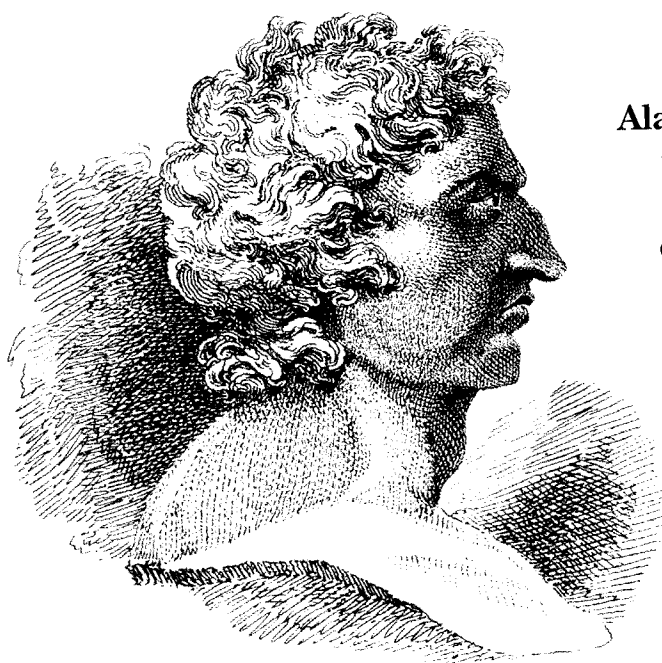


The Other Rights of Man

The Revolutionary Plan of Thomas Spence



**Alastair Bonnett
tells the little-
known but
extraordinary
'rags to rags'
story of a
radical
maverick
of the
early
19th
century.**

THOMAS SPENCE WAS THE most stubborn revolutionary of his age. Contemporaries described him as 'querulous' and 'single-minded'. One obituary observed he was 'despised', yet 'not despicable'. But who was Thomas Spence? And why did he excite such passions?

June 2005 saw a discovery. Leafing through a battered compilation of eighteenth-century documents held by Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society, David Gardner-Medwin, a retired doctor and amateur local historian chanced upon an intriguing one-penny pamphlet. No author is indicated but the title is striking, *Property in Land Every One's Right*, proved in a lecture read at the Philosophical Society in Newcastle, on the 8th of Nov. 1775.

Dr Gardner-Medwin immediately recognized it as the founding statement of Spence's thought. It is a

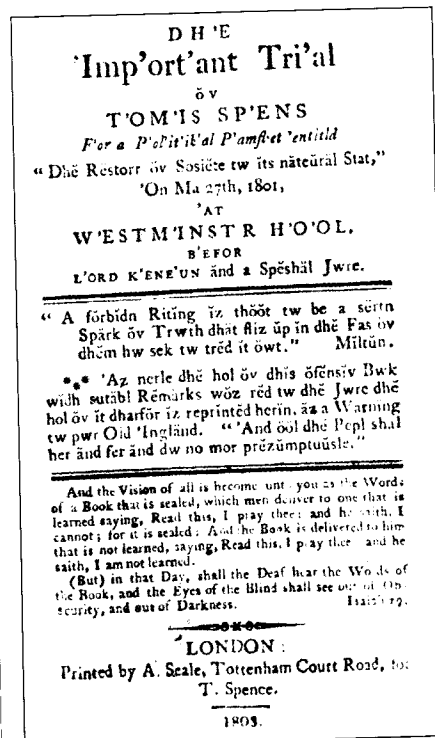
work republished many times in later editions as 'The Rights of Man'. But the original had been lost for nearly 200 years.

Spence had been thrown out of the Philosophical Society for hawking this fiery pamphlet on the streets of Newcastle with its message that all land should be taken out of private hands and instead be owned by the parishes. It was the start of a long and impoverished life on the furthest margins of British politics. Spence's story is a rags to rags tale of defiance and ingenuity. Today his name is all but forgotten. But in the first two decades of the nineteenth century it was synonymous with

Above: Thomas Spence (1750-1814) in 1810; engraving by his friend Thomas Bewick, and (right) a pamphlet by Spence relating to his trial, written in the 'New Alphabet' that he invented.

radical opinion. He was the subject of four contemporary biographical memoirs. Moreover, three years after his death an Act of Parliament was passed prohibiting 'All societies or clubs calling themselves Spencean or Spencean Philanthropists'.

One of his biographers, Francis Place, observed that Spence was 'as poor as any man could well be. And with some trifling fluctuation in his affairs he continued in this state to the day of his death'. Yet his ideas had influence. Spence's scheme for local and democratic ownership of the land was eventually to find a receptive audience within sections of the labouring poor. In 1817 Thomas Malthus observed that,



... an idea has lately prevailed among the lower classes of society that the land is the people's farm, the rent of which ought to be divided equally among them; and that they have been deprived of the benefits which belong to them, from this their natural inheritance, and by the injustice and oppression of their stewards, the landlords.

This, in a nutshell, is 'Spence's Plan'. It was a message spread as much by way of tavern meetings, ballads and chalked graffiti as by published treatise. And among coin collectors Spence's name has always been revered. Both the currency Spence countermarked with radical phrases (such as 'War is starvation' and 'Full bellies, fat bairns'), or the thousands of new tokens he threw into the street (all with striking political images, such as a pig trampling on the symbols of monarchy, or the Prime Minister, William Pitt, hanging on a gib-

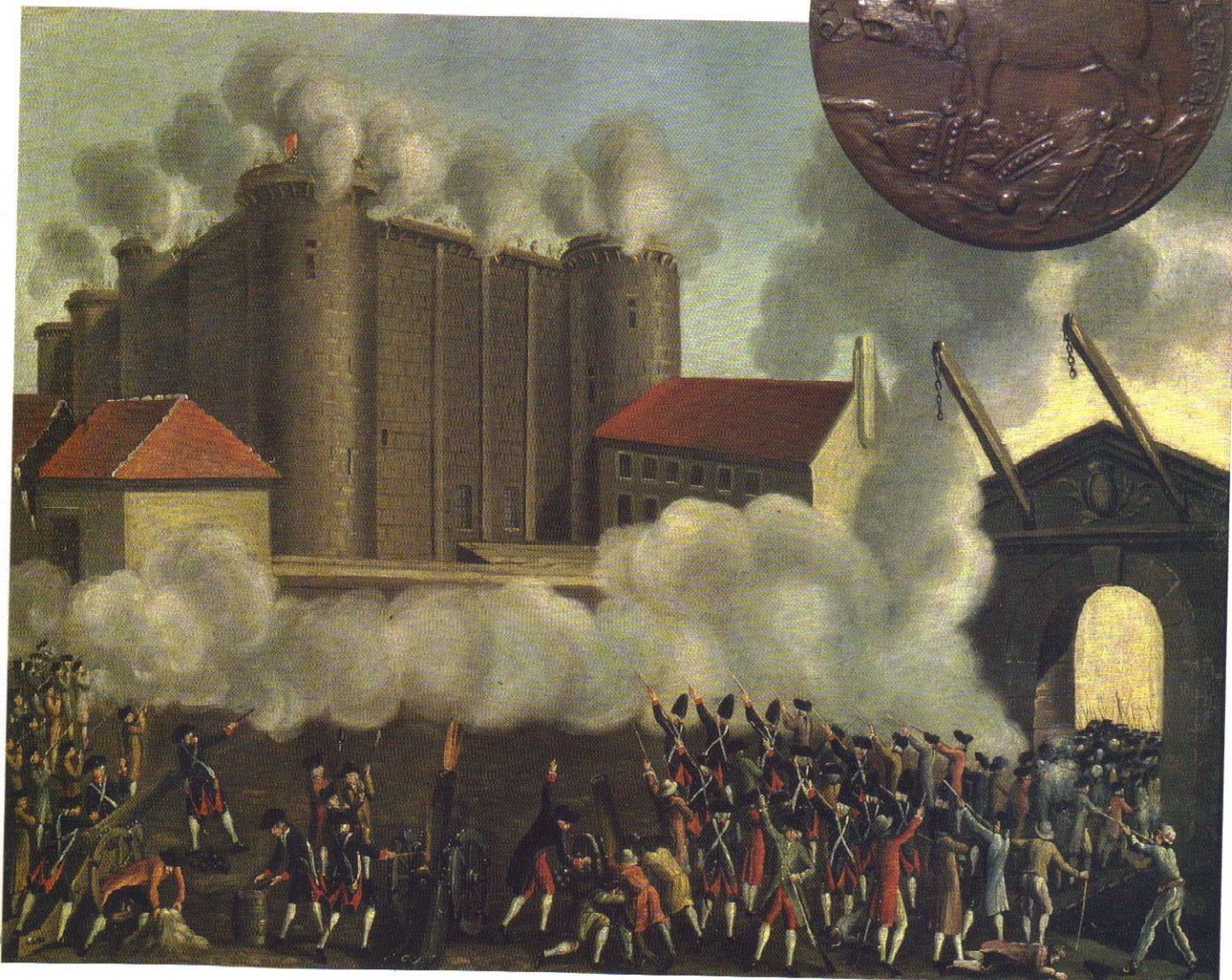
bet), continue to be prized as some of the boldest coinage ever cast. Today they are one of the few tangible relics of the phenomenon that was Thomas Spence.

Thomas Spence was born in 1750 on the Quayside in Newcastle. He was one of nineteen children. His mother sold stockings; his father made fishing nets. He received no formal education and at the age of ten joined his father's trade. Yet Spence's political views seem to have formed early. It is tempting to set his precocious radicalism in the context of John Wilkes's campaign for press freedom and the diffusion of Enlightenment values. Yet he himself

explained his turn to politics by reference to more local circumstances. The most important was the intense atmosphere of religious dissent in which he was brought up.

The Spence family worshipped in the Presbyterian Meeting House of one of the most provocative Protestants of the age, the Reverend James Murray. Murray's charged combination of egalitarian thunder and what Spence's friend Thomas Bewick called his 'playful' and 'facetious' manner, appears to have impressed both young men. Murray's *Sermons to Asses*, published in 1771, attacked the eternal forbearance with which the poor endured their 'human yoke'. A

Inset right: one of Spence's coins, an angry pig trampling on the trappings of church and state, that he threw into the street, but unlike in France (below, the Storming of the Bastille, 1789) Spence's revolutionary message failed to take root in England.





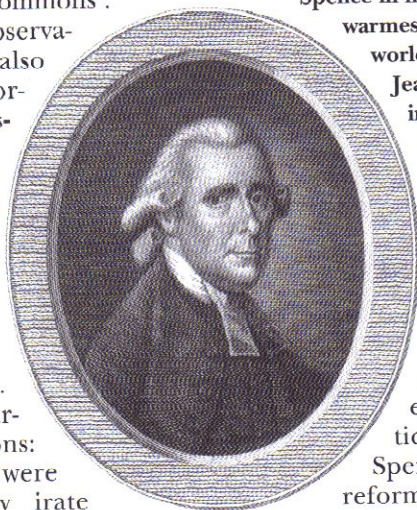
recent outcome of this dumb passivity, he argued, was the enclosure of common land. In typically controversial style Murray chided that, 'The claims of freedom and liberty ended with the division of commons'.

It was a topical observation. For 1771 was also the year that the Corporation of Newcastle attempted to enclose the Town Moor. Modern visitors to Newcastle are often puzzled by this considerable tract of bleak grassland, so close to the city centre. The Town Moor survives for two reasons: lessee's fences were knocked down by irate town folk and the city's Freemen challenged the legality of the Corporation's actions. The defeat of enclosure took two years to achieve. When it came it was celebrated as a victory of common ownership over private interests. Signet rings issued to mark the occasion were inscribed 'vox populi vox dei'. Though not a Freeman, the fight for the Town Moor had a tremendous impact on Spence. His life-long conviction that common property can be defended was established in these years. In later life he recalled that he 'took a lesson' from the Town Moor affair 'which I shall never forget'.

It was Murray who encouraged Spence to publish his *Property in Land* lecture of 1775. Murray was clearly intrigued by this determined

Spence's native Newcastle by Thomas Girtin (1775-1802). Here he met the Reverend James Murray (1732-82, below) and the wood engraver, Thomas Bewick (1753-1828, bottom), who described

Spence in his *Memoir* as 'one of the warmest Philanthropists in the world'. The French radical Jean-Paul Marat was also in Newcastle in the 1770s, publishing radical literature and working as a vet.



young member of his congregation. However, Spence's political views were even more iconoclastic than his own.

Spence did not advocate reform but revolution. He

looked forward to a new society, based upon what he called 'free liberty', democracy and the common ownership of the land.

Although Spence is sometimes labelled 'the father of English socialism' he always maintained a highly sceptical attitude towards the power of the state. In the lecture Spence looks forward to a time when there is 'perfect freedom from every imposition'; a time when

... there no more nor other lands in the whole country than the parishes; and each of them is sovereign lord of its own territories.

Spence was no theoretician. What interested him were the mechanics of democracy and common owner-

ship. This was an interest that went beyond issues of political representation. Spence saw his political ideas as inseparable from a wider programme of rational and popular improvement. Like many autodidacts, he had a passion for learning and was frustrated that ordinary people were trapped in illiterate ignorance by the arcane rules of the English language. For Spence, language reform would allow practical reason to be applied to social inequity. After all, 'Why should People be laughed at all their lives for betraying their vulgar education when the Evil is so easily remedied.'

The same year he was expelled from the Philosophical Society saw the start of Spence's remedy, his *Grand Repository of the English Language*. It is an unusual dictionary, for it is entirely based upon an 'easy to read' and 'easy to learn' phonetic script and pronunciation system devised by Spence himself. In Spence's system his political utopia titled *Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe*, became *S'upl'im'int loo thi Histire ov Robinsin Kruzo* (published in both standard and phonetic editions in Newcastle in 1782). Once Spence had arrived at a solution to a problem he stuck to it. He was to re-issue his works in phonetic translation for the next thirty years.

In 1787 Spence moved to London, setting up a bookshop on Chancery Lane. But one last incident from his Tyneside years demands our attention. In 1780 Spence went to visit 'Jack the Blaster', an ex-miner who 'had been ill-used by his landlords'



Portrait of Thomas Bewick, c.1780, by his friend George Gray (1758-1819).

and 'dug a cave for himself by the seaside, at Marsden Rocks, between Shields and Sunderland'. By the time of Spence's visit the cave had become something of a local tourist trap. Jack the Blaster must have been used to callers. But few are likely to have matched Spence's enthusiasm. He was jubilant to find a working man who had escaped the grasp of the land-owning classes. Years later, whilst in prison in London on a charge of High Treason, Spence recalled that he 'wrote extempore with chalk above the fire place of this free man, the following lines':

Ye landlords vile, whose man's peace mar,
Come levy rents here if you can;
Your stewards and lawyers I defy,
And live with all the RIGHTS OF MAN

Spence says this was 'as far as he knows' the first use of the phrase 'the rights of man'. It is a significant assertion. For he was by then engaged in a doomed attempt to wrestle the phrase away from its association with Thomas Paine (whose *Rights of Man* was published in 1791).

Spence sold Paine's book at his stall and risked prison for doing so. But he disagreed with Paine on a number of fundamental issues. Paine had no qualms about private property in land. Moreover, Spence thought that his proposed reforms were mere tinkering; they would not do away with poverty and tyranny. His pamphlet *The End of Oppression* (1795) drove the point home. As with many of his tracts, it is written as a dialogue between a sage 'Spencean' and a curious second party.

Young Man: I hear there is another RIGHTS OF MAN by Spence, that goes farther than Paine's.

Old Man: Yet it goes no farther than it ought.

Young Man: I understand it suffers no private Property in Land, but gives it all to the Parishes.

Old Man: In so doing it does right, the earth was not made for Individuals.

Spence took the attack further. He argued that not only Paine but also

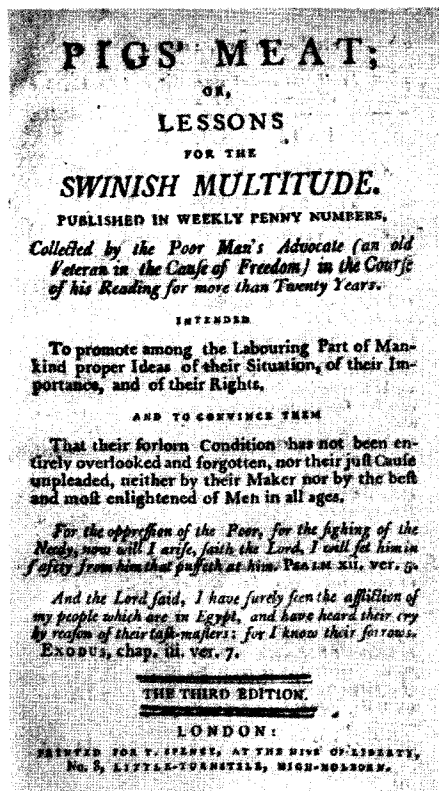
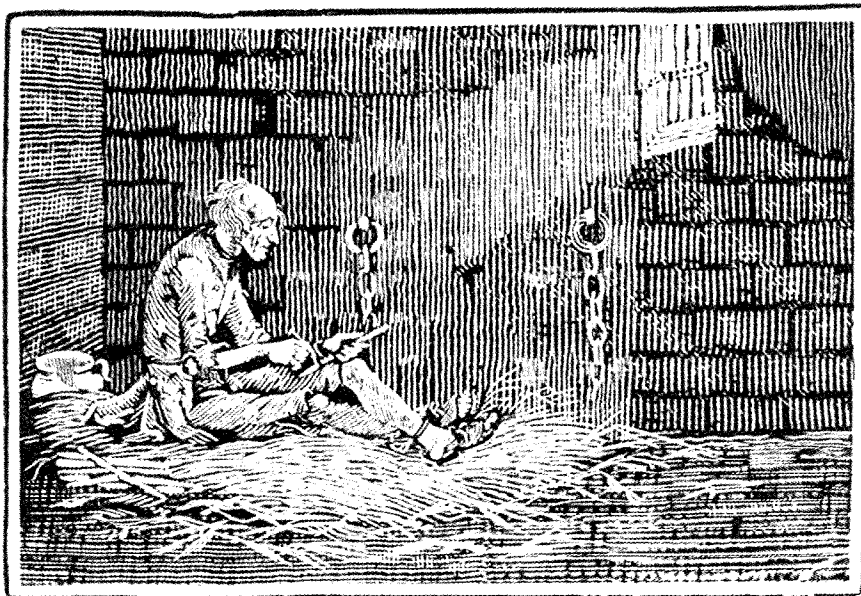
the revolutionaries who had recently come to power in France were forming a new land-owning despotism.

Young Man: It is amazing that Paine and the other Democrats should level all their Artillery at Kings, without striking like Spence at this root of every abuse and of every grievance.

Old Man: The reason is evident: They have no chance of being Kings; but many of them are already, and the rest foolishly and wickedly hope to be sometime or other Landlords, lesser or greater.

Having arrived in London, Spence plunged into the capital's turbulent radical sub-culture. He soon became a 'division' leader within the principle 'seditious' organization of the day, the London Corresponding Society. Biographical portraits begin to appear at this time, written either by government informants or activists within the radical movement. One such sympathizer was William Hone who, writing in 1816, tells us that,

Spence was a native of Newcastle, small in stature, of grave countenance and deportment, serious in speech and with a broad burr in his accent. He would sometimes relax at little evening parties where his plan was discussed. On these occasions he sang a song highly characteristic of himself and his plan, in which is a sentiment denoting the pleasing state of being 'free as a cat'.



In London Spence began issuing a penny weekly, *Pigs' Meat*. The odd title is a reference to Edmund Burke's characterization of the revolutionary masses as a 'swinish multitude'. *Pigs' Meat* offered 'the Honey or Essence of politics'. Alongside

Above: *Pig's Meat*, Spence's radical penny weekly, printed at 'the hive of Liberty' Little Turnstile, High Holborn, London. Below: 'Liberty and Slavery', Thomas Bewick's 1806 illustration for *The Hive*, highlighted the inhumanity of a system whereby an inmate could be incarcerated for debt, as his subject was, in the Old Castle gaol, Newcastle, for thirty years.



new utopian visions of 'Crusonia' and 'Spensonia', it provided short extracts from such writers as Volney, Harrington and Voltaire and serialized the revolutionary French Constitution.

Pigs' Meat could hardly have been more inflammatory. Spence was taking considerable risks in a dangerous city: spies, threats and conspiracy swirled around him. Within this murky world, Spence's naïve faith in his 'Plan' has a touching quality. Indeed, another sympathetic reformer, Francis Place, observed that he was,

... unpractised in the ways of the world to an extent few could imagine in a man who had been pushed about in it as he had been. Yet what is still more remarkable, his character never changed, and he died as much of a child in some respects as he probably was when he arrived at the usual age of mankind.

Following a royal proclamation against seditious writing in 1792, Spence's bookstall was a site of frequent confrontations, often instigated by members of the newly formed

Members of the London Corresponding Society address the crowds at an election fair in Copenhagen Fields. Spence was a leading activist within the society. (Gillray, 1795).

Below: Spence token inscribed 'Man over Man he made not Lord'.



Loyal Association. Although Spence was imprisoned for lengthy periods more than once, his relationship with the 'authorities' is more typically characterized by routine harassment. December 10th, 1792, is an example.

The records of the Loyal Association tell us that in the morning a member came by to check Spence's stall. Four days before a copy of Spence's *Rights of Man* had been bought there by a Bow Street Runner, causing Spence to be taken before a magistrate (who saw no reason to detain him, since it was not the more famous Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*). The Loyal Association member is irritated to find that 'in open defiance of the various entreaties and threats of numerous well-wishers of the public', Spence is still selling his usual fare. In the afternoon Spence is visited by more Bow Street

Runners, who do manage to buy a copy of Paine's book. They bundle Spence off to Bow Street and wait, in a nearby pub, whilst the magistrate has his lunch. Whilst in the pub Spence is attacked by an unnamed loyal 'gentleman', who tries to strangle him. Spence is committed to Clerkenwell Prison and arrives there at 11pm. After thirty hours in gaol he is released on bail.

He returns to his stall to find his shutters covered with 'Loyal' posters. Another record from the Loyal Association tells us that the next day another 'well-wisher of the public' paid a visit to make sure Spence's activities had ceased. He found the bookshop not only open but selling 'the most seditious and inflammatory material ever read'.

Spence believed that if enough people came across democratic ideas there would be a relatively peaceful revolution. Nevertheless, the would-be insurgents of the mockingly named 'Lambeth Loyal Association' drilled twice weekly above his shop. It seems these were rather ramshackle gatherings. Making use of a mixture of broomsticks and muskets were twelve or so labouring men, including two tailors, a miller, a hatter and a gun engraver (and Mr Frederick Polydore Nodder, a Government spy).

In *The End of Oppression* Spence

proclaims: 'let the People be firm and desperate'. But were the people listening? Ironically, Spence's implacability earned him a reputation as a mere eccentric. Indeed, he worried that only the Government took him seriously. Imprisoned for a year for seditious libel in 1801, he complained,

The people without treat me with the contempt due to a Lunatic ... it is only the Government that wishes to make me appear of consequence, and the people within [the prison] treat me as bad or worse than the most notorious Felons among them.

Spence was disappointed with his countrymen. He also felt let down by his friends in the London Corresponding Society. Having received little help from the Society after an earlier, seven-month spell in prison (in 1794, on a charge of High Treason), Spence turned on the Society's 'men of property calling themselves Democrats'. He ended a denunciatory ballad with the lines,

Whate'er your parties you may call,
You're all alike, so damn you all.

Spence's wish for 'perfect freedom' often took him one step further than his peers. He accorded women equal democratic rights. But

he went further. For what about the rights of children? Spence's *The Rights of Infants* no doubt provoked more than a few incredulous smiles, when published in 1796. Yet cruelty towards children was a topic Spence returned to time and again. *The Rights of Infants* argues that children have a right to be free from poverty, dirt and abuse. It is Spence at his angriest: a bitter dialogue between the contemptuous haves and the raging have nots.

'AND pray what are the Rights of Infants?' cry the haughty Aristocracy, sneering and tossing up their noses.

Woman: Ask the she-bears, and every she-monster, and they will tell you what the rights of every species of young are. — They will tell you, in resolute language and actions too, that their rights extend to a full participation of the fruits of the earth.

Spence goes on to claim that women are not only the natural defenders of the rights of children but of rights in general.

Aristocracy (sneering): And is your sex also set up for pleaders of rights?

Woman: Yes, Molochs! Our sex were defenders of rights from the beginning. And though men, like

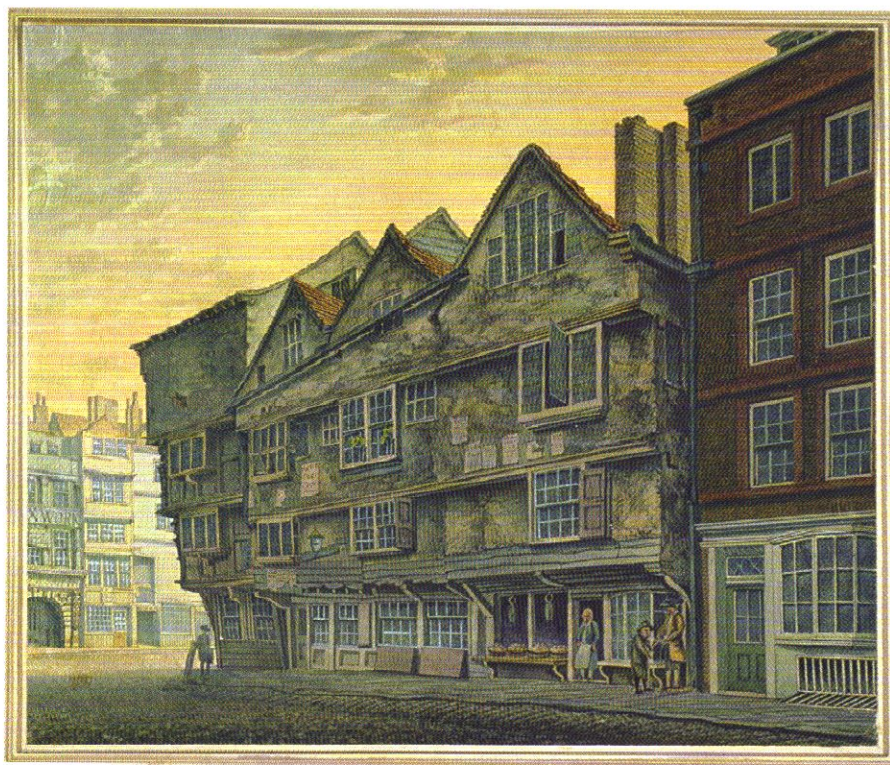
other he-brutes, sink calmly into apathy ... You shall find that we not only know our rights, but have spirit to assert them, to the downfall of you and all tyrants.

In his later years Spence was plagued by ill health. An account from 1811 describes him as 'reduced by persecution' yet remaining a 'victim of publishing what he thought was right'. Spence appears to have maintained his habit of holding regular open meetings. A depiction of such an encounter is found in a jaunty song, 'Spence's Plan', by Mr Porter.

As I went forth one Morn
For some Recreation,
My thoughts did quickly turn,
Upon a Reformation,
But far I had not gone,
Or could my thoughts recall, sir,
Ere I spied Spence's Plan
Wrote up against a wall sir.

I star'd with open Eyes,
And wonder'd what it meant sir,
But found with great surprise
As farther on I went, sir,
Dispute it if you can,
I spied within a Lane sir,
Spence's Rights of Man,
Wrote boldly up again sir.

Determin'd in my mind,



THE
C A S E
OF
THOMAS SPENCE,
BOOKSELLER,
THE CORNER OF
CHANCERY-LANE, LONDON,
Who was committed to
CLERKENWELL PRISON,
On MONDAY the 10th of DECEMBER, 1792,
For Selling the Second Part of
Paine's Rights of Man:
And a BILL of INDICTMENT found against
him.
To which is added an extract of a Letter from
His Grace the Duke of Richmond,
To the Chairman of the Committee of the County of
Suffex, convened at Lewin, January 18, 1783, for
the Purpose of presenting a Petition to the House of
Commons, to take into consideration the unequal State
of Representation in Parliament, &c.

[PRICE THREE-PENCE.]

1792.

Left: houses on the corner of Fleet Street and Chancery Lane (by W. Capon, 1798) where Spence had his bookshop, as his 1792 trial case mentions, above.

For to read his Plan, sir,
I quickly went to find
This enterprising man, sir,
To the Swan I took my flight,
Down in New-Street-Square sir,
Where every Monday night,
Friend Tommy Spence comes there
sir.

I purchased there a book,
And by the powers above sir,
When in it I did look,
I quickly did approve sir.

In 1814 Spence started a new news-sheet, *The Giant-Killer; or Anti-Landlord*. Only two issues were published. He died on September 1st, after a stomach ailment. Over the next few years Spence's name emerged as a touchstone of English radicalism. In 1816 William Cobbett reported,

We have all seen for years past written
on the walls in and near London
these words 'Spence's Plan'.

Soon after his death a Society of Spencean Philanthropists was formed. A report issued by a Government Secret Committee, in 1817, noted that,

... the doctrines of the Spencean clubs
have been widely diffused through
the country either by extension of
similar societies or by missionaries.

The Spencean Philanthropists were described by contemporaries as 'low tradesmen', the 'next to nobody and nothing'. Among their ranks were shoemakers, ex-sailors and ex-soldiers. Spence's tavern radicalism

**Spence token: 'In
Society Live Free
Like Me' dated
1795.**

was taken to new extremes by the Philanthropists. Indeed, one leading member, the black ultra-radical Robert Wedderburn, railed publicly against being told 'to be quiet like that bloody spooney Jesus Christ'. Here we hear the voice of an impious 'ultra'. But it is unlikely that Spence would have approved. We might say the same for the propensity of at least some would-be Spenceans for secret meetings and plots. The culmination of this cloak and dagger tendency was the 1820 Cato Street conspiracy to assassinate the Cabinet. Cato Street was a desperate, distorted reflection of Spence's revolutionary zeal. The conspiracy was infiltrated and five Spenceans were executed.

Spence's precise impact on future generations is difficult to gauge. One of the few historians who has studied the question is Malcolm Chase. In *The People's Farm* (1988) he argues that, after Cato Street, the Spenceans returned to first principles and went on to help shape Chartism, Owenism and the co-operative movement.

However, it cannot be denied that Spence's works were increasingly

**'Radical Parliament! or A Plan for
Assassinating his Majesty's Ministers':
George Cruikshank's cartoon of the
Cato Street conspiracy, 1820.**



rarely read. By the late nineteenth century his name had all but been forgotten. Thus, when the leading British Marxist of the day, Henry Mayers Hyndman, came across Spence's work, in the Reading Room of the British Museum in the early 1880s it was a bolt from

the blue. Hyndman immediately set about shaping the way Spence should be 'correctly' interpreted. His *The Nationalisation of the Land* in 1775 and 1882 reprinted Spence's 1775 lecture. The title and introduction claim Spence as an early advocate of state control. It was a strange fate for an enemy of big government. Frederick Engels enthused to Hyndman (in a letter of March 13th, 1882) that he was 'very glad that glorious old Tom Spence has been brought out again'. Thomas Spence, dismissed and impoverished in his lifetime, was being recognized. But as what? Unfortunately, the attempt to turn Spence into a Neolithic Marxist distorted and muffled his voice for many years.

Today we can begin to approach Spence with fresh eyes. And when we do we find that he was, indeed, 'despised but not despicable'. We also see that Spence's abiding concerns were to establish democracy, social equality and, above all, liberty. Perhaps, in the end Spence is best remembered by the inscription on his favourite coin, the one his friends placed in his coffin. It depicts a cat. It stares straight out at us, around it the words, 'IN SOCIETY LIVE FREE LIKE ME'.

FOR FURTHER READING

Most of Spence's major statements can be found at www.thomas-spence-society.co.uk. See also Malcolm Chase *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Clarendon Press, 1988); David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (Wayne State University Press, 1992); P.M. Ashraf, *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence* (Frank Graham, 1983).

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