more curious and cast his net wider. There is a comprehensive history of British radicalism waiting to be written and it would require someone of the stature of an E. P. Thompson to do it, and there aren't many of those on the ground.

Coming back to Sir William Courtenay. Vallance devotes a chapter to the Luddites but the reader will look in vain for its agrarian counterpart, Captain Swing (they'll have to go elsewhere.) Why one and not the other? Have I missed something in the text that gives the reason for this exclusion?

Vallance writes in an introductory chapter that 'the book focuses predominantly on those events, groups and individuals that have loomed largest in this narrative of British dissent.' Loomed largest to whom, where? And what narrative? Whose narrative? Is he implying that there is a narrative that stands alone and beyond any interpretation of history? Or by 'this narrative' does he mean the narrative of the book now before us in which case

what he is saying is that he concentrates on what he is concentrating on? This is sloppy, imprecise writing not befitting an historian.

Lest the reader think the Courtenay business was some provincial affair without consequence it should be noted that the national press carried full accounts. Further, there were many heated exchanges in the House of Commons regarding the uprising including calls for the resignation of the Home Secretary in Lord Melbourne's Whig administration, Lord John Russell; and, indeed, Select Committees examined the matter and reports were published and recommendations implemented. It was front page stuff nationally, and the memory of him is still strong in Kent. However, this isn't the first time Courtenay has fallen through the interstices of history.

Vallance has produced a competent study and a readable one at that but ultimately on the spectrum of historical writing it leans in the direction of Antonia Fraser and Arthur Bryant rather than E. P. Thompson and Christopher Hill (I'm not defining this spectrum on political grounds, but rather their accomplishments as historians).

A serious failing of the book is his 'tweezers' approach to the subject, his failure really to engage in what he is writing about. One of the reasons for this may be that the idea for the book wasn't his own, but was suggested by an editor at the publishers. And, further, Vallance comments in the acknowledgements that 'This book has also taken me a very long way out of my historical comfort zone, seventeenth-century Britain.' Why go there then? Could one imagine, say, E. P. Thompson, working like that?

'Eddie, babe. A history of the English working class? There's a niche in the market for it and big bucks are beckoning!'

'I'm writing already!'