The Devil behind me and the blue sea all around

I can't remember exactly when I first began to look for Thomas Rainsborough. It was after the time when I realised that the game was up for the political activism which had occupied me for twenty years and after I left the Communist Party. But it was before my son was born because I called him Rainsborough as some kind of marker that the search was serious. Not his first given name, of course, that would have been too unfair but as an optional second name; William Rainsborough so that he can choose in later life just what he wants to be, an accountant or an actor. So it must have been in the mid-80s around 1985, perhaps in Bangladesh wandering around Dhanmondi and Gulshan, that I fixed on Rainsborough as my man. I am not sure whether it is the immediate failure of the ultimate success which attracts me.

Searching for someone dead for over three hundred and fifty years is as much a search for oneself as for anything real. There is nothing now that is real about Rainsborough except perhaps for one thing that is so astonishing as to create its own reality. But apart from that he is only a set of images which go in and out of focus according to the precision of the knowledge we can acquire about one person's actions in a far-off world. And about Rainsborough the knowledge is very scanty.

The first time we can see him clearly and for certain he is sailing up the Humber, captain of the naval ship *Lion*. He must be good at his job because the *Lion* is the most modern vessel in what, admittedly, is a run-down fleet. He has sailed from the Irish Sea round the top of Scotland pursuing Irish reinforcements for the Royalist army. He had captured a ship containing two hundred such men and had been ordered to proceed on to Hull. The threat of thousands of Catholic Irish troops landing in the west to rescue the threatened King always hung over Parliament. But right now he is sailing up the Humber on a more immediate mission, to landfall in Parliament's last hope in Yorkshire, Hull, the best port on a treacherous coast, England's largest arsenal, solid Protestant, fairly solid for Parliament and under siege. It is late-summer, 1643, and Parliament's rebellion is wobbling.

Time has served Rainsborough badly in many ways not least in his choice of towns. Born in Wapping, baptised in the original White Chapel, entering history in Hull and dying in Doncaster, he passed through much of the rough end of English urban development. There is not much now that he would recognise in Hull except for the great brick tower of St Margaret's, "*the largest parish church in England*" as the notice in its porch proudly announces. There would have been brick walls then all round the town with two great bastions on each side of the entrance to the River Hull flowing along the east walls where the harbour was sited. Fifty metres wide at most and almost lost now, the Hull would have been a difficult northward entry off the wide, east-flowing tidal estuary of the Humber. But on a coast with few natural harbours it was a safe anchorage.

Then, as now, Hull had fallen on hard times. Plague had raged through the town a few years before leaving it quarantined from the wool trade to Flanders which had created its wealth. Wool from Yorkshire uplands had come here for four hundred years to be shipped to Antwerp, Ghent, Ypres and the other Flemish cloth towns. Flemish bricks brought back as ballast in the wool ships

had given the place its characteristic style. Merchants ran the town and, closed off by the plague, they had followed trade elsewhere. Grass grew in the streets and masts thinned on the Hull quays. But it remained a big administrative centre, a Royal arsenal and, more to the point, the last Parliamentary stronghold in Yorkshire. Like most merchant centres, Hull was for Parliament in that it was suspicious of the religiously ambivalent King and his definitely Catholic wife, Henrietta. Some time before, Henrietta had gone off to the Low Countries with most of the crown jewels in the same *Lion* that Rainsborough now captained, sold them and had recently returned, slipping up the nearby Trent with a big bag of gold. The Hull burghers were certainly very dubious about all this and supported the Parliamentary cause insofar as it had one, particularly insofar as it was against matters such as ship taxes. The refusal by these burghers to allow the King entry to the city is one marker for the start of that confused war once called the English Civil War though now more fashionably referred to as the war of the three kingdoms. The merchants of Hull sided with Parliament. But probably not to the last drop of blood. At least not their blood. And now Hull is under siege by a serious army.

In the previous summer at the start of the war, another army had laid siege to Hull but in a somewhat desultory manner and was soon repulsed. This time the capture of Hull was a key part of a grand strategy aimed at capturing London in a three-pronged attack with one army coming down from the Royalist north. Fairfax, a Yorkshire Parliamentary general, had been chased around Yorkshire from town to town by Royalist cavalry until eventually he had retired to Hull, the last part of the county controlled by Parliament. Its capture was widely expected; the man who had been its governor during the previous siege appears to have engaged in discreet discussions on the terms for surrender. At least that is what was asserted before he was executed some time afterwards.

On 11 October however, a few weeks after Rainsborough's arrival, the Parliamentary forces sally forth, overrun the besiegers' lines and send them packing with much slaughter. Rainsborough, described as leading the charge with the rank of colonel, is captured but shortly afterwards exchanged for Royalist captives. The grand Royalist strategy is in tatters once London's trained bands see off the only prong to actually get close to the capital. By the end of the year Thomas is a full colonel leading an infantry regiment, largely officered by returning American settlers from the Protestant centres in Massachusetts, and laying siege to residual Royalist strongpoints in East Anglia, notably Croyland Abbey attacked using boats to cross the fens. In a dismal time for Parliament, he is proclaimed a hero for this relatively insignificant feat and becomes one of the army's best-known figures. He is elected to Parliament from the constituency of Lichfield, a place with which he has no known connection so we can assume he was parachuted in as a prominent outsider. In February, 1645, he is given one of the infantry regiments in the reformed New Model Army, no longer officered by Americans but by officers handpicked from three other regiments.

In the year after, his regiment holds fast in the rear at Naseby when Fairfax' centre breaks and the battle is almost lost. His men then take part in a series of sieges which finally break down Royalist resistance culminating in the taking of Prior's Hill Fort, the key to the port of Bristol. At this point he has become one of the key officers in the Army, the expert on sieges and the most senior officer to support the Levellers. When in 1647 the Army moves to take over London and raise the stakes in their long-running dispute with a vacillating

Parliament, it is Rainsborough's regiment which forms the vanguard. Just at this moment he is one of the senior military figures in a country which hovers on the edge of a political abyss.

There is something going on here which lies out of reach of the written record, floating just out of reach in a now-you-see-it now-you-don't interplay between my time and his, something which is about belief, commitment and seizing a particular moment of history. It is also about failure.

Rainsborough's family origins are a mystery. The great Mormon index of English names shows that his grandfather, Thomas, was living in Wapping in 1570. The name seems not be English; no other Rainsborough (or Rainsborowe, the alternative spelling) is recorded in England though, elusively, it is the name of a parish in Northants. There is a suggestion that the family were Protestant refugees from Regensburg in Bavaria, but whether fleeing from religious persecution or in the normal course of trade we have no idea. Certainly his wife was not foreign; Judith Hoxton. It is quite certain that the Rainsboroughs were Protestant, probably they became what are now called Puritans though the name then had much less precision than history has given it; the family church was the White Chapel, the common point of worship for the Protestant shipping families of Wapping, the place where the family settled. It is also certain that the men were mainly seafarers rather than merchants though one son of grandfather Thomas is recorded as being an armourer.

Wapping is a part of London which is always outside. In the only map of London of the time, it is just off the edge along the Thames from the Tower, outside the walls, just down from St. Katherine's church. The business of Wapping was ships and trade; goods in and goods out, loading and unloading. In later years, the big road pushing through Wapping down from the boundary of the City of London into the docks would be called simply The Highway; running east-west a little further in from the river is Commercial Road. Wapping is the place where pirates would be exposed at the tidal edge whilst three tides washed over them. Still later, when the White Chapel had become St Mary's, it gave its name to the district where Jack the Ripper roamed. Before the bombs took most of it out, Cable Street, half a mile in from the river, was the roughest street in London; sailors' whores and drinking clubs leading down to London's Chinatown in Limehouse. The backing hinterland up through Hoxton to Kings Cross became London's criminal heart based on sailor's pleasures and stolen goods from the docks and railways. Even in the early 1960s when I spent a weekend campaigning there for C.N.D., we were warned about going out after dark in Cable Street.

In Rainsborough's time, there would be wooden quays along the river, warehouses backing them and, behind, a mess of houses and the rambling infrastructure of a port. In my time, Wapping is the place where I lived for six months on the sixteenth floor of a tower block on Cable Street, watching the empty dockland warehouses being torched and canvassing uncertain Bengalis, afraid to open their doors, to vote for Communists. A little later it was the chosen site for Rupert Murdoch to break the print unions; running his huge delivery trucks through massed picket lines out of the fortress which printed the *Sun* and *Times* newspapers. The law has always been a more shifting, clouded and brutal concept in Wapping than in Westminster.

Rainsborough was probably born in 1608. The Mormon index is a bit ambiguous about this partly because of the family habit of calling all male sons

Thomas or William but this is the only date that really fits. He had at least one younger brother, William, and two younger sisters, Martha and Judith. His father, William, was certainly a mariner, a captain who achieved brief fame in 1637 by leading a naval expedition to rescue British captives held as slaves in Sallee on the African coast. He achieved this, sensibly, by blockading the port until the Moors sent out the prisoners and paid up a decent sum of compensation. William received a medal, the right to a coat-of-arms and, presumably, a bit of money. He was offered a knighthood which was refused probably to avoid too close an identification with a king who was moving closer and closer towards confrontation with Parliament. He was certainly a political man, elected as M.P. for Aldborough from 1640 until his death in 1642.

There is no sign of Thomas' presence on the North African expedition but something must have given him the experience to captain the *Lion* in 1643 and this may have been part of it. There is in fact no sign of him being anywhere at all up to that point but clearly he was sailing ships, learning the craft either with his father or one of his father's friends. London was the biggest port in the country and not dedicated to any one trade like Hull. Coal came in from Durham and east Northumberland, wine from Spain, Portugal and France, timber from the Baltic, exotics from the Mediterranean. Wool and cloth were exported. These were the basic trades that paid the rent. English ships did little work then following the Dutch and Portuguese around the Cape into India and east Asia. The growing trade, the high-risk and probably the best-paid trade was to America. Furs, tobacco, salt fish and, the other way, people and manufactured goods

The most famous trip to the U.S.A. took place in 1620 when 102 passengers packed in the *Mayflower* landed by mistake in unknown Massachusetts rather than colonised Virginia and set up the first European settlement there at Plymouth. Direct descent from a Mayflower passenger is much sought for in US family genealogies and the surviving families at Plymouth (half died in the first winter having landed somewhat unwisely in December) have their descendants minutely mapped. The Virginia settlers were largely indentured convicts but the New Englanders chose to move to the New World and fit rather more with the American ideal. However the origins of these 'Pilgrim Fathers' are rather obscure. Despite later claims for religious purity, only about one-third were members of the extreme sect, the Separatists, whose adherents had been expelled from the Church of England in 1604 and who had first gone to Leyden in the new-found Dutch Republic to escape religious persecution. Some of them then decamped onward from there to the new colonies in America but most of the *Mayflower's* passengers seem to have been taken on board in England possibly to look after the interests of the London Merchant Adventurers who financed the expedition. Perhaps the most famous part of this voyage survives only by chance. A hand-written copy, made in about 1630, still exists of the compact which was signed by 41 of the passengers — women, children and, probably, servants being excluded — just before landing. It has passed into American mythology as the seed of the US Constitution, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and just about everything democratic and constitutional in that country.

Or so at least was the view of the Assistant Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Janet Springer, on the occasion of a rededication of a monument to the Pilgrims in Philadelphia in 1998. She asserted, amongst other things, that "*When Thomas Paine wrote **The Present Crisis**, a pamphlet to encourage the freezing and starving Continental Army at Valley Forge, he*

hammered home the principles of the Mayflower compact." Tom Paine, before life became too hot for him in England used to meet with other radicals in The Angel, Islington, another place just outside the City, on a cross-roads with one road leading south down to the docks. The extent to which he knew anything either about the *Mayflower* or about Rainsborough and his Leveller friends is unknown.

The core of the Mayflower covenant reads: " [We] *covenant to combine our selves together into a civil body politic; for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof, to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony: unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.*" Look at this hard and you can see the ghostly outline of democracy, the submission unto laws which *we combined together* have made. On the other hand it can also look like a commonsense pact between men on a desperate, cold December day before jumping off into a totally unknown wilderness in which some would soon die, a compact to stand together and look out for each other. Certainly something was shifting here; less than ninety years previously, a Crown lawyer had drafted as the preamble to the Act of Restraints of Appeal (1533) the following "*Where…it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and hath been accepted in the world, governed by one supreme head and king having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown of the same unto whom a body politic, compact of all sorts and degrees of people, divided in terms and by names of spirituality and temporality, be bounden and ought to bear, next to God, a natural and humble obedience."* Body politics could clearly mean different things. We can be fairly sure that the male Massachusetts pioneers owed natural and humble obedience only to their particular Lord cutting out any earthly intermediary. (Women of course had another channel for such duty).

After this initial voyage and the establishment of a permanent European presence, there was a gradual build-up of Protestants around Boston Bay, often described in some blanket fashion as Puritans though the exact meaning of this is difficult to establish. (The Pennsylvania Mayflower Society, for example, is at pains to point out that their settlers were different from later groups; they wore bright coloured clothes, for example, maintained peaceful relations with the indigenous people and repaid their debts to the London Merchant Adventurers within thirty years unlike some later incomers. Even four hundred years after, small traces remain of the sometimes venomous rivalries and disagreements which racked these small communities.) Rainsborough would have grown up in this gradual leakage of idealistic and passionate men and women to the New England colonies, many of them sailing from Wapping. Not long after the *Mayflower* he would have gone on the ships taking them and their supplies and he would have been friends with some of the emigrants. He would probably have contemplated leaving himself. We don't know this for sure but a better-documented career of a contemporary illustrates a pattern as well as a close family connection.

Thomas Graves was born in 1605 in Stepney, close by Wapping, and baptised at the White Chapel. He came from a seafaring family and is recorded as visiting America by 1628. He was mate of a ship to Salem, Massachusetts in 1629, master of the *Plantation* in 1630 and of several ships visiting New England thereafter. He moved the Charlestown around 1636 along with his

wife, Katherine, and mother-in-law, also Katherine. She came with the children of her second marriage including a son, yet another Thomas, whose wife, Martha, was Rainsborough's sister. This Thomas was master of the first ship ever built in North America, the *Tryall*, whilst Thomas Graves was its second. Martha's husband was lost on the coast of Spain in 1644 and she married again in 1647 to the aging first Governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop.

Thomas Graves was engaged in the trans-Atlantic trade through the 1640s and was appointed captain of the naval ship, *President*, by Parliament in 1652 and a rear-admiral the following year. He was killed in the Dutch war in the same year and left, amongst other possessions, a house in Limehouse close by Wapping.

The Rainsboroughs clearly had close contacts with the Winthrop family as, apart from Martha, the youngest sister of Thomas later married a son of John Winthrop. As the Winthrop's came from prosperous Suffolk stock and led a rather different faction of Massachusetts' settlers, more commercial, less idealistic, rather more inclined to a one settlement/one leader principle, we might be able to place the Rainsborough family as being part of a relatively well-off, house-owning group though outside the exclusive circle of merchants who formed the London Merchant Adventurers, financed the settlers, owned the ships which men like Rainsborough captained, and who, in 1643, financed the Parliamentary rebellion. The Rainsborough's were independent, political and excluded from the mainstream of English bourgeois life. Some of them and many of their friends chose to leave England for a freer life in Massachusetts. Others stayed on.

Let us return to the end of 1643 and the low point of Parliamentary fortunes. There is a tendency now current amongst historians of the period that, far from being the clarion voices of an emerging bourgeoisie as a preceding generation of Marxist historians had claimed, the leaders of Parliament were actually a rather confused bunch in a country already embroiled in civil war (Charles had recently lost a brief war in Scotland) who stumbled into their own war because of sectional interest. Certainly in 1643 they closely resembled this. Parliament had a number of things going for them. They had access to the money of London merchants, an under-swell of discontent with an erratic King, contact with a Scottish army already in revolt against that King and most of the Royal Navy. They also had a rag-bag of individual military skills mostly learnt in the interminable wars of the Dutch and the Spanish across the Channel. What they did not have was any clear cause nor an army capable of standing against the Cavalier horse, commanded by Prince Rupert the King's dashing nephew who charged carrying a white poodle on his saddle, which had chased Fairfax around Yorkshire and had played general havoc all over England in that year. (Cavalier is not an anachronistic word. It derives from the Spanish *caballero,* meaning horseman, and with its Catholic overtones was applied early on to the Royalists who similarly used the word roundhead to mean the Parliamentarians).

Military tactics were in the middle of a long process of change in the mid-16th century often described in terms of the more and more efficient use of guns. However this is only part of the process and one which mainly came about after this story when muskets became light enough to be used for controlled volleys to be used by massed infantry. At this time, cannon had changed siege warfare but not yet the battlefield. The central factor is easy to describe. Heavy cavalry charging against unformed infantry are virtually invincible. The

horses tread down the humans and slashing swords or thrusting lances rip them up. However, horses, whatever the skill and determination of the rider will not charge down a line of firmly-fixed spikes whether fixed stakes or spears or, as they evolved, bayonets. This was the lesson of Crecy, when French cavalry unwisely charged again and again into fixed Anglo-French positions only for the horses to be killed as they baulked and the armoured knights slaughtered where they lay. It would be the lesson of Waterloo when the French cavalry similarly foundered on Anglo-Scottish squares. It was, according to *Braveheart*, the lesson of Wallace at Stirling Bridge and, certainly, no English army had tried to win a battle with cavalry alone since Bannockburn in 1314.

At the time of Rainsborough, European battlefields were ruled by the Spanish pikemen or their equivalent who can be seen as the background to heroic Velasquez paintings; the leaders in front on horses looking dashing, a forest of pike staffs behind. The pike was sixteen foot long with a single pointed head. It had little utility as a killing weapon but, in massed formation, pike-men could in effect act as mobile bastions, sheltering the relatively few musketeers with their clumsy and slow-firing weapons, and moving in disciplined formation to sweep over a battle field. When such infantry groups met there was more push and shove than killing until one side broke when they could be slaughtered.

The theory was sound but the practice less easy. Horsemen were mobile and could outflank static infantry and take them from the rear. They could catch them on the move before they had formed their solid spiky lines. They could simply frighten you shitless so that you dropped your pike and ran for cover. The tactic used by Rupert's cavalry was to ride up to about twenty yards from the line and discharge a volley of pistol shot before riding upon the line. The more common English practice was to ride up to the line as fast as possible, shouting and swearing, firing pistols at random. Either way, once their pistols were discharged and their momentum gone, cavalry was useless and could be picked off by the slow-loading but very punchy firelock muskets behind the line. Some cavalry still wore full plate-armour but even this was little protection against a musket ball.

Resolution and a very strong solidarity was everything for pike-men; 'I won't run if you don't' their single unspoken motto. That and the ability to move in cohesive, disciplined formation. It was possible to achieve this solidarity, this actual physical solidity, by training, by money and discipline and by time. Unfortunately by the end if 1643, Parliament was running out of time and its money, although substantial, did not run to hiring a trained mercenary army even if its scruples would have. So what they turned to were the ideologues, the believers whose solidarity lay in worship of the same god in the same way with the same discipline. They got an army; reluctantly, probably insensibly, they adopted a cause. Cromwell's Ironsides, the cavalry who charged with their bibles in their saddlebags, have become the most famous elements of this new army but, as ever, it was the infantry which mattered.

The leaders of the new parliamentary army, particularly the colonels, were to remain a mixture but a man of Rainsborough's mettle, accustomed to giving orders at sea and to expect a disciplined response but also with strong links to Puritan factions was an obvious choice. He also clearly brought something of his own to the army. In his first regiment, the lieutenant-colonel, major and captain were all returning Americans from Massachusetts, settlers who had come back, presumably, specifically to take part in the war against the King

and with whom, presumably, Rainsborough had been in previous contact. After Marston Moor, Rainsborough's military career prospered. He became a specialist in sieges, mopping up several Royalist strongholds before, finally, in 1647 personally leading the hour-long "*push of pike*" which took the key wall of the City of Bristol, the last Royalist-controlled port. This was the end of the Royalist cause; Charles took himself off to the Scots, whom he judged a better bet than the English army, who promptly brokered him to Parliament. Shortly afterwards, the Army in the form of Cornet Wilde (possibly acting on Rainsborough's orders) took over ownership of the anointed body and settled down to decide what to do next.

What happened in the succeeding six months is one of those passages of national history whose outcome now seems so natural that it passes almost without comment but which at the time seemed far more balanced. Cromwell is said to have remarked about Rainsborough that "*one of us must not live*" and so it proved. In the same way, the opposing strands of opinion in the Army could not co-exist by working out some temporary compromise; one had to be destroyed and so it turned out. History is brutal to the discarded; as Auden noted, regret may be expressed but it "*cannot help nor pardon*". It now seems obvious that the Federal occupation of southern States after 1864 could only lead to the festering semi-slavery of Afro-Americans whose slow working out has ever since undercut every democratic hope in the USA. But there were people, both black and white, who at the time thought differently and for a time seemed close to some success. The possibility of Bukharin and his associates toppling Stalin now seems quite incredible but at the time they may only have been a couple of power-moves and a fatal security slip in Leningrad away from just that. Seemingly inevitable victories are just as finely balanced. One Latvian rifle regiment out of all the massed divisions of the Russian army saved Lenin at the critical moment.

On the other hand, even if twenty-four bishops had sat down to open Joanna Southcott's box it is doubtful if anything much would have happened. Not everything is contingent. Some things will happen however much you may wish otherwise.

The Army had by the end of 1647 given up much pretence to being Parliament's army or indeed being anyone's at all. It had become a agent of itself; Marston Moor and then Naseby had given it the power to dispose of things as it willed. It had no single commander; Cromwell was actually third in the line of command after Fairfax and Ireton and in mid-1647 it is uncertain just how many regiments would have moved on his word alone. It had no clear policy, no clear leadership. The only thing that is clear is that, if the English civil war had any cause or purpose at all, it was now contained within these regiments. Parliament had fractured in factions whilst groups outside, such as the nascent Levellers, had no political organisation or discernable idea of how to form one. So this Army does a very odd thing, a thing so strange that it is difficult to find any parallel, certainly before and probably since. It sits down to a formal debate on what should be done. Every regiment elects two delegates, Agitators, and they, together with sundry senior

officers, meet in a St Mary's church at Putney to talk things over. There they are sitting round a table like a committee to decide on the next church outing. By chance and unusually, someone, a Mr Clarke, is present who takes down a verbatim transcript of proceedings which, almost complete, still exists. (This at a time when it was a criminal offence to record speeches made in Parliament.) Perhaps he is the person in the picture without a proper hat standing close to a quill pen. Like 30s gangsters, this is a time when real men wore real hats.

But take no notice of the hats, this is an army of practised and skilful killers which Macaulay was later to laud as the finest army in Europe though it was only once ever to demonstrate this across the Channel. It is a victorious army which has fought a vicious little war from north Yorkshire down to Bristol. It will fight one more battle in England and one in Scotland and these, apart from some pointless skirmishes associated with the alcoholic ambitions of the last Stuarts, will be the last ever fought in Britain. (Ireland, of course, is quite another story). It has not been paid its wages and there is no strong government to which they answer. They have crossed a line, the imprisonment of the King, for which the common punishment is punitive and painful public death.

At this point in history, continental Europe had been torn apart for decades by religious-based wars. France had seen a succession of civil wars; the Spanish and the Dutch had fought mercilessly for decades; the Thirty Years War was devastating large areas of central Europe from Bohemia to the Rhine. *Simpliccisimus* is the contemporary record of the latter horror, *Mother Courage* its 20th century reverberation. Broadly speaking, soldiers of the day took what they fancied from the towns and countryside they occupied and did whatever they wanted to the population. Research into the demography of the regions like the Rhineland most affected by the wars has shown that population falls of thirty per cent or more were common. The Protestant armies of Gustavus Adolphus did this as readily as those of the Catholic Hapsburgs. There is no record of any one of these armies ever discussing just what it was they were doing and why. The Putney Debates are, amongst other things, almost the first example of war simply ending with a final battle and a peaceful reckoning.

Putney church is now a sparse and unremarkable building and it would have been sparser still in 1647. No images, no altar; with a table and chairs it would probably pass as village hall. Nor are the Debates for the most part very remarkable. It would be surprising if they were, a group of men more used to slaughter than speeches trying to do what no one have ever tried to do before; decide how a country should be run by having a discussion between democratically elected representatives. They are ultimately dominated by two men; Ireton and Rainsborough.

Henry Ireton is the Commissar General of the Army, an organisation man rather than a fighting man, one of the landed gentry who in the classic Marxist analysis were part of the rising class, a man of some property who had, nevertheless, stood staunchly by the Parliamentary cause and who would have been judged by members of that Parliament, a radical. He was Cromwell's son-in-law. Ireton died shortly after the final victory. If he had lived longer the Cromwellian republic might have shaped up rather differently.

He simply and quite cogently argues for the rights of property. Not just for the right to have property but for the right, indeed the necessity, for those with property to have a voice which counts for more than those without. He does not base his argument on anything like natural rights, on inherited aristocratic

or royal power, it is that which makes him a radical, but simply on the principle that those with property are best able to take the right decisions for society at large. Those with the most to lose, he asserts, are those most likely to choose a course best suited to the maintenance of general welfare. In broad terms what he argues for is what came to pass, a transferral of power from a King to a class.

Men may justly have by birthright, by their very being born in England; that we should not seclude them out of England, that we should not refuse to give them air and place and ground and the freedom of the highways and other things, to live amongst us…That I think is due to a man by birth… [But] those that choose the Representors for the making of laws by which this state and kingdom are to be governed, are persons in whom all land lies and those in Corporations in whom all trading lies. This is the most fundamental constitution of this kingdom…[For if] you say, one man has an equal right with another to the choosing of him that shall govern him, by the same right of nature, he has an equal right in any goods he sees; meat, drink, clothes, to take and use them for his sustenance. He has a freedom to the land, to take the ground, to exercise it, till it; he has the same freedom to any thing that anyone does account himself to have any propriety in.

His key argument is simply this: that if all men were to have a say in government then what would stop them enacting a law to redistribute property as equally as the franchise. There is nothing in this which now seems odd. Rephrase it in a different jargon and it would not be out of place in a board room or a cabinet office.

Rainsborough is the ranking officer of what by now is termed the Leveller faction, the only full colonel and, quite possibly, the only man present who could confidently present a thousand infantry to that cause. The only known picture of the man, a print now in the Bodleian library, not far from where King Charles gave up his fight, shows a man just as one might expect, a bit of a tough with thinning hair. He is not just a fighter. In 1644 he had been elected M.P. for Lichfield as a result of an unrecorded electoral process from an elite electorate and, although there is no record of anything which he might have said in that chamber, he had presumably been involved in the complex parliamentary politics of the time. He would, probably, have known Lilburne, Overton and the other prolific pamphleteers of the radical cause. He would have sat in on many discussions, probably arguments and heated disagreements as to what course of action should follow from the increasingly probably defeat of the Royalists. He probably knew of, may have ordered, the abduction of the King. When the Army in final defiance of Parliament invested London, he led the five regiments, his own amongst them, which marched fully armed over London Bridge. He is a man of political ambition and connection and he has the apparent intention of acting to further that ambition.

His argument lacks some of Ireton's sophistication and he is particularly thrown by Ireton's claim that equal franchise would inevitably mean equal property. But his words have a clear and simple power.

For really I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore, truly, Sir, I think it is clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do not think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he has not had a voice to put himself under…I do think that every man born in England cannot, ought

not, neither by the law of God nor by the law of nature, to be exempted from the choice of those who are to make the laws, for him to live under, and for him, for ought I know, to lose his life under.

This then is the point. The moment when what the cold men on the *Mayflower* may have meant, when what may be signalled in the always wordy and often elliptic Leveller pamphlets, when the endless tavern debates finally came together. Very simple and very clear and just about as revolutionary a doctrine as could be propounded, even envisaged, at that moment. Possibly the most radical thing that, even today, one can say.

There are professors of politics who, today, will assert that the concept of consensual government was not part of seventeenth century political thought, that not until well into the following century would anyone even begin to approach the idea, that even the US Declaration of Independence only began to explore its possibility. And, in a sense, they are right. In the succeeding one hundred and fifty years, not until Tom Paine explored the idea, can any real trace be found of the idea which Rainsborough launched into these rough waters. It is tempting to believe otherwise, that in underground and unrecorded ways, ideas like this or some version of them remained in existence until, like the Leveller song *The World Turned Upside Down*, they suddenly reappear at Valley Forge or Peterloo or outside the Bastille, that they are in Marcus Greil's phrase the 'lipstick traces' of our history. Tempting but without the slightest evidence.

We have no knowledge as to how his speeches were received, as to whether there was a momentary silence and spontaneous applause, whether Ireton scowled and Cromwell glared, whether the word went out to the nearby regiments that Rainsborough had finally raised the stakes and that the game was on. Or whether it was all lost in a shifting, restless crowd which wanted to move on to the important subject of pay and regimental dispositions or just regarded as one more stroke of radical rhetoric. One thing of which we can be fairly certain. When Rainsborough concluded "*Though I had the devil behind and the blue sea all around yet I could not stand before the Lord my God and say that I did not attempt it*" it has the ring of declaration of intent and, when that intent comes from the colonel of a crack regiment, established politicians would have exchanged glances.

The rest of the story can be told simply enough because in a way it is all anti-climax, a set of unexplained half-events en route to the second Civil War which in turn led to Cromwell's dictatorship, the debacle of the Republic, the Restoration and, ultimately, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when the right sort of person finally triumphed. Following which, in the fullness of time, the merchants of Hull, though it never quite regained its former position and was gradually eclipsed by the west-facing ports of Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow in the prime trade of slaving, were able to erect a fine, gilded equestrian statue of King Billy himself. '*Our Saviour'* as it succinctly reads though from what is not made clear.

Among these obscure events are various half-mutinies snuffed out either by prompt hangings or by devious negotiations. One regiment involved was Rainsborough's own whilst he was in London. Rainsborough himself, placed at the centre of London politics, was rewarded by apparent promotion to Rear-Admiral of the Channel fleet and sent off to replace a popular though suspect

incumbent. The suspicions were well-placed, the fleet was on the verge of a Royalist mutiny and Rainsborough, though treated well enough, suffered the humiliation of being put in a small boat with his family to return to shore. He was then, in the summer of 1648, placed in command of a new regiment and sent to deal with the renewed Royalist threat, this time to take over the siege of Pontefract which was being undertaken in a somewhat dilatory fashion. He never reached Pontefract for, when sleeping in an inn at Doncaster, he was surprised by a small group of men who had ridden in unchallenged and slaughtered him like a pig unprotected by any sentry. There exists a letter from a fellow Leveller claiming that he was cut down as part of a general plot instigated by unspecified Parliamentary leaders. The official claim is that he was killed by a group of Royalist cavalry who had ridden from Pontefract to kill him. No one was ever charged with the crime.

His body was brought back to London and a funeral procession was organised from Tottenham to Wapping, almost the last great Leveller parade. It was attended by uncounted thousands, wearing sea-green colours, and probably went down what is now Stamford Hill, along Kingsland High Street, through the brickfields and tanneries, and then onward through Spitalfields, where the refugee Huguenot weavers worked, through Whitechapel and down to the river. It is as dreary now as it was then, just as full of the dispossessed and marginalised. There are a couple of decent Hawksmoor churches, a few of the empty warehouses are being turned into costly lofts and the City office blocks now edge towards it but it remains an urban waste.

Did he ever attempt it or was the attempt delayed until finally, out-manoeuvred, he was killed? Was the affair at Ware, when Rainsborough sat by as two mutineers were summarily hanged, a premature coup? Was the mutiny at Burford in 1649 the half-cock effort of what might have been with a coordinated leadership? None of these questions can be answered as, by their nature, there exist no documents, no letters or written plans, no public speeches of intent. In any case, is it conceivable that in 1648 anything resembling a Parliamentary democracy could have been set up on the basis of a full franchise? It is always easy with hindsight to recognise a moment when a crisis of authority has reached a critical point and when major shifts in social organisation can be attempted. Perhaps we had our moment too in 1974 and failed to see it. Perhaps our Burford came in 1984, also too late. For we know that such moments can go as well as come, unrecognised, lost in factional dispute, argument over pointless theory, irresolute leadership.

After his death, the Rainsboroughs seem simply to disappear. His younger brother, William, a captain in the army, is recorded as agitating into the 1650s, one of a diminishing band of roving radical preachers, a ranter. Probably his wife and children went to America to join his sisters and then were lost in the general expansion of the colony. The Mormon index is blank for Rainsboroughs after 1680. Like Hull, there is barely a brick or stone in Wapping or Doncaster which he would recognise let alone any plaque of memorial. St Mary's, Whitechapel, went in the Blitz, the graveyard in Wapping where he might have been buried is now just a small row of gravestones propped against a wall. Doncaster is England's Wild West; last chance saloons and clubs, big Saturday nights, lots of thrift shops. The inn where he died seems to still have a pub on the same site but there are a good few pubs in Doncaster.

That is all there is. A bare five years of any recorded history then a blank. The

same is true, apparently, of Rainsborough's cause as England drifts away to the two centuries of that corrupt and elitist politics which still form the shape of our corrupt and elitist governance. Radical history in England remains a series of lost causes, a set of possibilities frittered away in seemingly trivial dispute and irresolution. Events mount, passions are raised, crowds are gathering, then at the critical moment it flows away like water through one's hands. Lacking any common lodestone, English radicals remain fatally flawed by the same flaws as we may, dimly, see in Rainsborough. It is not the lack of courage just, somewhere, the lack of will, possibly even a residual deference to authority.

After the Restoration, they took Colonel Harrison, almost the last surviving regicide to stay in England, away to a rough death. A voice in the crowd called out "*Where is your good old cause now, Colonel*". "*In my heart, sir, in my heart*" replied the stout colonel. These are fine and brave words but history whispers, where were you at Burford, colonel, where were you? It's unfair but that's what history does; it whispers at you.