**On the Edge of History: *A Field in England***

Henry K. Miller

In *The World Turned Upside Down*, his history of the radical movements brought into being by the English Civil War (or Revolution), Christopher Hill observed that ‘each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors’.[[1]](#endnote-1) The sympathies of Hill’s generation lay with the pamphleteers and agitators whose democratic and communist ideas have come to be seen as the fountainhead of the left-wing political tradition; today it is quite probable that the Levellers, the most consequential of these movements, have eclipsed Charles I’s principal opponents in the popular imagination. Announcing a different set of interests a generation later, Amy Jump’s screenplay for Ben Wheatley’s *A Field in England* (2013) plays on Hill’s title, a Biblical phrase much in the air in the 1640s, with the declaration that ‘The world is turned upside down – and so is its pockets.’

The film’s soldier protagonists, fresh from battle, are more concerned with hunger than with liberty, and are perhaps conceived in the light of Hill’s critics, who sought to play down the popularity of Leveller ideas and emphasize the army’s more quotidian grouses. And yet while *A Field in England* is in this sense materialist, it is at one and the same time magical, taking as given the reality of visions, whether divinely or otherwise inspired – and at points taking on the form of a vision itself. Events which ‘will stagger the Monarch and Kingdom’ impend, yet the soldiers are preoccupied with constipation and venereal disease. Set in a single, albeit mutable, location, the film’s visual range encompasses ‘the particulars of the common weevil’ and the coming of an ‘ill planet’, seen in the sky. Its generational sympathies are with what has been called ‘Old Weird Britain’ or ‘the English eerie’, a cross-media phenomenon with roots in rave culture and environmentalism, described by one of its exponents as ‘a magnificent mash-up of hauntology, geological sentience and political activism’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The quintessential Civil War film of Hill’s generation, Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo’s *Winstanley* (1975), concerned with the True Levellers or ‘Diggers’, and praised by Hill for its ‘imaginative reconstruction of the world in which the Diggers lived’, begins in the midst of battle, filmed in something akin to Eisenstein’s monumental style, and using Prokofiev’s score for Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). *A Field in England*, by contrast, begins on the fringe of the battlefield, with a series of highly subjective sounds and images, some of them hallucinatory.[[3]](#endnote-3) Not only does the main action of the film take place away from the fray – early on the soldiers, thrown together seemingly by providence, agree that ‘there are no sides here’ – but within a mushroom circle, a feature of European folklore, in which the laws of time and space do not apply. Characters die and are resurrected, can materialize or be ‘conjured’ out of nothing; its central conflict is between two servants of an astrologer and alchemist.

Even more than Wheatley’s breakthrough feature *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* keeps exposition to a minimum, but the essence of the plot is as follows: Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith), sent by his unseen master, an eminent Parliamentarian of Norwich, to apprehend O’Neil (Michael Smiley), an Irishman and Royalist (or opportunist) who has abandoned the same master and stolen astrological papers from his library, enlists a group of soldiers of both sides to help. Having retrieved O’Neil from the mushroom circle by supernatural means, Whitehead is in turn, and by similar means, forced by O’Neil to discover hidden treasure in the field. As the soldiers dig for it, Whitehead, revivified by psychotropic mushrooms, turns on O’Neil, summoning up the same mysterious forces that O’Neil used against him. During the struggle, partly rendered as a hallucination containing a number of doubled or palindromic images, O’Neil declares that they are brothers; and after triumphing, Whitehead dons O’Neil’s hat and cape, and assumes his manner.

What is the meaning of this strange reconciliation, and of the articulation of Civil War themes which leads to it?

It is surprising to the modern sensibility that a Parliament man from Puritan East Anglia, leader of a ‘pious regiment’, should be concerned with astrology; but as Hill put it, while ‘in the long run protestantism worked against all magic, black or white’, the process had only begun in the 1640s, and even Cromwell sought astrological advice – as did the Leveller leader Richard Overton.[[4]](#endnote-4) Of the latter case, the historian Keith Thomas wrote that ‘There is no stronger testimony to the appeal of astrological advice in the mid seventeenth century than this request by one of the most sophisticated and “rationalist” of contemporary political thinkers.’[[5]](#endnote-5) For some prophets Charles’s downfall represented nothing less than the fall of Antichrist. Kept out of *Winstanley* and generally repressed when the Levellers are remembered as ancestors of the modern left – though it is discussed in detail by Hill and Thomas – the strain of Christian millenarianism which ran through the radical movements of the Civil War is brought to the fore in *A Field in England*. Whitehead’s master is a compiler (with Whitehead’s help) of astrological almanacs, published in ‘an unprecedented torrent’ in the war years, as Thomas tells us, and his prophecy of events which will ‘stagger the Monarch and Kingdom’ identify him as a fictional proxy for the Parliamentarian astrologer William Lilly, whose almanacs sold tens of thousands of copies in the late 1640s.[[6]](#endnote-6) Those exact words are in fact his, first written in 1645, the year of the Royalists’ military defeat at Naseby, and repeated in vindication in his 1647 book *Christian Astrology*.

Though the date is never given, the publicity for the film makes clear – and lines of dialogue to do with Cromwell’s movements confirm – that it is set in 1648, during the so-called Second Civil War, in which Charles, while held captive by Parliament and attempting to negotiate a settlement, was able to inspire Royalist uprisings in England and Wales, and to make a temporary alliance with the Scottish Presbyterians. It was his last throw of the dice, and after the risings had been put down and the Scots seen off by the New Model Army, the Army’s leadership purged Parliament of its opponents and, in January 1649, had the King tried and executed. Lilly, who picked winners, was by then publicly aligned with the Army, which championed the cause of ‘Independency’ – limited religious toleration – against the Presbyterian party in Parliament. Whitehead’s master’s prophecy of staggering events, and O’Neil’s claim that the country ‘is on the edge of something’, are both right when translated into secular and historical terms; but how the country was to fall had yet to be decided at the time of their (fictional) confrontation.

Conversely, the characters in Wheatley’s earlier films, especially *Kill List* and *Sightseers* (2012), all set in the England of the 2000s and 2010s – the England which fell the way it did, 350 years on – are all to a greater or lesser extent engaged in stamping out the vestiges of the ‘English eerie’ whose crisis *A Field in England* may be said to stage. One of the victims of the murderous couple in *Sightseers* is the author of *Walks Along the Ley Lines of Britain* – not, notably, a hippy or crank, but a conventional *Guardian*-reading (or -writing) type. (The shamanic campers with their yurt and drum circle are lucky to survive.) The pagan cult in *Kill List*, on the other hand, represents ‘Old Weird Britain’ at its most malign, while the film’s Witchfinders General, war veterans incongruously serenaded in a hotel restaurant with ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’, represent a no less violent and intolerant tendency in the national culture. There are even traces of the Old Weird Britain in *Down Terrace* (2009), with its soundtrack of folk songs, some of them based on seventeenth-century stories, and in the crime boss’s lament for the drugs scene of his youth – what had been a means of enchantment is now, alas, in the grip of profiteers like him.

There is also Michael Smiley – a charming and dangerous Irishman in three of the four films. In *Kill List* his character Gal and his brother-in-arms Jay (Neil Maskell) might be ‘Christian Soldiers’ to some, but in an earlier dinner party scene in which Northern Ireland comes up, a fundamental breach between the two is exposed, and Gal questions whether Catholics and Protestants are really of the same religion at all. Ireland was another question on which the country was ‘on the edge’ in 1648. The following year, after having Charles killed and the Levellers suppressed, the Army under Cromwell began its brutal suppression of the Irish rebellion – against the Scottish and English settlers, and theoretically in support of the King – which had begun in 1641. The affairs of Ireland (and Scotland) had been complexly bound up in the English Civil War – sometimes, as a result, considered altogether as the Wars of the Three Kingdoms – and O’Neil, who shares a name with the most prominent rebels of Ulster, in some ways embodies the fears which the Irish rebels provoked on the Parliament side. As C. V. Wedgwood wrote in her classic account, ‘the English and the Scots were much inclined to suspect the Irish of occult powers’, and after 1644 Irish Royalists were liable to be killed if captured.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The contest between Whitehead and O’Neil is not, however, overtly sectarian or national, but has to do with a distinct, though not unrelated theme: that of ‘mastery’. In an early scene, when Whitehead says that his ‘man’ Trower (Julian Barratt), overseeing his search for O’Neil, is dead, Jacob (Peter Ferdinando), the likely New Model Army soldier, proudly asserts that he is his ‘own man’. When Whitehead, in reply, mentions that he still has his master to serve, Jacob says ‘there’s always others, brother’, before launching into a rant against his social betters. Later, while being forced to dig by O’Neil, Jacob says ‘I am my own man’ over and over again, now in defiance of reality. Perhaps fortified by Jacob’s example, as well as the mushrooms, when Whitehead finally decides to challenge O’Neil, he declares: ‘I am my own master’, implying not only a breach with his master in Norwich, but also, more obliquely, the climactic ‘union’ with O’Neil, his ‘brother’.

According to Hill in his chapter on ‘Masterless Men’, the Civil War radicals tended to be drawn from outside the traditional social hierarchy – vagabonds, Londoners, Puritan townspeople, marginal rural ‘cottagers and squatters’, itinerant traders; but also from the New Model Army, ‘a body of masterless men on the move’, and ‘the most powerful, the most politically motivated, but also the shortest lived’ group of them all.[[8]](#endnote-8) Masterlessness naturally went together with the Puritans’ rejection of ecclesiastical authority; and this rejection was in turn easily translatable into an attack on the wider social and economic order. Though Hill himself slightly dissents from the view, the Puritans’ ‘object was to find a new master in themselves, a rigid self-control shaping a new personality’.[[9]](#endnote-9) A century or so after the Reformation had put vernacular Bibles into wide circulation, the Civil War had served to disseminate astrological texts, hitherto a specialist affair, among the multitude, with related implications for the established order. The Interregnum after 1649, wrote Thomas, ‘saw an influx into the astrological profession which closely resembled the storming of the pulpit by the tub-preachers’.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Thus Whitehead’s desire to keep secret his master’s documents goes against the spirit of the age, while O’Neil’s ‘liberation’ of the same, though inspired by no godly motive, goes with it. Whitehead has gifts which O’Neil lacks, but Whitehead lacks O’Neil’s worldliness. Their union is a fruitful one. By appropriating his master’s texts he – though in the last moments it is a changed ‘he’ – follows the Puritan logic of lay interpretation of Scripture; but he applies it to a body of study, astrology, which Puritanism would eventually drive out from serious consideration, not in every way for the best. In this respect *A Field in England* belongs to a long tradition in which the Civil War is seen as a moment of permanent schism in a way far transcending the immediate constitutional and religious questions over which the war was fought – as for example in T. S. Eliot’s (borrowed) notion of the ‘dissociation of sensibility’, after which thought was separated from feeling in English poetry. By attempting to reconcile its cluster of contradictions, what *A Field in England* shows at its conclusion is a fragment of an impossible alternative future, an England which fell another way, the passage which we did not take.

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Bio:

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Abstract:

A historically informed interpretation of Ben Wheatley’s *A Field in England* (2013). Whereas cinematic and other representations of the English Civil War, such as Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo’s *Winstanley* (1975), have tended to emphasize the role and contemporary political relevance of radical groups such as the Levellers, Wheatley’s film, based on a script by Amy Jump, introduces into the picture the millenarian currents of thought whose vital significance for these groups has tended to be played down. In this way it is shown to belong to the current cross-media interest in ‘the English eerie’, as well as providing a skeleton key to Wheatley’s earlier films, all of which relate to its central theme.

1. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Robert Macfarlane, ‘The Eeriness of the English Countryside’, *Guardian Review*, 11 April 2015, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Christopher Hill, ‘Notes and Comments’, *Past and Present*, 69 (1975), 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 372. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 341. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. C. V. Wedgwood, *The King’s War, 1641–1647* (London: Collins, 1958), 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 43; 85; 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 445. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)