

— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



FOLK AND THE ENGLISH  
RADICAL TRADITION

Brian Denny

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## FOLK AND THE ENGLISH RADICAL TRADITION

The English radical cultural tradition exists all around us, if we only took the time to see it, hear it and feel it. Many believe that folk and its history consists of maypoles, Morris dancing and other genteel pastimes. But what some don't realise is that English folk has a radical and even dangerous past.

In the spirit of doing away with stereotypes, Folktree Recordings recently launched the song-collecting project *Working River: songs and music of the Thames*. With just an idea and a few songs, we set out to gather as many musical forms performed by and about working people who lived, worked and died on the Thames. To our surprise, it had never been done.

Although this most famous river had always been dominated by the rich, being long known as the 'royal river', the writer Peter Ackroyd's book *Thames: Sacred River*<sup>1</sup> gave us a glimpse of another history. In it, he suggests that Handel's *Water Music*, perhaps the most famous piece of music associated with the Thames, was first performed in July 1717 on vessels carrying King George I to drown out the 'vulgar abuse of the Thames watermen and their egalitarian sentiments hallowed by tradition on the river'.

While identity politics in all its guises has become an obsession within the contemporary Left, there is one identity that has been relentlessly derided, devalued and ignored - the cultural identity of the English.

*A Handbook of Freedom's exploration of the songs, words and poems of the English radical tradition would prove controversial, and was met with some hostility from the start.*

However, there is one man whose personal struggle clearly demonstrates that English history is strewn with revolutionary cultural potential. Born in Essex into a conservative family in 1898, the radical intellectual John Edgell Rickword would become many things - trench poet, bohemian, modernist, pioneering critic, satirist, publisher and historian. He is the very embodiment of the English radical literary tradition, and was even cancelled from history for his troubles and beliefs.

Rickword was barely a teenager when he gained his first editorial role putting together an unofficial school magazine called *The Idler* (of which, unfortunately, no copies survive). His first poem protested the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland and

was based on Charles Swinburne's radical poetic call for clemency for the Fenians condemned to death in Manchester in 1867.

As a young adult, he found himself fighting in the Great War, having joined the Artists' Rifles, and was awarded a Military Cross as an officer. It was here that he gained a profound and life-long affinity with the working class, preferring to mix with the lower ranks as he found them far more articulate and interesting.

'Speech, with the illiterate, is their highest form of expression, and they put their best into it, till it rings like good money thrown down. Those who live more remotely, the cultured, are apt to regard it as a necessary wearisome system of exchange', he would later comment. This was the source of Rickword's passion for the 'Good Old Cause', a term coined during the English Revolution which laid the basis for democratic gains won over years of struggle and defeat.

In 1939, Rickword and his friend Jack Lindsay published a profoundly influential lexicon of struggle called *A Handbook of Freedom: a record of English democracy through twelve centuries*.<sup>ii</sup> It was hugely influential to a new generation of anti-fascist activists and historians such as Christopher Hill, Raphael Samuel and Eric Hobsbawm. EP Thompson, like many of his

contemporaries, carried a copy of the book throughout his service in the Second World War. But, despite its success, *A Handbook of Freedom's* exploration of the songs, words and poems of the English radical tradition would prove controversial, and was met with some hostility from the start.

Rickword begins his handbook by looking at the resistance to feudal oppression, quoting the tenth-century Abbot Aelfric's work, *Serf Labour is Irksome*. The fight for freedom of belief and political democracy up to the English Civil War are recounted through the words of the republican John Milton, who called on the people to 'awake, arise or be forever fall'n', as well as references to the leveller John Lilburne's 'freeborn rights' and the digger Gerrard Winstanley's 'common treasury'.

*He set about recovering a different narrative, based on the rich democratic traditions created by English radicals.*

With powerful quotations, Rickword deployed Thomas Paine, William Blake and William Wordsworth to introduce the democratic struggles that followed. He engaged the poetry of Chartist leader Ernest Jones and William Cobbett's polemics to mark the rise of working-class resistance. The battles



for peace are explored with poets of the First World War, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. So why has this fascinating and explosive publication been out of print and forgotten for decades?

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## Old divides

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When many cultural figures were choosing sides following the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany in 1933, Rickword, along with many other intellectuals, joined the Communist Party (CP). At a stroke he had effectively cut himself adrift from the literary world he had been a such rebellious part of since he emerged as a trench poet in 1918. As he said himself, ‘many of my friends had become fascists’.

Rickword foresaw the growing threat of fascism and the need to create the broadest possible anti-fascist alliance. But at the same time, he wanted to challenge the establishment view of British imperialism itself. So he set about recovering a different narrative based on the rich democratic traditions created by English radicals down the centuries, a political and cultural legacy that jingoistic ruling elites would rather working people did not learn or know about.

In the words of Thompson, Rickword was the ‘architect of the conjunction between an internationalist socialist theory and a vigorous national historical practice’.<sup>iii</sup> Together with figures like Tom Wintringham, AL Morton, Douglas Garman and Randall Swingler, he set about developing a more flexible Marxist approach invoking figures such as John Donne, Blake, Shelley and Byron. But this broad approach would put him on a collision course with party hacks who distrusted intellectuals at the best of times.

Chief CP ideologue R Palme Dutt was profoundly hostile to Rickword’s ilk, demanding that they ‘forget that he was an intellectual and remember only that he is a communist’. Dutt’s hectoring and didactic tone could not be further from Rickword’s urbane and cultured world view. Here was a man who had been the first to champion the French symbolist poets like Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, and had even written the still-admired first biography of Arthur Rimbaud in 1924. Rickword had also edited, contributed and published Nancy Cunard’s groundbreaking anti-racist work *Negro Anthology* when nobody else would touch it. It was obvious that he did not share the doctrinaire certainties of many communists at the time. He later observed: ‘One does not think that a sympathy with Marxism makes anyone an oracle.’

There must have been comedy value in watching a party hack like Dutt listening with quiet rage to Rickword's matter-of-fact explanation of his beliefs as he set out: 'I am a Marxist in the sense that I try to relate public happenings to the tissue of cause and effect which he divined in the interplay of material and economic forces.' Like a scene from *Dad's Army*, Rickword played the demure and affable Sergeant Wilson lecturing the bombastic yet envious Dutt as Captain Mainwaring. (Except, of course, Dutt had a far more upper-class background than Rickword.)

Rickword rejected the CP's longstanding sectarian suspicion of English literature and championed it as part of forming an alliance with the working class against the barbarism of Nazism and British imperialism. He called on the people to 'use our poems against the infectious influence of the warmakers'.

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## **A history of revolt**

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One of Rickword's greatest obstacles to recovering these radical traditions was the fact that you had to go back to the seventeenth century for successful revolutionary examples. Countries like France, the

United States and in particular the Soviet Union, in contrast, had clear and more recent radical traditions. Having said that, England has some of the oldest working-class movements in the world - some which Marx had often written about.

As the anti-fascist Popular Front developed and the fascist insurrection in Spain in 1936 led to civil war, it was clear that a new boarder cultural approach was required to win maximum unity against Nazism. It was in this spirit that Rickword became editor of *Left Review*, campaigning against the British establishment's refusal to help the republican government in Madrid with the policy of 'non-intervention', supported by the Labour Party. It was here that he published his last and possibly most successful political poem, 'To the Wife of any Non-Interventionist Statesman', which has been described as the poetic equivalent of Picasso's anti-fascist masterpiece, Guernica.

In his work at the *Left Review*, Rickword continued to explore the English radical tradition, applying it to the modern world by employing the observations of Georgian satirist Jonathan Swift on the burgeoning British empire:

*'A crew of pirates are driven by a storm they know not  
wither; at length a boy discovers land from the top-mast; they  
go on shore to rob and plunder; they see a harmless people, are*

*entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name, they take formal possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten plank or a stone for a memorial, they murder two or three dozen of the natives, bring away a couple more for a sample, return home, and get their pardon. Here commences a new dominion acquired with the title by divine right.<sup>3v</sup>*

Despite all this political and literary activity including visiting war-torn Spain and inviting international writers to contribute including Pablo Neruda and Federico Garcia Lorca, it would be a very dispiriting period for Rickword. He spent a lot of time writing obituaries for many of his fellow poets and friends who were dying in Spain including Lorca, John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell and Ralph Fox. Moreover, the Moscow show trials were casting a shadow over this new-found anti-fascist unity. Rickword refused to print the party line in support of the trials, as he saw it as divisive and unproductive.

*What bound these voices over the centuries was a profound disdain for privilege and power, and a willingness to express radical ideas.*

As a result, by 1938 he was no longer editor of the *Left Review*. But his enthusiasm for the English radical tradition only intensified along with his friend Lindsay, who had published a popular essay that sold over

80,000 copies on revolutionary English movements. It closed with the provocative words: 'Communism is English.'<sup>v</sup> The pair set about gathering songs, poetry, first-hand accounts and other sources through English history for what would become *A Handbook of Freedom*, including the extraordinary anonymous dream-state poem from 1630:

*The Poore Man Payes for All  
Me thought I saw how wealthy men  
Did grind the poor men's faces  
And greedily did prey on them  
Not pitying their cases  
They make them toil and labour sore  
For wages far too small  
While the rich men in the taverns roar  
And the poore man payes for all*<sup>vi</sup>

This verse articulates all the seething discontent within early seventeenth-century English society. It directly spoke out against grinding poverty, feudal oppression and greedy lawyers. Much of it was based on a rudimentary understanding of class - of us and them, the rich and the poor. Yet these cultural movements had a long and rich tradition. Nearly 300 years earlier, during the great rebellion of 1381, the revolutionary Essex preacher John Ball declared: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'

What bound these voices over the centuries was a profound disdain for privilege and power, and a willingness to express radical ideas which could have easily cost the authors their lives.

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## Twentieth-century cancel culture

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The *Handbook*, along with Left Book Club publications, had a huge influence during the Second World War on the Left and the wider reading public. In fact, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), set up to improve morale among the armed forces by organising barrack-room debates, was soon introducing subjects like history and politics heavily influenced by the same writers. Communists like Lindsay, the writer Montagu Slater and folklorist AL Lloyd all wrote for ABCA, producing pamphlets with socialist and working-class content. (ABCA was even blamed by many establishment figures for Labour's landslide election victory of 1945.)

However, it was Rickword's continuing focus on English liberty and democratic patriotism that would put him once more at odds with the party. In 1944, he was invited to be editor of a new CP-backed magazine called *Our Time*. He repeated his approach of drawing in a broad array of writers, avoiding the doctrinaire

and openly promoting pluralist thought where ideas were challenged and contested in open debate.

*It was this powerful mixture of national culture and class consciousness that would put him at odds with the old communist left.*

Yet, as Thompson later wrote, it was exactly for this that Rickword was effectively cancelled once more and removed as editor at an extraordinary inquisition in 1947. Thompson would know, he was in attendance at what he described as a ‘disgraceful’ meeting that denounced Rickword and his friend Swingler for various crimes and deviations, which led to their enforced resignations.

The cultural awakening that had taken place over the previous 10 years was coming to an end with the coming of the Cold War, and the CP had once more returned to a siege mentality in support of the Soviet Union, right or wrong. Rickword sat silently throughout this mini show-trial and quietly left London to open an antiquarian book shop in Kent. He never held this betrayal against his former comrades - a measure of the man. As Thompson remarked, ‘a decade of aggressive cultural vitality on the Left came to an end’ with that meeting.



Despite his internal exile, Rickword continued to publish his research into radical figures - particularly from the Regency period, such as free-speech campaigner and pamphleteer William Hone. Hone was an extraordinary man, who stood trial three times on charges of blasphemy and, representing himself despite ill health, was acquitted.

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## **Patriots and democrats**

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Rickword's cultural influence also continued amid the burgeoning folk-music scene as folklorists such as Roy Palmer, Lloyd, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger championed traditional working-class culture from sea shanties to work songs, particularly from the industrial heartlands as folk clubs sprang up across the country throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

This mass involvement of workers in their own cultural output was always the aim for Rickword. He said: 'The real triumph was drawing into the cultural ambit of a significant number of men and women who were barricaded out from participation in what was regarded as a middle-class preserve.' It was this powerful mixture of national culture and class consciousness that would put him at odds with the old communist left, as well as new-left movements that

were emerging which misused terms such as 'internationalism' to marginalise and dismiss English cultural imperatives as 'nationalistic' and therefore 'bad'.

Ultimately, Rickword was singled out for the matter of his 'Englishness'. As Thompson further explained: 'It is exactly this emphasis upon national cultural experience which a contemporary generation of Marxist intellectuals in England (but not in Scotland or Wales) most distrust and deride in their forerunners.'

*We must ask ourselves, are we spectators or active participants in democracy?*

What is the legacy of Edgell Rickword? He shocked the literary world for his conversion to Marxism and earned the ire of the Left for championing English radicals over and above any short-term political aims. But this did not prevent English cultural traditions from being demonised without parallel. In the United States, in contrast, traditional culture is lionised, with communists like the folk singer Woody Guthrie becoming immortalised in the US Library of Congress. The British Left has contributed to the demonisation of the English and, in doing so, has retreated ever further from English and British

political and cultural life. This was clearly revealed in the almost total absence of left voices in the 2016 Brexit vote (with some very honourable exceptions).

*Every nation has its stories of the rich and poor, of revolution and repression. Rickword teaches us that it is laying around waiting to be discovered, enjoyed or - heaven forbid - even weaponised in class struggle.*

And yet, the rebellious nature of the working classes had clearly not diminished, as they voted in their millions for change against complacent bureaucrats. They shocked a political elite, which had expected to remain in an increasingly anti-democratic European Union, which has been trampling clumsily over the rights of nations for decades. Britain has left the EU, and is once again an independent and sovereign nation (of sorts). The high idealism of neoliberal globalisation which argues that the nation state is out of date, curiously adopted by many in Left circles, has been rejected. Rickword would have been amused. National peoples have cultural agency in their own right, and can affect democratic change for the benefit of all. He stood squarely for the sovereign right of nations to self-determination.

We must ask ourselves, are we spectators or active participants in democracy? There is reason to believe that our cultural battleground will continue to be fought out in similarly unpredictable ways. Who knows, it is not beyond the realms of fantasy that William Blake's epic poem Jerusalem, with music by Elgar, could become the rightful English national anthem. Now that would be a popular move. But if the Left continues to regard English people and their culture as somehow inherently inferior and troublesome, like a disapproving aunt rolling her eye, its political irrelevance will be assured.

Every nation has its stories of the rich and poor, of revolution and repression. Rickword teaches us that it is laying around waiting to be discovered, enjoyed or - heaven forbid - even weaponised in class struggle. In *A Handbook of Freedom*, he writes:

*There is no short cut to an absolute freedom, but with the democratic rights we have won we can press forward the limits of our freedom in ways which will benefit all the people in their daily lives. Democracy ensures us the right to promote change, and those who sneer at its evident limitations as we have it today, are repudiating the wisdom gathered from the harsh but inspiring experience of twelve centuries.*<sup>vii</sup>

Rickword died in 1982, and at his funeral his friends read out his favourite poem by Wordsworth, which

had appeared on the opening page of *A Handbook of Freedom*. It gives us the essence of a great man:

*Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,  
Or on some secret island, Heaven knows where!  
But in the very world, which is the world,  
Of all of us, the place where in the end,  
We find our happiness or not at all.*

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