

Editorial: Radical Thinking in the Long Nineteenth Century

GEMMA HOLGATE

(EDITOR-IN-CHIEF)

THE TERM 'RADICAL' evades simple definition. What is understood to be radical is dependent on the particular social, political, and cultural context in which it occurs, and must necessarily change over time. What once was radical may continue to appear avant-garde decades, even centuries, later, while other once-transgressive ideas are absorbed to the extent that they lose their radical power altogether. The question of what it means to be 'radical' is particularly pertinent for nineteenth-century studies, as much of our contemporary understanding of the concept was developed within this period. Indeed, it was in the early nineteenth century that 'radical' as a label denoting 'a proponent of radical reform' became common, and this usage was sustained even when the capitalised 'Radical' – as a branch of parliamentary Liberalism – came to dominate in the second half of the century.¹ While specific party political affiliations kept 'Socialist' and 'Radical' mostly separate in the later Victorian period, the subsequent decline of Radical-Liberalism has made the term available in a broader sense; as Williams notes, it seems to 'offer a way of avoiding dogmatic and factional associations while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change'.² A definition popular in the leftist politics of the present, one that stresses the social function of the radical, is also attributed to Williams: 'To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing'.³ We might thus think of the radical as showing the way forward to

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 251. The term's usage is fluid across noun (as person), adjective, and noun (as concept), in that one can be termed *a* radical, described *as* radical, or seen as a proponent of *the* radical.

² Williams, *Keywords*, p. 252.

³ This definition of radicalism is widely quoted, and features on the front cover of a recent Verso edition of his essays: Raymond Williams, *Culture and Politics: Class, Writing, Socialism*, ed. by Philip O'Brien (London: Verso, 2022). There does not appear, however, to be a traceable source for this quote – though Williams did advocate for 'making hope practical, rather than despair convincing' in an essay on nuclear disarmament: Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*

transformative change, as opposed to the more gradual, conservative approach to reform often most associated (perhaps unjustifiably) with the nineteenth century.

This issue of *Romance, Revolution and Reform* defines radicalism in its broadest sense, welcoming contributions on any aspect of the long nineteenth century that represents a departure from tradition, convention, or mainstream norms, whether in a political, cultural, or social sense. It is often the case that the significance or potential of a radical idea only emerges fully in a later period, when a gradual shift in attitudes means that a greater number of people are prepared to receive it. Radical figures, works, and movements may also take on new relevance in later years, but scholars must resist rereading the radical in light of what we might wish it to be, and instead see historical radicalism in its full, idiosyncratic, and even contradictory, complexity. Neither must we judge the importance of radical thought purely on the extent that it has seen concrete implementation in the time since. Following the work of Leela Gandhi in *Affective Communities* (2006), we might recognise the value of those radical ideas characterised by what she terms 'immaturity': sparks of the radical, or the utopian, that do not fit easily as stages within overarching narratives of progress in the 'respectable' politics of mainstream socio-political arenas.⁴ In a similar vein, we might also seek out the radical in less obvious places, as in recent literary critical re-readings of canonical texts. Carolyn Lesjak's 2021 study, on the politics of 'the commons' long after enclosure, for example, seeks to reveal 'a radical politics at the heart of the work of the British nineteenth century's most canonical writers', challenging previous readings that suggest mere reinforcement of socio-economic norms.⁵

The radical has never been the sole preserve of the academy, however, as local communities seek to discover, conserve, and celebrate their own radical histories in the twenty-first century. Independent, not-for-profit organisations such as the Bristol Radical History Group and the Pendle Radicals connect people to the radical past in

(London: Verso, 1989), p. 209. Regardless, the popularity of the definition attests to its continued political resonance.

⁴ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anti-Colonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Princeton, NJ: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁵ Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 3. See also Isobel Armstrong, *Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), which undertakes a radical reading of six canonical novels via the subject of illegitimacy.

their area through walking tours and public talks.⁶ The lively radical sector of the publishing industry also suggests that there is significant public appetite for radical ideas and solutions to our modern crises, many of them influenced, if not inspired, by the radical traditions of the past.⁷ The articles in this issue of *RRR* also look to this tradition, exploring how five very different manifestations of nineteenth-century radical thinking – on issues as varied as gender, sexuality, literary form, and colonial and anti-capitalist resistance – can continue to hold relevance for us as twenty-first-century thinkers.

In his article on the poet and critic John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), Charles Gough discusses the articulation of Symonds's queer identity in his *Memoirs*, written between 1889 and 1893. Symonds's work has rightly seen increased attention in recent years and Gough builds on Amber K. Regis's 2016 Critical Edition of *The Memoirs*. The expression of homosexual love at this moment in history is, of course, radical in itself, but Gough's argument highlights the formal radicalism of Symonds's autobiographical composition, 'highly intertextual' and 'polyphonic' in its approach to self-expression. Gough's reading of the *Memoirs* draws attention to the vital role of poetry, as 'an essential component in the process of sexual self-formation in literature for queer male Victorian writers'. Symonds's text is radical, he argues, because it moves beyond 'the formal strictures of traditional life-writing'. In doing so, it indirectly constructs a queer identity which is 'collective' rather than 'singular', departing from contemporary understandings of homosexuality that pathologised the individual.

Poetry is also the subject of the next two articles in this issue, which perhaps reflects the suitability of poetic form as a vehicle for radical ideas. Rory Edgington's article explores the uses of medievalism in works of Romantic poetry by William Wordsworth and his lesser-studied contemporary Joseph Cottle. Edgington compares Cottle's *Alfred; An Epic Poem* to Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, arguing that the former combines Anglo-Saxon discourses from the radical protestant tradition of the

⁶ Bristol Radical History Group centres histories 'from below' and has organised over 250 talks since its founding in 2006. Further details can be found at www.brh.org.uk. Pendle Radicals is 'a research and creative project, exploring the stories of some of Pendle Hill's extraordinary change makers, radical thinkers and nonconformists'. It is supported by the social enterprise and charity, Mid Pennine Arts – further information can be found at www.pendleradicals.org.uk.

⁷ Radical publishers frequently reprint radical 'classics' as well as new texts, emphasising their continued relevance: see Verso's 'Revolutions' series, for example.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with 'the aesthetic and political sensibilities' of Romanticism, while the latter adapts 'the idiom of dissenting radicals in order to defend the established church'. What strikes the reader of Edgington's piece is the longevity and above all, the malleability, of the Anglo-Saxon narratives discussed – their political usefulness predicated on symbolic power rather than historical accuracy.

Continuing the discussion of medievalism, but moving our focus into the mid-nineteenth century, is Susan Mooney's article on William Morris's early poem, 'The Defence of Guenevere' (1858). Morris is certainly the best-known, and most straightforwardly radical figure to appear in this issue, both in terms of his commitment to socialist revolution and his leading role in the Arts and Crafts movement. Mooney's article returns to his early work, in a period before the full development of his radical politics, to discuss his approach to the highly moralised issue of female adultery. The piece contrasts Tennyson's contemporaneous portrayal of Guenevere, which upholds conventional Victorian attitudes towards women's illicit love, with what Mooney reads as Morris's radical defence of not only the queen, but of adultery itself. Undermining the social tenets that condemn 'fallen' women, she argues, Morris defends the realisation of 'natural' desire and unfettered passion.

If poetry has often served as an outlet for the expression of radical thought, others have favoured more direct, unequivocal forms of writing. In the fourth article of this issue, Helena Drysdale asks what a series of oppositional pamphlets might tell us about the conflict over British rule in the Ionian Islands in the mid-nineteenth century. The two individuals at the centre of this 'pamphlet war' were the Ionian radical agitator Dracato Papanicolas and the British Vice-Chancellor of the Ionian University, the travel writer George Bowen. The tensions articulated through these pamphlets in the early 1850s ultimately resulted in capitulation to radical nationalist demands, as Britain ceded the Islands to Greece in 1864. Through these pamphlets and their reception in the press, as well as archival materials such as private correspondence and diary entries, Drysdale suggests that the individuals involved in the Ionian case cannot be easily grouped into 'radical nationalist' and 'colonial oppressor'. Recognising their complex, overlapping personal motives and sometimes contradictory political beliefs, she argues, helps to nuance our understanding of this particular imperial dispute, in which ideological divisions 'were not so clear-cut'.

The final article in this issue also invites us to view a wider radical history through the lens of an individual's experience. Frank Jacob's piece discusses the autobiographical notes of Isidore Wisotsky (1895-1970), an Eastern European Jewish immigrant in New York involved in the anarchist movement at the end of the long nineteenth century. Against a prominent contemporary stereotype that characterised Jewish radicals as a 'foreign menace' importing political ideologies from abroad, Jacob argues that this radicalism was a product of the New York context itself. The exploitative conditions of the metropolitan labour market, as well as the poverty and overcrowding experienced in tenement housing – representations of the unmet expectations promised by the American Dream – led to the forms of anti-capitalist radicalisation exemplified through Wisotsky. Jacob's contribution to the study of the Jewish radical labour movement seems a fitting end to this issue, only too relevant in this period of resurgent labour struggle in Britain today.

Composing this issue's Call for Papers back in 2021, I felt that this theme would be particularly appropriate for *RRR*, as a journal that prides itself on its innovative, forward-thinking model. When Zack White and Katie Holdway founded the journal in 2018, their aim was to carve 'a new niche in a dynamic area of scholarly publishing', primarily by offering postgraduates an unusual level of editorial responsibility through its 'pioneering PGR-led board structure'.⁸ *RRR*'s support for postgraduate researchers operates on two levels: offering editorial and leadership experience and encouraging, developing and showcasing the work of postgraduate and early-career authors. What makes *RRR* different is that it refuses the limiting title of 'postgraduate journal', working instead with a broad community of students, academics, and independent scholars. We pride ourselves on providing supportive, constructive feedback at all stages of the process, whether an article is published or not, thus treating scholarship as a collaborative effort – something that we might consider a small radical gesture amid a neoliberal atmosphere of academic competition. Just as the articles in this issue suggest the suitability of certain forms as vehicles for radical ideas, we might also think of the journal as an apt platform for research on this theme.

In preparing this issue, my intention was to demonstrate the variety, creativity, and continued relevance of nineteenth-century radical thought. My hope is that you,

⁸ Zack White and Katie Holdway, 'Editorial: Region, Identity, and the Genesis of *Romance, Revolution and Reform*', *Romance, Revolution and Reform*, 1 (2019) 4-8 (p. 8).

the reader, will find something within its pages that resonates with your own research, or perhaps even your own mode of twenty-first-century radical thinking.