

The Paris Commune in the British Socialist Imagination, 1871-1914

Abstract

This article is concerned with manifestations of the memory of the Paris Commune in Britain in the decades after the Commune was defeated. It is about how the Commune was incorporated into the mythology, the canon, of British socialism, and how the memory of the Commune furnished British socialism with powerful and useful symbols. In highlighting the ways in which the events of 1871 captured the British socialist imagination, what follows shows how, despite its oft-emphasised insularity, British socialism was made through the incorporation and appropriation of both native and foreign ideas, symbols, and traditions. The powerful mythologies and symbolism associated with the Commune were taken up by socialists in Britain, and highlight an important intersection between British and French political cultures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Paris Commune 1871, socialism, commemoration, political exile

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In early June 1871, just after the fall of the Paris Commune, the *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* reported on ‘The English Ripples from French Communism’. The report began, ‘when you throw a stone into a pond, the splash is succeeded by a widening circle of ripples over the whole surface. In just the same way the great splash – political, social, industrial, moral – which has been made in France produces effects that are felt and seen, more or less, in every civilised country’.¹ This article traces the Commune’s ripples and reverberations in Britain, and shows how the events of 1871 connected French and British radical political culture in the late nineteenth century. What follows shows how the Commune was incorporated into the mythology, the canon, of British socialism, and how the memory of the Commune furnished British socialism with powerful and useful symbols.

The Paris Commune of 1871 was a radical experiment in government. The Central Committee of the Commune governed Paris for seventy-two days in the spring of 1871, before civil war with Adolphe Thiers’ newly elected provisional republican government (under control of a monarchist assembly) brought the Commune to a bloody close. For activists in France, and indeed throughout the world, the Commune quickly became a powerful symbol of the possibilities of progressive proletarian government and municipal people power. Its ripples were certainly felt in Britain. Following the defeat of the Commune, thousands of Communards fled France to avoid imprisonment or death. As a result, and due in large part to Britain’s liberal asylum policy at the time, around 3500 Communards (including their families) arrived in Britain in the early 1870s.²

While the physical Communard refugees of the 1870s certainly left their mark on the political landscape, and mindscape, of Britain this article instead looks to the longer afterlife of the Commune in Britain – to the ways in which the Commune and its ideas and symbolism influenced the nascent socialist movement of the late nineteenth century. It argues that it was precisely because Britain had been home to Communard exiles in the 1870s, that the mythology and symbolism of the Commune was so appealing, and useful. The Commune was foreign enough to transcend regional and factional squabbles and bring together often disparate socialist groups once a year in an otherwise rare expression of unity, while the fact that Communards had been in Britain made it home-grown enough for British socialists to claim its heritage as their own. This article is concerned with reappraising the malleable and mythological afterlives of the Commune in Britain. My focus is the ways in which British and Irish socialists extracted useful symbols, rituals and inspiration from Communards, and how certain elements within the ‘laboratory’ (to borrow Kristin Ross’s word)³ of the Commune were commemorated and appropriated by various individuals and groups in Britain. Doing so shows that despite its oft-

¹ ‘The English Ripples From French Communism’, *The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, 2 June 1871.

² See Laura C. Forster, ‘The Paris Commune in London and the spatial history of ideas, 1871-1900’, *The Historical Journal*, 62, (2019), 1021-1044. Also see, Laura C. Forster, ‘“Scaped from Paris and crossed the narrow sea”: the Paris Commune in the British political imagination, 1871–1914’ (Ph.D. thesis, King’s College London, 2018).

³ Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London, 2015), p. 29.

emphasised insularity, British socialism was made through the incorporation and appropriation of both native *and* foreign ideas, symbols, and traditions.

In recent years there has been notable scholarly interest in the place of the past in left-wing political movements.⁴ This scholarship builds on work previously done on the legacies of Romanticism within later radical and socialist traditions,⁵ the place of the past in nineteenth-century British culture,⁶ and of course on the large body of work on memory and heritage more generally.⁷ In the French context Patrick Hutton has shown how following the Commune the campaign for amnesty was buoyed by remembrance rituals, wherein Communards could ‘consciously use their revolutionary heritage as a political weapon’.⁸ The annual ritualised pilgrimage to the *Mur des Fédérés*, and the grand funerals of Communards (notably Blanqui’s funeral in 1881) in turn provided a space for Communards and their descendants to restate ‘their commitment to the revolutionary tradition, a commitment often obscured by the outward sectarianism of left-wing parties in Paris in the 1880s’.⁹ In a British context, Paul Pickering’s essay on Fergus O’Connor and the radicalisation of the ‘Monument Mania’ of 1850s Britain, shows that while the permanent monuments erected to remember Feargus O’Connor ‘have done little to give this champion of the people a secure place in public memory’, the process of putting the monuments together – raising funds, arguing over design and location, deciding on a suitable inscription – created an arena within which Chartists and radicals could thrash out their post-O’Connor identities; connect with new contemporary political issues (particularly debates around public access to civic spaces for working people); and vie for ownership of O’Connor’s radical legacy.¹⁰ Herein lay the importance of radical commemoration in Victorian Britain: commemoration as a social practice helped to inform the traditions of the burgeoning socialist movement in the early 1880s.

The scholarship on radical commemoration is a welcome development, however, where the importance of the past within British leftist movements has been scrutinised, it has very often been an English past.¹¹ Most find their examples in those socialists who consciously evoked more distant, and British, pasts: socialists like Morris harking back to medieval English communes, and Chartists lamenting the

⁴ For example, see Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrell (eds.), *Contested Sites, Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot, 2004); Hilda Kean, ‘Tolpuddle, Burston and Levellers: The Making of Radical and National Heritages at English Labour Movement Festivals’, in Laurajane Smith, Paul Shackel, Gary Campbell (eds.), *Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes* (London, 2011), 266–283; Alastair Bonnett, ‘Radical Nostalgia’, *History Today*, 57, (2007), 41–42; and Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London, 2010).

⁵ See for example, Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1998); and Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham, NC, 2001).

⁶ See Paul Readman, ‘The Place of the Past in English Culture’, *Past & Present*, 186, (2005), 147–199; Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature* (London, 1986); Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven and London, 1997).

⁷ Much of this literature is associated with the heritage debates of the 1980s and 1990s. See for example, Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985) and *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994) and *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London, 1998).

⁸ Patrick H. Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition: The Blanquists in French Politics, 1864–1893* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁰ Paul Pickering, ‘The Chartist Rites of Passage: Commemorating Fergus O’Connor’, in Pickering and Tyrell, *Contested Sites*, 101–126, p. 119.

¹¹ Most notable perhaps in Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Woodbridge, 1998). Also see Paul Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity and the Politics of Land 1880–1914* (Woodbridge, 2008)

destructive forces of newly industrialised urban Britain whilst wishing for the countryside. Paul Ward highlights only the ways in which British socialists looked to a distinctly English, pre-industrial past, of Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* brand, for inspiration.¹² However, the pasts British socialists claimed were not necessarily English pasts. In recalling the Paris Commune English, Irish, and Scottish socialists could find a rare point of consensus within an otherwise splintered movement. And it was precisely the foreignness of the Commune that made it so useful: it existed outside of parochial squabbles, and by celebrating the memory of the Commune British socialists could parade their internationalist credentials, without compromising some of their national goals.

Celebrations of the Commune brought together activists of various political shades, in a common purpose, once a year. Before May Day emerged as a unifying date on the socialist calendar, the celebration of the Paris Commune was *the* event at which socialists could meet allies and rivals; friends and sometimes distrusted acquaintances who had formed rival groups or new sects; anarchists; socialists; parliamentarians; and trade unionists, both British and foreign. Within an often-fractured fledgling movement the memory of the Commune could draw together these different strands for an important act of cohesion and identity formation. As Ernest Belfort Bax put it, 'The Commune has become the rallying-point for Socialists of every shade.'¹³ Within the Socialist League the growing number of disparate local branches in the years 1885–1889, coupled with the deepening internal split between the anarchist-leaning and the socialist-leaning members (the anarchists outnumbered the socialists by late 1890), meant that it was increasingly difficult to pin down a common purpose or establish formal joint campaigns, and each branch seemed to be going in its own direction. As Morris wrote wearily to his Scottish comrade John Bruce Glasier, 'there seems to be a sort of curse of quarrelling upon us'.¹⁴ But the celebration of the Commune represented one event, and one message, that brought comrades together for a common purpose every March: 'One of the most pleasing things about these commemoration meetings is the great number of old familiar faces one sees. Comrades whose life and work lies apart throughout the year gather together on the occasion of such a meeting as this, and unite in keeping up the annual celebration'.¹⁵

I. Creating a tradition

In the decades before the First World War the memory of the Commune was internationalised. The period saw the development of powerful Commune myths and memory rituals that took hold across Europe, and indeed the world.¹⁶ The invocation and commemoration of the Commune was being taken

¹² Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, pp. 26–30.

¹³ Ernest Belfort Bax, 'The Bloody Week', *Commonweal*, 5 June 1886.

¹⁴ Letter from Morris to Glasier, 15 December 1888, in *The Collected Letters of William Morris, Volume II, Part B: 1885–1888* (Princeton, 1987), p. 841.

¹⁵ 'The Commune Commemoration', in *Freedom*, April 1891.

¹⁶ For an excellent introduction to the uses of the Commune as a symbol in various national contexts (not British), particularly in Communist Russia and China see, Georges Haupt, 'The Commune as a Symbol and Example', in Georges Haupt, *Aspects of International Socialism, 1871–1914: Essays by Georges Haupt*, trans. Peter Fawcett (Cambridge, 1986), 23–48.

up by socialists far beyond its native France, and the enthusiastic celebration of the Commune across the British Isles was part of this internationalisation. However, the context within which the Commune was understood, and the representation of both the victims and the villains was not uniform across different national contexts. While certain tropes – the emphasis on the nobility of the Communards, the symbol of the red flag, the idea of work still to be done – were near universal, the ways in which socialists marked the memory of the Commune spoke to distinct domestic concerns as well.

In France, the Catholic Church's efforts to represent itself as a victim of the left influenced political and cultural discourse on the Commune in the years that followed, and socialists responded by emphasising the martyrdom of the Communards.¹⁷ Thus, as Karine Varley highlights, after originally celebrating the dawn of the Commune on 18 March in the 1870s, 'during the 1880s, the left shifted to focus upon its violent demise during the *semaine sanglante*. The suppression of the Commune fitted neatly into socialist analyses of counterrevolution and bourgeois betrayal, placing the events of 1871 into a model that connected the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848'. The French left transitioned from smaller 'commemorative activities such as banquets and concerts in the 1870s to annual gatherings at the mur des fédérés' which 'fed into a trend of pilgrimages to *lieux de mémoire* and a cult of the dead which saw cemeteries become places of social gathering'.¹⁸ Therefore in France the memory of the Commune was decidedly a commemoration, and was very much associated with mourning rituals. The 18th of March was still marked but it was the May commemoration that was (and remains) the key date for large organised remembrance rituals. The large performative processions to the wall included speeches and singing, but were generally more sombre in tone (and much larger) than had been the anniversary banquets and concerts of the decade before. Similarly, in Belgium, it was the final slaughter in Père Lachaise and particularly the murder of the socialist member of the First International Eugène Varlin that were emphasised as symbols of the sacrifice of the Communards and the brutality of the monarchist regime.¹⁹

But in Britain, as the 1880s wore on into the 1890s, the Commune commemoration became more celebratory—more singing, more dancing, more cheering. Old Communards were not dying in Britain, and there were no real sites of pilgrimage associated with the Commune in Britain. Instead celebrations were often presented as a festival; an Easter rebirth – 'The anniversary of [the Commune's] foundation is the great Socialist festival of the year',²⁰ – rather than a ritualised mourning for the dead. These celebrations rehearsed the celebrations of May Day in Britain: large meetings with speeches and

¹⁷ Karine Varley, 'Reassessing the Paris Commune of 1871: A Response to Robert Tombs, "How Bloody was the Semaine Sanglante? A Revision,"' in *H-France Salon*, 3, (2011), 20–25, pp. 24–25.

¹⁸ Varley, 'Reassessing the Paris Commune of 1871', pp. 24–25. For more on shifting Commune commemorations in France also see, Karine Varley, *Under the Shadow of Defeat: The War of 1870–71 in French Memory* (Basingstoke, 2008); Laure Godineau, 'Retour d'exil: les anciens Communards au début de la Troisième République' (Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, unpublished PhD thesis, 2000), p. 592; and Julia Nicholls, 'French Revolutionary Thought after the Paris Commune, 1871–1885' (unpublished PhD thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2015), pp. 45–47.

¹⁹ Christoph De Spiegeleer, '“The blood of martyrs is the seed of progress”: the role of martyrdom in socialist death culture in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1880–1940', *Mortality*, 19, (2014), 184–205, p. 193.

²⁰ *Commonweal*, 5 June 1886.

politics, but also with a great deal of emphasis on singing and dancing and drinking. Of course the theme of martyrdom weighed heavy in all countries, and some of the imagery and poetry produced in Britain – notably Walter Crane’s poem *In Memory of the Commune of Paris* (1891)²¹ – treated the anniversary with a sense of bereavement. However, more common in Britain were handbills encouraging British commemorators to discover the *life* of the Commune – the stories of ordinary men and women who had fought for their freedom. Where earlier nineteenth century Chartist commemorative activities had generally been focused around individuals, and were therefore more vulnerable to ownership disputes (notably Ernest Jones whose memory was wrestled over by radicals and liberals, and whose funeral in 1869 contained ‘an uneasy mix of Liberal and Chartist tropes’²²), the Commune celebrations in Britain rarely singled out individuals. The celebrations were about ordinary people and workers, ‘neither the “highest” nor the “lowest” – neither aristocrats or criminals, those inevitable fruits of inequality – they were the *People!*’²³

Antony Taylor has shown that ‘political funerals and posthumous memorialisation of individuals’ had been very important within the symbolism of the Chartists.²⁴ But the memory of the Commune did not have such a personal character in Britain: many of the names of individual Communard “heroes” were little known, thus allowing the Commune’s memory to provide a more accessible and unifying message. As one celebration handbill put it:

[E]very year its supporters [in France] meet in the cemetery of Pere la Chaise to commemorate the death of the men and women who fought and fell in defence of the Commune. We desire also to meet that we may not only do honour to the heroes, but learn a lesson from their life... Come, then, help us to find if it was not something desirable, real and living, towards which they strove, and to see, if it may not be that we also shall find it worth while to work and fight even as they.²⁵

Also, in Britain the enemy that Commune commemorators decried in their speeches and handbills was not only the French monarchist-led national assembly, or the Catholic Church, but rather the press and the middle-classes of France *and* Britain. In particular the latter was blamed for having misled the British public and turned them away from the Commune in the early 1870s: ‘the ordinary papers, the “reptile press,” who told that “[Communards] were red-handed ruffians, idle miscreants, abandoned characters’.²⁶ Opening speeches would typically stress the ‘the persistent and dastardly lying of the capitalist press’ which had viciously smeared the Commune and attempted to turn people away from socialism by portraying it as a doctrine of rampant and unthinking violence and chaos.²⁷ For example,

²¹ Walter Crane, ‘In Memory of the Commune of Paris’, in Walter Crane, *Cartoons for the Cause* (London, 1907). The poem was originally printed in *Black and White* in March 1891.

²² Antony Taylor, ‘Radical Funerals, Burial Customs and Political Commemoration: The Death and Posthumous Life of Ernest Jones’, *Humanities Research*, 10, (2003), 29–39, p. 32.

²³ From an undated handbill advertising the Commune celebration that year, Socialist League Archive [SLA hereafter], ARCH01344, nr. 3498, IISH.

²⁴ Taylor, ‘Radical Funerals, Burial Customs and Political Commemoration’, p. 29. Also see, Matthew Roberts, ‘Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero c.1770–c.1840’, *Labour History Review*, 78, (2013), 3–32.

²⁵ undated handbill, SLA, ARCH01344, nr. 3498, IISH.

²⁶ undated handbill, SLA, ARCH01344, nr. 3498, IISH.

²⁷ ‘The Paris Commune’, *The Labour Chronicle* (Edinburgh), 1 April 1895.

in Bloomsbury in 1885: ‘This meeting of Revolutionary Socialists assembled to commemorate the Paris Commune of 1871 ... protests against the infamous misrepresentation of the Commune and its members and supporters by the reactionary press from 1871 to the present time’.²⁸

This is in part why the annual Commune celebrations were so popular and useful. Old press slurs could be re-refuted and the annual resurrection of the chief enemy of the movement allowed socialists to reassert their principles and clearly define themselves against one thing, and in solidarity with another. Resurrecting a common enemy allowed socialists to define their common principles, despite personal and factional disagreements. British and Irish socialists localised the enemies of the Commune and held up the events of 1871 not only as an example of workers’ power, but also as a way to delegitimise claims that socialism could not take hold amongst British workers, and to encourage British workers not to be deceived: ‘remember the pioneers of the freedom which you will soon enjoy if you take example of these brave men, but which you will never gain if you allow your oppressors to keep you ignorantly apathetic and what they call, contented’.²⁹

In 1880, a general amnesty was granted by the French government to all convicted and indicted Communards.³⁰ As a result the vast majority of Communards returned to France. A small number stayed in Britain, but by 1884 the diminishing presence of exiles themselves, and the emergence of several explicitly socialist societies in Britain meant that the ways in which the Commune was discussed, invoked and celebrated in Britain had begun to shift. The mythology of the Commune could now be taken up by British socialists, not just in solidarity with French Communards, but as part of a new British socialist tradition.

In the 1870s there was not a decidedly socialist British movement. Most people writing in favour of the Commune in Britain were club radicals, republicans, Christian socialists, and positivists. The majority of Commune anniversary celebrations in the early 1870s were organised and attended by exiled Communards and international organisations, with a keen but numerically small number of British Positivists, secularists, and radicals from the Manhood Suffrage League and other radical clubs, mostly in London. British activists had been involved with Communards; they contributed to celebrations, organised events and talks, and shared political friendships with the exiles, but the memory of the Commune was maintained by the living exiles themselves. In 1878 British radical groups put together an *Address to the Heroes and Martyrs of the Commune*.³¹ The address was a message of solidarity for the exiled Communards in light of the French government’s issue of the first (limited) pardon for convicted Communards, and was signed by various social democratic associations in London (including the Manhood Suffrage League, the English and German sections of the Social Democratic Club, and

²⁸ Resolution passed by the commemoration held at Neumeyer Hall in Bloomsbury, 22 March 1885. Reported in *Commonweal*, April 1885.

²⁹ Handbill, Store Street Hall celebration, SLA, ARCH01344, Nr 3453, IISH.

³⁰ See Jean T. Joughin, *The Paris Commune in French Politics, 1871-1880: The History of the Amnesty of 1880* (Baltimore, 1955).

³¹ *Address to the Heroes and Martyrs of the Commune, on their Restoration to Citizenship, after Eight Years of Proscription, From the Social Democrats of London*, Julius Motteler Papers, ARCH00904-3056, IISH, Amsterdam.

Tower Hamlets Radical Association). However, at this point, the memory of the Commune still very much belonged to the exiled Communards themselves; it was the Communards who were looked to as the keepers of the memory of the Commune. The language used in the *Address to the Heroes and Martyrs* is illustrative of the deference paid to the Communards, but also the distance between the authors of the address and those they were addressing. ‘We send you our heartiest congratulations’ begins the address. Throughout the text the tone is very much that of an interested but uninvolved party of far-away well-wishers. There are some tentative suggestions of universal solidarity effected by the Commune, but there is no *Vive la Commune!*; no hearty collective ownership of the memory that would soon become a key *international* socialist event seen as having led the charge for social revolution across Europe. Yet from 1884 the Commune was celebrated every year by British socialist groups, sometimes collectively, sometimes as separate groups, but always with nods to one another and reciprocated solidarity. Within the decade after the French amnesty the language of Commune celebrations in Britain would transform the Commune from ‘your’ Commune to ‘our’ Commune, and *Vive la Commune!* would become a powerful slogan in British socialism.

William Morris’s words in 1889 demonstrate that by the end of the 1880s British socialists had staked their claim for the Commune. At the Socialist League Commune celebration in London Morris, unable to attend due to his being ‘lame with rheumatism and gout’, sent a message of apology and solidarity in which he wrote, ‘If there were any amongst the defenders of the Commune who did not understand that its ultimate aim, its reason for existence, was the abolition of class society, its enemies at least understood it well - and wrote their endorsement in the blood of 30,000 men slain after their foul and useless victory’.³² Here Morris was carefully appropriating the history of the Commune to suit his socialist agenda. He subtly dismissed those Communards who would claim that the Commune was about municipal democracy, republicanism, patriotism, or radical democracy, rather than class war, and instead claimed the martyrdom of the Communards for socialism alone. It was for the spokespeople of the nascent socialist movement to speak on behalf of the martyred Communards, and to extrapolate the *true* meaning of the Commune; a meaning that even some Communards themselves might well have been ignorant of.

This reading of the Commune meant that while in the 1870s the Commune was commemorated as a noble defeat, by the late 1880s it could be celebrated as a victory. It was reconceptualised as a ‘victory of ideas’; and a victory in that it had produced the very meetings that celebrated its memory.³³ In other words, the Commune had spread the word of socialism despite its temporary defeat. At the 1891 anarchist celebration at the South Place Institute in London, Robert William Burnie (a barrister and anarchist member of the Socialist League) said, ‘looking back over twenty years, what struck one first was the manner in which the Commune proving as it seemed a failure and quenched in blood, yet had

³² ‘Some Greetings’, *Commonweal*, 23 March 1889.

³³ ‘Anniversary of the Commune’, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 22 March 1891.

in the highest sense succeeded, since that great act of propaganda had, like all propaganda by deed, made more Socialists than any amount of speaking and writing'.³⁴ Looking back later on the early years of British socialism, Walter Crane, socialist and Arts and Crafts artist, recognised that, 'at the time... the Commune, its ideals and its acts, were entirely misunderstood, or misrepresented in the English press, and it is only recently, after the lapse of years, that its true aims, with all its faults and almost superhuman difficulties, are beginning to be apprehended'.³⁵ Like Morris, Crane suggested that the passage of time had allowed the Commune to speak more clearly to *British* socialists: British socialists had had time to distil the messages of the Commune and were now ready to propagate them as their own. Many Britons may have misunderstood their Commune guests in the 1870s, but socialists were now realising the importance of the exiles that had made Britain their home, and these socialists were claiming the memory of the Commune for the Socialist League, the SDF, and their allies, particularly in Britain.

What's more, by 1886 the celebrations of the Commune in Britain, and the British character of these celebrations, had become much more reported on by the non-socialist British press. Recent events such as the Black Monday riots in Trafalgar square in February 1886 (which had begun as a protest by unemployed workers and Social Democratic Federation activists and ended with rioters smashing club windows along Pall Mall and looting shops), and the countrywide industrial strikes and riots in Belgium in March of the same year which began at a Commune celebration in Liege, combined with the increasing visibility of British socialist societies of various shades, meant that the Commune celebrations began to cause some alarm in the hostile press. Cries of *Vive la Commune!* were reportedly heard during the Black Monday riots,³⁶ and the conservative *Standard*, reporting on Commune celebrations across Europe, including the meeting held at South Place, London reported that:

not long ago we might have regarded all this with scant interest. Continental Communism seemed a long way from our shores... [but] during the last few weeks we have found reason to bestow rather more attention on the subject. We have learnt that there are sects, calling themselves Social Democrats, among ourselves; and though they are a small band of obscure fanatics and notoriety-hunters, they have shown that they are quite capable of doing mischief.³⁷

Socialists themselves recognised the increasing suspicion with which they were viewed and many wore it as a badge of honour. One writer in the *Commonweal* used the interest of the press as evidence of the growth and increasing strength of the movement: 'the great number of Commune celebrations this year is a sure sign of the increasing strength of the Socialist parties of this country. Even the would-be silent bourgeois press is compelled to note this'.³⁸ By the end of the 1880s the Commune celebrations were understood to be a hugely important annual tradition in regional Socialist League and SDF branches

³⁴ 'The Commune Commemoration', *Freedom*, April 1891.

³⁵ Walter Crane, *An Artist's Reminiscences* (London, 1907), p. 102.

³⁶ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22 March 1886.

³⁷ 'The Anniversary of the Paris Commune has been "celebrated" this year with rather more than the usual honours', *The Standard*, 22 March 1886.

³⁸ 'Paris Commune Celebrations', *Commonweal*, 26 March 1887.

across Britain.³⁹ An advert for the 1889 Commune celebration, printed in the *Commonweal* the month before stated: ‘The annual celebration of the Commune of Paris is this year being organised by the Socialist League and the Social Democratic Federation. It is intended to make the celebration as distinctively English as possible, at the same time representatives of our foreign socialist brethren will be invited to attend and speak on the occasion’.⁴⁰ These are telling words. The Commune, in the speeches of many English socialists, came to belong less to the living exiles of Commune; it seemed detached from the realities of those Communards who had survived and were still politically active in France and elsewhere, and could instead serve the needs of its socialist successors, in this case in Britain, who were now propagating many of the ideals for which the Commune was so brutally put down. The celebrations continued to be international (commonly advertised as including speeches in German, French and English), and ex-Communards were certainly still involved in the celebrations – to varying degrees of importance across different groups and regions – but by detaching the memory of the Commune from the Communards themselves, the symbolism of the events of 1871 could be appropriated to fit various new political, and national agendas.

II. A culture of celebration: songs and symbols

If a movement has caught hold of the imagination of the masses they will seek a vent in song for the aspirations, the fears and the hopes, the loves and the hatreds engendered by the struggle. Until the movement is marked by the joyous, defiant singing of revolutionary songs, it lacks one of the most distinctive marks of a popular revolutionary movement, it is the dogma of a few, and not the faith of the multitude.⁴¹

The Irish socialist and republican James Connolly’s insistence that true successful socialism could only be won if it was the ‘faith of the multitude’ and not ‘the dogma of a few’, and only if that multitude is willing to sing about it, astutely captures the importance of shared rituals and symbols for British socialists in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These decades saw many attempts to create and sustain a faith; a commitment to a movement that insisted on a fairer, more egalitarian world. Exactly what that world might look like, and how it might be reached was subject to fierce debates and conflicting philosophies, and led to personal clashes, short-lived and fragmented organisations, changing strategies and near ceaseless arguing. In attempting to bring the politics of labour, in its various forms, into the twentieth century, these activists struggled to find a universal upon which to cling. The Paris Commune offered a common symbol: a connection to a wider community, and a sign of radical conviction.

The symbol of the Commune, and the imagery and slogans associated with it were incorporated into language and rituals of the socialist movement in Britain and Ireland. It was an Irish socialist, Jim

³⁹ For example, the reports of various Socialist League branches show that in 1888 for the Norwich branch of the SL the celebration of the Commune was their most successful meeting of the year and really showed the importance of the celebration as an annual event, SLA, ARCH01344, nr. 611, IISH.

⁴⁰ ‘Commune Celebration’, *Commonweal*, 18 February 1889.

⁴¹ Mat Callahan (ed.), *Songs of Freedom: The James Connolly Songbook* (Oakland, 2013), p. 55.

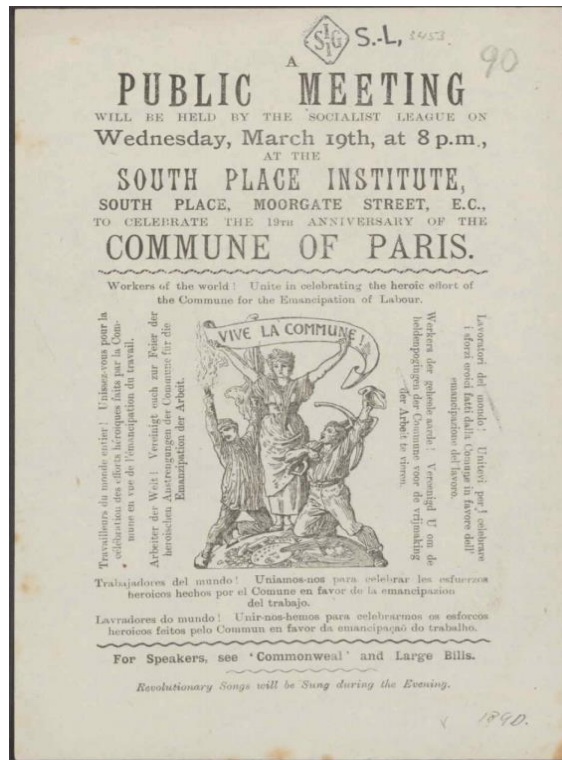
Connell (1852–1929), who wrote the famous socialist anthem *The Red Flag* in 1889. *The Red Flag* became the official anthem of the Independent Labour party from its founding in 1893.⁴² Connell said, ‘I was inspired to write *The Red Flag* by the Paris Commune, the heroism of the Russian nihilists, the firmness and self-sacrifice of the Irish Land Leaguers, the devotion unto death of the Chicago Anarchists’.⁴³ This sentiment well articulates the importance of international symbols of solidarity, used in conjunction with regional and national political struggles, within the socialist movements of the late-Victorian period. The Arts and Crafts artist, Walter Crane, often thought of as a purveyor of Englishness – particularly one associated with Medieval, rural, and religious allegorical tropes – adopted some of the symbolism of the Commune in his work, and produced various commemorative pieces for the anniversaries. Crane’s political artworks often incorporated a female figure, draped and surrounded by heroic labourers and the bounty of nature. Paul Ward attributes these recurring draped women to Crane’s love of England, and his ‘idealised interpretation of socialism’. Ward emphasises that Crane was ‘deeply touched by the symbolism of St George’.⁴⁴ This was certainly the case. However, these draped women were also very much in the likeness of the French revolutionary Goddess of Liberty or the figure of Marianne. Crane was undoubtedly influenced by French socialist tropes in his drawings, and the visible internationalism in his particular brand of socialist utopianism show that his ‘idealised view of English history’⁴⁵ did not preclude him from seeking inspiration, both artistic and political, from beyond the nation. Crane drew several commemorative pieces specifically for the Commune which provide a striking visual representation of the ways in which the internationalist memory of the Commune was woven into his medieval inspired British radical visual tradition, and the surprisingly comfortable co-habitation of British and foreign symbols and traditions within British socialism in this period. Crane’s *Vive la Commune* image was used on the handbill of the 1890 London SL Commune celebration:

⁴² Paul Adelman, *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880–1945*, 3rd edition (London, 1996), p. 109.

⁴³ Quoted in Tom Mann, *Memoirs* [1923] (Nottingham, 2008), p. 68.

⁴⁴ Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*



Handbill for Commune celebration held at Store Street Hall, London, 1890, Socialist League Archive, ARCH01344, Nr 3453, IISH, Amsterdam

British socialists' attempts to bring the Commune into their traditions and refashion its memory within a British socialist internationalism demonstrate the utility of the memory of the Commune. The Commune provided a recent revolutionary past that, more easily, for example, than the French Revolution, could be lifted from its national context and understood as a new kind of radical heritage. What's more, the revolutionary Communards had sought refuge in Britain. British socialists could therefore lay claim to the radical heritage of the Commune. New English language songs and poems were produced for various anniversaries, and could be printed and re-printed, sung and re-sung in order to firmly situate the Commune in a very accessible and broad international revolutionary tradition that had real utility for British socialists in this period.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century memories of the Commune, and annual celebrations and commemorative meetings were informing and inspiring socialists and anarchists across Britain. The most well-known of the British Socialist organisations, the SDF and the SL, had branches across all regions of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland in the late 1880s and 1890s. These local branches often worked in tandem with a wealth of other local socialist organisations that were springing up around the same time and in the following decade, particularly the Scottish Socialist Federation and the Irish Socialist Republican Party.⁴⁶ Most of these groups and branches celebrated the Commune annually. Therefore, celebrating the Commune was a point of overlap between groups across the isles

⁴⁶ For the histories of the socialist revival in each national context see, William Kenefick, *Red Scotland!: The Rise and Fall of the Radical Left, C. 1872-1932* (Edinburgh, 2007); Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism, 1881-1896* (Cork, 1997), Martin Wright, *Wales and Socialism: Political Culture and National Identity Before the Great War* (Cardiff, 2017).

and beyond: speakers travelled to new and unfamiliar constituencies, and celebrations began with messages of solidarity sent to London from Dublin, Norwich and Edinburgh; to Dundee from Leicester, Nottingham, and Brussels; and to Nottingham from Walsall and New York. And these celebrations show how the memory of the Commune could be used to showcase growing interest in the activities of these still-young socialist groups. Celebrations of the Commune offer insights into how socialists updated and invented various rituals and traditions; the ways in which they tied national political and social concerns to international struggles; and how celebrations could prompt the formation of new groups and alliances. For example, in Leicester, the 1888 celebration of the Commune was attended by twenty-three local activists and led to the formation of what became the Leicester Labour Club, which would unite the various informal groups (chiefly secularists and trade unionists) of the area.⁴⁷ The Commune connected British socialism to continental socialism, and allowed British socialists to situate themselves within a broader movement, whilst still retaining their distinct regional and national characters.

III. Scottish socialists and the Commune

The Glasgow branch of the Socialist League was one of at least six Socialist League branches that existed in Scotland in the late 1880s.⁴⁸ The SDF also enjoyed success across the country, and was the first explicitly socialist organisation established in Glasgow.⁴⁹ John Bruce Glasier (1859–1920) was a Scottish socialist, member of the Scottish branch of the Irish National Land League, member of the SDF and then the SL, and founding member of the Scottish Land Restoration League. In 1900 Glasier succeeded Keir Hardie to become chairman of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Glasier, imbued with a ‘religious zeal’ by his Calvinist uncle from an early age, has been described as a ‘socialist evangelist’, and he often expressed his socialism as a religious commitment.⁵⁰ In a personal notebook titled ‘The Commune of Paris’ (1899), which reads as a sort of unordered compilation of thoughts and bits of speech on the Commune that Glasier planned to deliver at an unspecified Commune celebration, Glasier writes, ‘we commemorate the Commune, as a sacrament, as a festival’.⁵¹ For Glasier, the commemoration of the Commune was both a duty, and a hearty celebration. In the notes for his talk, Glasier begins a list of the ‘great illuminating achievements in the emancipation of peoples’. But aside from the Commune (which headed his projected list), Glasier specified only one other illuminating achievement: ‘the Peasants’ Revolt’.⁵² This shows how the Commune was part of a symbolic ancestry that, for a Glasgow Socialist, could take in both medieval England and nineteenth-century Paris. It may

⁴⁷ *Commonweal*, 24 March, 1888. For more on socialism in Leicester see William Lancaster, *Radicalism to Socialism: The Leicester Working Class 1860–1906* (unpublished thesis, University of Warwick, 1982).

⁴⁸ David Lowe mentions branches in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Kilmarnock, West Calder, Carnoustie, and Arbroath. See David Lowe, *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour* (Glasgow, 1919) p. 128.

⁴⁹ Lowe, *Souvenirs*, p. 121.

⁵⁰ Chris Wrigley, ‘John Bruce Glasier’, *ODNB* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38468> [accessed 6 December 2017].

⁵¹ London School of Economics [hereafter LSE], Independent Labour Party [hereafter ILP] Archive, Manuscripts of J Bruce Glasier, 1899–1919, ILP/6/2/1, Notebook – “The Commune of Paris,” 1899.

⁵² LSE, ILP/6/2/1, Commune notebook.

seem obvious to note that dipping into the past for inspiration is anything but a linear process; and that in self-styling mythologies, as individuals or as part of political communities, rituals, ideas and mythologies, are appropriated, reframed, and jumbled together with the memories of other ‘significant event[s]’ to which they bear little real resemblance. And yet, although we now take it as given that the English past was of great importance to English socialists, historians remain reluctant to take seriously British socialists’ identification with foreign pasts.

At the first conference of Scottish Socialist Societies in December 1888 (which brought various groups together to discuss the future of the movement), one of the resolutions passed read:

London has shown itself to be unable to organise Scotland;

Therefore be resolved: -

That a Scottish Organisation be formed for propagandist purposes.⁵³

The timing of the conference, given the sentiments expressed there, is very important. In September 1888 a delegation of sixteen French socialist workmen visited Scotland for the Glasgow exhibition, and were hosted at various events in Glasgow and Edinburgh. *The Scotsman* reported that when they were met off the train in Edinburgh they were greeted with the cry ‘Vive la revolution sociale!’⁵⁴ Banquets and meetings were held in their honour. At the Edinburgh event, organised by the SDF and the Scottish Socialist Federation (newly formed out of the Scottish Socialist Societies conference), John Leslie took the chair and toasted the workingmen of Paris, pledging to uphold ‘the red flag’.⁵⁵ John Gilray, a very active socialist, who left behind an unpublished account of the early Scottish socialist movement which has been a key source for the period, described the event:

The sixteen French working men who have been visiting the Glasgow Exhibition ... have created quite a flutter...Over sixty sat down...The usual revolutionary toasts were drunk with great enthusiasm, and a number of speeches were made, in French, German and English. The Carmagnole was sung by our guests in splendid style. This is the first time there has been an international gathering of workers in Edinburgh who pledged themselves to do all in their power to sweep away the frontiers of all countries, and to unite the workers of every nationality for the overthrow of their common enemy, Capitalism.⁵⁶

Interestingly though, no one seems to have really reported on, or been interested in exactly who these French workmen were. Gilray doesn’t tell us much, and the press, both socialist and mainstream, are equally vague. In all the reports the visitors are simply ‘French socialist workmen’ or ‘French delegates.’ Of course, in France in the 1880s there were several different types of socialists, and very different types of workers across industries with vastly different radical traditions. And yet in terms of providing inspiration and representing a tangible example of international fraternisation it seemed

⁵³ Lowe, *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour*, p. 128.

⁵⁴ *The Scotsman*, 3 September 1888.

⁵⁵ *The Scotsman*, 3 September 1888.

⁵⁶ John Gilray, *Early days of the Socialist Movement in Edinburgh*, 1909, MS, Acc.4965, National Library of Scotland, p. 10.

enough that these French socialist workmen were exactly that: French, workers, and socialists. Upon the French workers departure from the station in Glasgow, Scottish workers reportedly cheered for the Commune: ‘the[ir] train departed with deafening cheers for “The Social Revolution,” “The Commune of Paris,” and the “Workmen Delegates,” while the little red flag of the delegates waved from the car till the train was out of sight’.⁵⁷ The French workers were aligned with the Paris Commune in the minds of these Scottish workers; whether or not these particular workers had actually had anything to do with the Commune or not was unimportant to them.

This episode points to the emotional and symbolic importance of the memory of the Commune as part of a desire for a more international movement, at a time when the socialist movements of Britain were establishing their identities and laying claim to certain traditions. It also points to an attachment on the part of British socialists to the French revolutionary tradition – an attachment that often operated on the level of symbolism rather than policy or ideology. Acknowledging the symbolic nature of this attachment is not to trivialise it: symbols, and British socialists’ identification with radical foreign symbols and traditions, was hugely important for British socialists in this period. For the Scottish workers cheering for the French workers, *Vive la Commune!* was shorthand for a whole set of desires and demands. Paul Pickering has argued that for rank-and-file Chartists in the mid-century ‘symbols were effective as a form of social or cultural shorthand: a public mode of communication’, and that these symbols were just as important as the content of speeches and pamphlets.⁵⁸ Pickering refers mainly to symbolic clothing (the white cap), modes of appearance, and performative speech-making, as important signals that helped to define the movement. In the case of the memory of the Commune, simply invoking its memory (the cry of *Vive la Commune!* or the waving of red flags) became proxy for a certain revolutionary stance. The Commune was becoming part of the language of socialism and invoking its memory was used as a signal to prove revolutionary conviction. Even if the Commune was mentioned only vaguely or without substantiation, the implication was understood – so much so, indeed, that Glasier could say in September 1888, at a meeting held in Glasgow about forming what was to become the Scottish Labour Party, attended by a crowd ‘of Land Restorers, Social Democrats, miner’s agents, and advanced Radicals’,⁵⁹ that it was the Commune they were aiming for:

Let us keep to the highway of Freedom; it is the nearest, the easiest, and by far the pleasantest road... We are not out for a day’s preaching or a game of hares and hounds, we are hastening to reach the City of the Commune before night falls.⁶⁰

Here it is again clear that the Commune provided British socialists with a common language: a sometimes vague but very potent slogan – *Vive la Commune!* – which could be a powerful rallying cry, even when speaking to a group of labour activists as diverse as Glasier’s audience at Glasgow. And,

⁵⁷ ‘French Workmen Delegates in London’, *Commonweal*, 8 September 1888.

⁵⁸ Paul Pickering, ‘Class without words: symbolic communication in the Chartist Movement’, in *Past & Present*, 112, (1986), 144–162, p. 155.

⁵⁹ Reported in *Commonweal*, 22 September 1888.

⁶⁰ Reported in *Commonweal*, 22 September 1888.

importantly, the slogan was part of an international vocabulary—connecting activists and workers across borders in both directions. When an English delegation of workers had visited Paris in March 1885, the speech delivered by Thomas Burt (Lib-Lab MP for Morpeth and secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association) on behalf of English workmen was cheered with the cry of *Vive la Commune!*⁶¹ For Scottish socialists in 1888 it was particularly important to claim their own international connection at a time when organisations like the Glasgow branch of the SL was breaking from London. Following the success of the French workers visit, 'it was in March of the following year, that is in 1889, that the first celebration of the Paris Commune was held in Edinburgh'.⁶² This was a key few months for Scottish socialist groups: the French workmen visited in September, the Scottish Socialists Societies conference was held in December, and in the following March the celebration of the Commune was inaugurated as an annual event. At the same moment that Scottish socialists were denouncing the London leadership, they were asserting their identity as part of an international cohort of socialists, and embracing the Commune as part of their revolutionary symbolism.

At a demonstration on the Land Question in September 1891, organised by the Aberdeen Socialist Society, the Aberdeen Revolutionary Socialist Federation (which had split from the Aberdeen Socialist society earlier in the year, and soon began to take a more anarchist line) paraded an empty fish cart adorned with revolutionary slogans: 'On the front of the cart was erected a gibbet, from which, suspended by the neck, was the effigy of a man in full dress with tall hat, and provided with an eyeglass. Around the hat was a placard printed in red with the word "Capitalism" upon it'. The cart was hung with placards reading, 'Vive la Commune', 'All wealth to labour doth belong', 'We'll turn things upside down'.⁶³ Here again, the symbolism of the Commune was used as short-hand to denote a revolutionary stance. What's more, 'We'll turn things upside down' was a reference to the Civil War era radicalism of seventeenth-century Britain, and more specifically John Bruce Glasier's very recent 1891 poem about the long tradition of radicalism in Britain, titled *We'll Turn Things Upside Down*.⁶⁴ The Aberdeen revolutionary socialists' choice of slogans for their cart shows the comfortable co-habitation of native and foreign symbols; both native and foreign heritages could be invoked to express revolutionary sentiments at a demonstration about the Scottish Land question. The invocation of the Commune was very much part of socialists' vocabulary in this period—*Vive la Commune* was recognisable and therefore useful. This episode also shows how within socialist groups the Commune was used as a way of reminding others to remember their revolutionary conviction, especially when they were tempted to "sell-out" or put too much faith in the parliamentary cause. Just prior to the Land demonstration the Aberdeen Revolutionary Socialist Federation accused the Aberdeen Socialist Society of 'reactionary policy' and for pandering to moderate and parliamentary concerns in asking the Town Clerk for

⁶¹ 'French and English Fraternity', *The Times*, 5 March 1885.

⁶² Gilray, *Early days*, p. 12.

⁶³ *Northern Daily News* (Aberdeen), 31 August, 1891.

⁶⁴ For more on Glasier's song see Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour*, p. 199.

permission to hold the demonstration.⁶⁵ In this way invoking the Commune – or the means by which one celebrated its anniversary – could be used as a chance for rival socialists to attempt to out-radical each other.

IV. Irish socialists and the Commune

In Ireland the atheism of the Commune and the assassination of the Archbishop of Paris caused most Fenians, and Irish republicans and radicals, to recoil from internationalist movements in the early 1870s. *The Weekly Freeman* wrote that, ‘In the name of France a deed was perpetrated which surrounds the Commune with an infamy that stands unparalleled in any civilised country’.⁶⁶ The International was seen to be intimately linked to the Commune and therefore encountered problems when it attempted to organise in Ireland.⁶⁷ The International’s Dublin branch – begun in February 1872 and headed by Richard McKeon, a cabinet-maker, former Chartist, and Fenian – was repeatedly chased out of meeting rooms, threatened with violence and had effectively disbanded by April 1872, after another unsuccessful meeting at which the *Irish Times* reported ‘The defenders of the Communists of Paris were set upon, and a hand-to-hand encounter ensued ... the glass was smashed in the windows, and every stray piece of wood was availed as a weapon’.⁶⁸ Even after the first socialist societies had sprung up, concerns about the fundamental incompatibility of Catholic workers and socialist ideas linked to the Commune continued to cause apprehension. George King, a former member of the Dublin branch of the International and the Dublin Democratic Association, and soon to be leading figure within the Dublin branch of the Socialist League (established in December 1885) engaged in a correspondence with the secretary of the Socialist League in London, Henry Halliday Sparling (1860–1924), to express both his interest in starting a branch in Dublin, and his concern for the response he might garner in Dublin. He writes, ‘You must have forgotten the religious aspect of the Irish question... the one fact that the average Dublin working man knows about the Commune is that during the struggle the archbishop of Paris was shot’.⁶⁹

And yet, just a year later the Celebration of the Commune had become an annual event for many Irish socialists. The Dublin branch of the SL had its inaugural meeting on 13th December 1885 and the first public celebration of the Commune took place the following year (1886): ‘The Chairman [of the London branch Commune celebration] next announced that telegrams had been received from the Dublin branch of the Socialist League ... assembled for a like purpose, conveying fraternal greetings to their London comrades’.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ *Commonweal*, 19 September 1891.

⁶⁶ *Weekly Freeman*, 3 June 1871.

⁶⁷ Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism*, p. 23.

⁶⁸ *Irish Times*, 8 April 1872.

⁶⁹ Letter from George King to H. H. Sparling, 26 September 1885, SLA, ARCH01344, Nr. 1877, IISH.

⁷⁰ *Commonweal*, April 1886.

The Commonweal reported on the celebration held in Dawson Street, Dublin in 1887: ‘Addresses on the principles and aims of the Commune, the reason of its failure, etc., were delivered ... A most enjoyable evening was wound up by comrade Coulon singing the Marseillaise in French’.⁷¹ In these early years of Irish socialist group-formation the Paris Commune was often the only organised event on the calendar; lecture series not yet being organised. For example, the Dublin Socialist Club was formed in December 1887, and celebrated the Commune in 1888, the only official event run by the club that year.⁷² In the now well-established tradition, the club sent their greetings to the Socialist League celebration in London: ‘Dublin Socialists join you in honouring the memory of the heroes [*sic*] of ’71 and in working for the International union of peoples. Vive la Commune & revolution social’.⁷³

The Dublin Socialist Club folded in 1889 (but not before another Commune celebration⁷⁴) and was succeeded by the Irish Socialist Union (ISU), based at 87 Marlboro Street, Dublin. It was announced in the *Commonweal* in February 1890 that an ‘Irish Socialist Union, has been started in Dublin. Basis: The union on a common Platform of representatives of the various schools of Socialistic thought, with a view to the more effective propaganda of the principles on which all are agreed’.⁷⁵ The celebration of the Commune was one principle upon which all the component groups could agree on. The Commune, as a foreign event, helped to bridge some of the gaps between disparate organisations. The ISU celebrated the Commune annually beginning in 1890: they held a lecture and discussion on 15th March titled ‘The Commune of Paris – What it Meant, and Why it Failed’, and then had the anniversary celebration on the 19th March.⁷⁶ They sent the usual greetings to the London meeting: ‘Dublin comrades join with you in honouring the men who bravely fought and fell in the Cause of human freedom. Vive la Commune!’⁷⁷

The picture of organised socialism in Ireland in the last decades of the nineteenth century is one of diverse and often chaotic and unsettled institutions and affiliations. As Finton Lane argues, while it is commonly assumed that modern Irish socialism only really began with James Connolly and the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) in 1896, in fact from 1880 there was a vibrant, if unsteady, socialist scene which was reframing and re-radicalising debates about land and labour.⁷⁸ And celebrations of the Commune were very much a part of fashioning this new internationalist socialist identity. For all the institutional upheavals, the Commune was celebrated every year. As short-lived and small groups such as the Dublin Socialist Club and the Dublin Democratic Association were established, dissolved and replaced with newer groups the Commune celebration remained a reliable yearly event in Dublin. Moreover, celebrations of the Commune were popular, and often were the best attended meetings of

⁷¹ *Commonweal*, 26 March 1887.

⁷² *Commonweal*, 24 December 1887.

⁷³ Greetings sent to the London celebration, 1888, SLA, ARCH01344, Nr. 1325, IISH.

⁷⁴ *Commonweal*, 9 March, 1889.

⁷⁵ *Commonweal*, 8 February 1900.

⁷⁶ *Commonweal*, 15 March 1890.

⁷⁷ *Commonweal*, 29 March 1890.

⁷⁸ Lane, *Irish Socialism*.

the year; at these events pamphlets sold better than usual, and the meetings themselves could even make a profit. Many of the events sound like a good knees-up: at the 1899 celebration organised by the ISRP, ‘a beautiful supply of eatables and refreshments of a less solid nature were provided all of which suffered a more ruthless dispersion than ever was inflicted on the Communards... The instrumentalist music consisted of harp, violin, fife and clarionette. There were a very large number of songs rendered during the night (and part of the morning)... the proceedings ended about 2.30am Monday morning’.⁷⁹ The celebration made 20 shillings, quite a substantial profit.⁸⁰ Part of what made the celebrations so successful was the Commune’s symbolic draw, which helped Irish socialists to see beyond localised divisions and connected them to an international cohort of activists with some shared broad aims. But also, the Commune celebrations were attended by a diverse crowd, both from different Irish political backgrounds and different nationalities (in 1887 *Commonweal* reported that ‘English, Welsh, Scotch, Irish, French, Danish, Russian, and American’ were all represented) which meant that the celebrations could also be used to discuss domestic issues in a different setting and with a broader church of attendees. For example, in 1887 Dublin socialists combined the celebration of the Commune with a debate about the Irish Land war, and the recent call for a no-tax manifesto as part of the 1886–1891 Plan of Campaign:

Dublin. — An International Celebration of the Paris Commune will be held at 50 Dawson Street, on March 17. Tea will be served at 7 o’clock, after which comrade Fitzpatrick will deliver an address on “Archbishop Croke's No-tax Manifesto”. Citoyen Coulon, Gabriel, and Schumann will take part.⁸¹

As in England, the passage of time had allowed the memory of the Commune to be articulated within a new socialist tradition, one that had not existed at the time of the Commune itself. Socialists in Dublin refashioned the memory of the Commune in order to connect with an internationalist tradition.

James Connolly - Irish republican and socialist leader, best known for his role in the 1916 Easter Rising - was a particular advocate of the Commune celebrations in Ireland. Connolly had received his early political education in the socialist clubs of Edinburgh in the early 1890s, having been born to Irish parents in the Cowgate district of the city, a neighbourhood often referred to as ‘Little Ireland’. In his youth, growing up in Edinburgh, Connolly was influenced by a Communard exile. The Communard in question was Léo Melliet (sometimes spelt Meilliet or Meillet). Originally from Lévignac-de-Guyenne in South-West France, during the Commune Melliet was elected to the Council of the Commune for the thirteenth *arrondissement*, and he was a member of the International. Following the *semaine sanglante*, Melliet first fled to Belgium and then to Scotland where he became a key organiser of the first Commune celebration in Edinburgh, and a very influential foreign socialist in Scotland. Melliet became a key player in the Edinburgh Socialist scene. David Lowe described him as one of the ‘first-rank pioneers’

⁷⁹ Minutes of the ISRP, March 1899, printed in Donal Nevin, *James Connolly: ‘A Full Life’* (Dublin, 2005), p. 71.

⁸⁰ Minutes of the ISRP, in Nevin, *James Connolly*, p. 71.

⁸¹ *Commonweal*, 12 March 1887.

along-side John Gilray, Rev. John Glasse, John Leslie and Alexander Dickinson.⁸² Melliet was one of the very early members of the Edinburgh branch of the Socialist League (formed out of what had been the Scottish Land and Labour League) which was established in 1885.⁸³ John Gilray credited Melliet with initiating the annual Commune celebrations in Edinburgh: ‘Leo Melliet, at whose instigation this commemorative [Commune] meeting was held – a man far too important in connection with this movement to pass by without a word.’⁸⁴ Indeed, it was at an Edinburgh Commune celebration that a young Connolly first met Melliet. Their meeting was probably at the celebration in 1890, at which Melliet insisted to the crowd that ‘without the shedding of blood there could be no salvation—social salvation, I mean’.⁸⁵ These words would be later echoed by Connolly, who in February 1916, just two months before the Easter Rising, wrote that, ‘Without the Shedding of Blood there is no Redemption’.⁸⁶ The importance of the Commune within Connolly’s political imaginary was later referred to by his friend and colleague in the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, William McCullen, who wrote that:

We held meetings to commemorate all sorts of events in the Socialist and Nationalist calendars. Two of which were outstanding. The celebration of the Paris Commune (1871), which he held was the classical example of a working class insurrection...the other was on McArts fort on the top of the Cavehill, on the spot where Theobald Wolfe Tone and his colleagues, prior to his departure to the United States and France,⁸⁷ swore never to desist in their efforts until the last chain with England had been broken.⁸⁸

McCullen claimed that for Connolly and his colleagues the anniversary of the Paris Commune and the anniversary of Wolfe Tone’s commitment to creating an independent Ireland were the highlights of the radical calendar. Connolly’s symbolic commitment to these two events exemplified his life-long commitment to both nationalism and internationalism. Connolly’s insistence on the Commune and on Tone illustrates how the memory of the Commune was bound up within national heritage and socialist rituals in England, Scotland and Ireland. The Commune was a symbol of internationalism, but it was also very much a part of the domestic socialist landscape in Britain before the First World War, and its memory sat comfortably within socialists’ own origin myths and ancestries, alongside nationally specific figures like Wolfe Tone.

V. Conclusion

⁸² Lowe, *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour*, p. 130.

⁸³ Lowe, *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour*, p. 126.

⁸⁴ Gilray, *Early days*, pp. 12–13.

⁸⁵ Gilray, *Early days*, pp. 12–13.

⁸⁶ James Connolly, ‘Notes on the Front’, *Workers’ Republic*, 5 February 1916.

⁸⁷ United Irishmen Theobald Wolfe Tone and Henry Joy McCracken allegedly met at Cave Hill, near Belfast, in 1795 and took an oath to launch the rebellion of 1798 (the Irish Rebellion of 1798 was an uprising against British rule in Ireland lasting from May to September 1798).

⁸⁸ William McCullen, ‘Introduction’, in James Connolly, *The Workers Republic: A Selection from the Writings of James Connolly* (Dublin, 1951), p. 26.

British socialists mobilised foreign radical symbolism and mythologies in the last decades of the nineteenth century, during which organised socialism was gaining ground across the British Isles. Commemorations of the Commune were popular and important because they required, not a coherent elaboration of political programs or philosophies, but rather the expression of a powerful sentiment of solidarity *with* the Commune, in opposition to all those *against* it. As Lissagaray wrote of the Communards of 1871 themselves: ‘like any other proscribed group, that of 1871 has its groups and its animosities, but all these opinions disappear behind the red flag escorting the coffin of a comrade’.⁸⁹

In the same way that we now take it as given that the English past was hugely important to English socialists, historians need to take seriously British socialists’ identification with these foreign pasts. Acknowledging one does not exclude the other: British socialists’ search for a universal set of symbols to connect them to each other and to comrades in other parts of the world was always pursued in tandem with the articulation of specific regional and national socialist identities. As part of their search for inspiration and legitimisation, and in self-styling their foundation myths as individuals and as part of political communities, British socialists appropriated rituals, ideas and mythologies from outside Britain and articulated them as part of an oft-fluid set of references to historic and deliberately vague examples of the workers (or the people, or the ordinary folk) rising up against their common foe. This kind of internationalism was often not the doctrinal internationalism of Karl Marx’s conception, but rather a powerful sentiment of solidarity and common struggle; and a self-conscious desire to connect British socialism with a heritage from both within and beyond the nation. It was an often-romanticised internationalism that was not always concerned with a tangible manifestation on an institutional or programmatic level (although international congresses were attended by British representatives throughout this period), but none the less was part of many individuals’ emotional attachment to socialism. The idea of an international brotherhood was appealing. This emotional attachment to internationalism found its outlet in anniversary celebrations. Anniversaries and commemorations lent themselves to this brand of emotional desire to create and sustain the idea of shared pasts and shared struggles across borders, and allowed British socialists to display these desires in a public and striking style.

For early British Socialists the Commune could always sit well within a diverse heritage that allowed for regionally specific, British, and foreign rituals and radical traditions. Celebrations of the Commune in Britain attest to the utility of foreign symbols in providing some element of consensus within a fractured movement, and they also point to the very real desire on the part of British socialists to cast themselves as part of an international movement, even as they cherished that which made them distinct. Moreover, celebrating the memory of the French Commune often allowed newly organising British socialists to better connect to their own national pasts and myths. At many celebrations connections

⁸⁹ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, p. 361.

were made between Communards and illustrious British radical heroes (like the peasant revolters of 1381, as in the notebook of the Scottish socialist John Bruce Glasier, or the Irish republican hero Wolfe Tone in the speeches of James Connolly, for example). For these British and Irish socialists, celebrating the Commune prompted reflection on national pasts, as part of a process of creating and celebrating a long and diverse radical lineage that took in both foreign and native inspiration.

Communard exiles, having battled to reshape their city, sought liberty in Britain in the 1870s. In doing so they linked their struggle, and their story, to the long history of British radicalism. The Commune endowed socialists all over the world with a powerful rallying cry. In Britain, this cry was made all the more germane by the fact that Communards had actually lived in Britain – they had held meetings, swapped stories and made plans on this side of the Channel. Of course, the realities and nuances of these ideas and plans and experiences were often lost as the retellings grew more frequent. But the legend became all the more compelling as a result: the simple fact remained that the Commune had come to Britain. In short the Commune, both mortal and mythical, produced ‘a widening circle of ripples’ that reverberated across the British political imagination.⁹⁰ Geographically separated from the continent by the narrow waters of the Channel, Britain felt these ripples lapping at her shore, and the new and recycled politics, ideas, and symbols that they carried with them could not fail to affect the trajectory of late Victorian British socialism.

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⁹⁰ ‘The English Ripples From French Communism’, *The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, 2 June 1871.

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