



## 'How the Hobbits Saved the World'

A review of Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, The Bomb, and the Greening of Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

by Patrick Wright

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WHAT does a Hobbit have in common with a CND marcher on the road to Aldermaston in 1958, or, for that matter, with an early Luddite insurrectionist saved from the condescension of posterity by E. P. Thompson five years later?

Quite a lot, according to Meredith Veldman, an American academic who claims to have found the idea for her book while commuting to work on the elevated train in Chicago. After reading Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings*, she turned to Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, and had the strange feeling that she was actually reading the same story. So she set out to trace the 'deep structures' of a tradition of romantic protest that seems to have held these two apparently very contrary figures - a Franco-supporting fantasist and a Marxist historian - in common.

This might not be the most promising start, especially given the example of Martin Wiener, another long-distance American observer of the British scene, whose over-schematic account of the 'anti-industrial' effects of English culture became more grist to the mill of free-market philistinism in the eighties. Veldman, however, has resisted the temptation to generalise, and her book may even be all the better for the comparative weakness of its conclusion.

She picks up the thread in the late 18th century, with poets like Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, who condemned the utilitarianism of early industrial capitalism in the name of intuitive, holistic and romantic values - invoked largely from rural nature and the past. William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites were in the same line, as was Ruskin, whose Gothic Revival asserted wholeness and cultural values against the ruling principle of economic self-interest and laissez-faire. The Guild Socialists of the early 20th century also drew on mediaeval inspiration for their New Age. They too pitched Wonder against expertise, the light of creation against the darkness of the centralising state,



organic diversity and self-government against private monopoly and bureaucratic standardisation.

Veldman finds her next mediaevalising ‘pocket of resistance’ in the Oxford University of J R R Tolkien, who judged fantasy to be the highest form of art, and was prompted to write by his reading of William Morris. Tolkien also burrowed into lost archaic worlds, valuing ‘homely heroism’, and insisting that it is ‘the little people, the Hobbits, who save the world’. Not content with turning the free-born Englishman into a Hobbit, Tolkien once expressed the view that anyone who so much as uttered the word ‘State’ should be arrested. As for the metallic, tree-destroying, kingdom of Mordor, which seeks to drive enchantment out of Tolkien’s Shire, this is easily fitted into the anti-mechanistic tradition of romantic protest. So too are the Christian fantasies of Tolkien’s Oxford friend C S Lewis: in the Narnia books, but also in the earlier cosmic space trilogy which shows what folly it would be to try to harness Merlin, the old wizard of Arthurian legend, into the service of modern science.

Soon enough, Veldman’s Hobbits metamorphose into the ‘sensible men and women’ who would, as J B Priestley predicted in an inaugural *New Statesman* article, be dispossessed of their democracy once Britain had the atomic bomb. Indeed, by the time we next see them, they have apparently joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The annual Aldermaston march was a prefigurative flowering of ‘the romantic quest for reintegration’, and the inspiring ideal of Britain without the bomb was a world of ‘cohesion and community’ – just like Narnia or the Shire. Veldman suggests that anti-Americanism was part and parcel of this defence of native romantic tradition. And, once again, patriotic resistance was mixed with old imperial assumption. As Iris Murdoch declaimed for CND, ‘it is our duty in Great Britain to take the initiative’. Or again: ‘we are the people in the world who combine to the highest degree the ability to reflect and the ability to act impressively and effectively’.

Veldman is sometimes inclined to stretch superficial likenesses too far. Her analysis, which is widely researched and makes good use of interviews with participants, can be over-reliant on people standing ‘squarely’ in the romantic tradition. But she has also unearthed revealing connections to support her argument for a continuous tradition of romantic and predominantly middle-class resistance. She’s found a letter in which Tolkien describes the atom bomb as Mordor’s work, and another that E P Thompson wrote to the *Guardian*, denouncing Reagan and Thatcher as ‘self-appointed Gandalfs’ bent on destroying the world.



Small is beautiful, as we know from Fritz Schumacher, but romantic protest is actually a various thing that seems to be both everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Guild Socialism drew adherents from right as well as left, as did the early Soil Association in the forties. But the differences were surely even more pronounced in the late sixties and early seventies, when conservationism was metamorphosed into ‘eco-activism’ by campaigns like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, and the Other Economic Summit, which were concerned to bring a global analysis into play.

Here too, the green cause mixed Christians with Buddhists and atheists; New Leftists with composting monarchists and anti-urban misanthropes; crop circle hoaxers with animal-rights activists and a few flying-saucer conspiracy theorists too.

The Ecology Party was launched as ‘People’ from Coventry by two solicitors, an estate agent and his assistant, and then further transformed into the chaotic, rolling implosion that we know as the Green Party today. Edward Goldsmith, meanwhile, was at the *Ecologist* magazine, where his pursuit of the ‘hunter-gatherer ideal’ led to the influential *A Blueprint for Survival* in 1972.

Like others who have started out on the far side of an enlightenment rejected as rationalistic, mechanistic and wholly unsustainable, members of this doomsaying circle were capable of drawing bizarre and sometimes frankly lamentable conclusions. They foresaw a significant role for the police and the courts in supervising the cataclysmic changes that were surely to come, described racial tolerance as a sign of cultural decline, and even got round to commending Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge as pioneers of decentralised rural society.

So it will not just be readers who remember the pixified eccentricities of the Tolkien cult in the early seventies, when stoned Hobbits with runesticks were to be encountered on many British street corners, who will want to concentrate on the differences rather than the similarities between these diligently gathered threads of romantic protest. Veldman might have made more of them in her conclusion, but it is already to her credit that she has avoided easy talk about ‘the movement’ and kept these differences well in view.

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