

## Revolutionary Self-Sufficiency: The Diggers' Digging in the English Civil War, 1648 to 1650

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On 1 April 1649, after 7 years of the English Civil War and a few months after the execution of King Charles I, a small group of people appeared on the Commons at Campe Close on the southern slopes of St George's Hill, near Weybridge in Surrey, taking possession of 'at least 40 roode' of Heath (Firth 1894: 210-11). Here, on the west side of the River Mole, close to land still marked on the map as 'Upper Common,' they burned, dug and planted previously uncultivated heath with turnips or parsnips, carrots, fava (broad) beans and corn (wheat, rye, or barley). This was one of several 'Digger' groups which appeared at around the same time in various counties across England, most of them forgotten in the immediate aftermath of the English Civil War. However, thanks to the prolific pamphleteering of one of their leaders, Gerard Winstanley, their story has been preserved in writing that still, more than 350 years on, leaps powerfully from the page. Through Winstanley's words the Diggers have been repeatedly 'rediscovered' and appropriated by historians and social and political thinkers since the mid eighteenth century to support various revolutionary political standpoints, from Marxism to environmentalism.

Although they have been discussed by historians and political thinkers in numerous contexts, almost all accounts have downplayed the Diggers' religiosity: their radical Protestantism is an inconvenience to an interpretation of the Diggers as proto-communists; and the more fantastical religious sections of Winstanley's writing are difficult for a twentieth and twenty-first century audience to digest. However, in an analysis of the Digger approach to food, their religious beliefs and radical interpretation of the Bible are crucial: grounded in non-conformist Protestantism, the Diggers' ideas about bread, Creation and right-use of the land underpin their thinking about every aspect of society. Their approach to land cultivation, food production and food consumption reveal the very practical nature of their revolutionary utopianism. In this assessment, food is shown to be representative of the imaginative possibilities of a differently structured world, establishing food as a long-standing component in socio-political utopian thinking.

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### The Diggers' religious politics

At the time the Diggers referred to themselves as *true* levellers, as much an affirmation of political difference as a declaration of affinity with their better-known contemporaries, the Levellers. The Diggers challenged the management and uses of waste common land to which they believed they should have free and open access, and declared

that the royal lands that had been seized as a result of the Civil War belonged to and should be redistributed to the people as an extension of those commons. Insisting that 'kingly power' should have died with the executed king, they harked back to what they believed were the ancient freedoms of England, before the 'Norman Yoke' of new, feudal-law governed land management practices was placed around the necks of the people. Winstanley tells the Parliament to 'be not ashamed or afraid of Levellers, hate them not' (Winstanley 1650b: 38) as he exhorts them to write new laws for the new Commonwealth. His proposals are presented as religious arguments. Jesus Christ himself is proclaimed as the restorer, Saviour, Redeemer, yea and the true and faithfull Leveller' (Winstanley 1650: 7). The Diggers' message was one that insisted on the people's God-given rights to be self-sufficient through common access to the land, and their associated rights to do what was necessary with that land to support and feed themselves.

This period is well known for its multiplicity of dissenting protestant, non-conformist religious groups, most anticipating a millennial cleansing and all presenting their own interpretations of the Bible. The Diggers were sometimes referred to as Adamites, part of the Anabaptist 'Rabble of Heretics' (Featley 1660) denounced by the 39 Articles of the Church of England (Hill 1972: 114). Although there were differences between the various Anabaptist groups' ideas and their means of expression, they shared certain principles, many of which are still reflected in Quaker beliefs: adult baptism entered into by free will; obedience to but non-participation in government; and opposition to the swearing of oaths, the use of law courts and lawyers and the bearing of arms. Diggers and most Anabaptists believed that organised churches were corrupt and the clergy, who claimed to be the mouthpieces and interpreters of God's word, were symbols of vanity and unwarranted power imposing deliberately self-serving biblical interpretation on their congregations and extracting unwarranted tithes. For them, true religion lay within.

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### Bread, the symbolic staple food

In the millennial spirit of the time the Digger writers of the late 1640s and early 1650s consistently use imagery drawn from the Bible to elaborate and justify their claims. Winstanley's discussion of bread is representative of many other food-related themes in Digger writing, particularly ideas about eating and sharing, approaches to land distribution and agriculture (especially the notion of what is 'common'), and Winstanley's ideas about Eden, nature, and Creation.

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Most Digger grain was destined to be made into bread, a food that has been resonant with symbolic power for centuries, and arguably millennia, and which simultaneously conjures up a number of different ideas (Rubel 2011). Although we no longer necessarily think of it as our staple food, bread continues to be an important component of the Western diet, and in the mid-seventeenth century it maintained its role at the centre of the diet for the vast majority of people. Its position as fundamental building block of all eating gives Digger references to bread an air of quite deliberate and fundamental simplicity; central to their theme is the idea that the desire to grow, bake or eat bread—the most important staple—is neither a trivial nor an excessive exercise. Bread is the necessary food that unites all people in need, and which implies hard work and its rewards. References to bread can thus also imply a reference to all food, as in the request in the Lord's Prayer to 'give us this day our daily bread', a humble request for what is necessary and sufficient. Finally, bread's place in both the old and new testaments of the Christian Bible as emblem of the hard grind of farming, of simplicity and sharing, and as Christ's body in the Eucharist give it multiple additional layers of meaning. While belief in transubstantiation was categorically not part of the Protestant dissenting tradition, the symbolism of the bread of the last supper, a simple meal shared with the apostles, remained critically important. Most of all for the Diggers, the production of bread is a biblical imperative, bread being the food at once most closely tied to man's punishment for sin—farming – and the rights of all to access the land needed to grow the grain.

#### *Bread and work*

Winstanley calls on Biblical support to link bread with the land and work. Firstly, bread and the hard work required to get it is part of the curse visited on Adam when he was ejected from a life of gentle gardening in the Garden of Eden: 'This is the power of the curse, which makes mankind eat his bread in sorrow by the sweat of his browes' (Winstanley 1650a: 2). However, he was not doomed to eat alone. Winstanley repeatedly invokes the verses (such as those in Jeremiah) in which the word of God is 'work together, eat bread together', and he emphasises that this should be at once a shared experience and an individual commitment to both working to obtain the bread and enjoying the eating of it: 'his *own* bread with the sweat of his *own* brows' (Winstanley 1649a: 62) [my emphasis]. Bread obtained through hard work and eaten with one's fellows is thus seen as a perfect representation of God's law, a series of acts that 'doth advance the law of Reason and Righteousnesse' (Winstanley 1649a: 53). The man-made curse visited on the common people by those in power is not to be able to eat one's bread 'as being members of one household' (Winstanley 1649a: 48-49), but rather to be forced to live according to externally imposed structures that limit the ability to share one's bread. The punishment foreseen by Winstanley for those living with only an

appearance of 'outward community' (Winstanley 1649a: 58) and of withholding from others the ability to 'quietly enjoy Land to work upon' (Winstanley 1649a: 62) is to 'be set alone, to eat his own bread, none having communion with him' (Winstanley 1649a: 58).

Having established bread as the fundamental righteous food and the reward for hard work, it is used to further emphasise the negative aspects of the current socio-political system. Winstanley insists that the bargain of the Civil War included breaking the Norman Yoke so that people might 'have the land free to work upon, that they may eate their bread in righteousness' (Winstanley, Barker, and Star 1649: 8). According to this version of history, the Norman conquest and its lineage of kings doomed the people of England to become hired labour, allowed 'but three pence, and four pence a day for their work, to buy them bread of their Task-masters' (Winstanley 1652: 19). This enforced working for hire, and by extension the forced purchase of essentials like bread, is against the word of God (Winstanley 1649a: 57). To work instead in a self-sufficient way—producing staple foods for oneself in a spirit of community—is a fundamental tenet of Digger thinking expressed forcefully through bread.

#### *Symbolic bread*

In descriptions of hunger, starvation and lack of compassion, bread is always invoked as the representative final necessity that has vanished, or is at least in short supply. By supporting the War the common people have been 'brought almost to a morsel of bread' (Winstanley 1649b: 6), while some 'have not left our selves hardly bread to eate' (Winstanley 1650b: 12-13). In doing so they have earned and paid for the freedom of the commons, the promised reward for taking Parliament's side in the 'bargain' of the Civil War. In many cases low wages and high corn prices mean that now 'their earnings cannot find them bread for their Family' (Winstanley 1650b: 8), and shortages mean the people 'can hardly get Bread, but with great difficulty' (Winstanley 1650b: 40). At the same time, the lords of manors and those that retain the riches of kingly power are accused of eating 'the bread out of the pooeres mouthes' (Winstanley, Barker, and Star 1649: 10).

Conversely, when used to defend the Diggers against charges of anti-parliamentarianism, bread is seen as a potential instrument of compassion and a way to show that one loves one's enemies. Citing Elijah's advice to the King of Israel not to starve his enemies and to set them free, Winstanley emphasises that even though the Cavaliers are their common enemy they too should at least be fed on bread and water (Winstanley 1650b: 41). More frequently, Winstanley elaborates on the Biblical notion of turning swords into ploughshares, giving this action an additional purpose. It is not only an act of peacemaking, but an act of self-sustaining (Blith 1649: title page) - these instruments will be made use of in a practical sense: 'know we shall not strive with sword and speare, but with spade and plow and

suchlike instruments to make the barren and common Lands fruitful' (Winstanley 1649b: 6). Instead of fighting Winstanley exhorts everyone to 'stand up for freedom in the Land, by acting with Plow and Spade upon the Commons' (Winstanley et al. 1650) in order to get their bread in peace.

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### Eden, Creation and its management

The Diggers' ideas are clearly grounded in a post-Edenic biblical world, taking the time after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden as the starting point for all the ills that followed. In this dissenting Protestant version of events, humankind has been in conflict over the distribution and uses of the earth or Creation ever since the Fall, and those who have put themselves in charge—the 'elder brothers'—have consistently misused power to gain dominance over their exploited, downtrodden 'younger brothers'. From the first declaration onwards the Diggers identify themselves with this wronged yet righteous 'younger brother', representing the ongoing conflict between man's law and God's liberty as the conflicts between a series of counterbalancing pairs such as the murderous elder brother Cain and the murdered younger brother Abel (Everard et al. 1649). Justified by their reading of the Bible, the Diggers declare that it is 'the meek spirit... the poor Common People, or yonger [sic] Brother, out of whom the blessing of Deliverance is to rise and spring up to all Nations' (Everard et al. 1649: 9). In their apparent weakness, they say, lies the Diggers' strength.

Besides drawing on biblical sources for colourful simile, the Digger arguments were based on a scriptural interpretation of Creation that determined fairness and the right uses of nature. In particular they focused on notions that land and its produce should be equally accessible to everyone, and that men were destined to rule over the other creatures but not over one another. The Diggers trace the idea of equality to the original man:

In the beginning of Time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Man, the lord that was to govern this Creation; for Man had Domination given to him, over the Beasts, Birds, and Fishes; but not one word was spoken in the beginning, That one branch of mankind should rule over another (Everard et al. 1649: 6).

This idea of the earth as a 'common treasury' is a biblical one, most prominently found in Mark 12:43 and Acts 2:44. In Digger tracts the phrase is repeated over and over again, closely tied to the idea of the unfair, immoral behaviour of the 'elder brothers'. The emphasis on the word 'common' reflects its multiple meanings in this context: it refers to the contested land upon which the Diggers were digging, to wider ideas of sharing, and to the social standing and collective grouping of the ordinary people making the plea. By oppressing the Common in all its

senses the 'elder brother' not only harms his fellows but disobeys and disrespects God and His Creation:

and that Earth that is within this Creation made a Common Store-house for all, is bought and sold, and kept in the hands of a few, whereby the great Creator is mightily dishonoured, as if he were a respecter of persons, delighting in the comfortable Livelihood of some, and rejoicing in the miserable povertie and straits of others. From the beginning it was not so (Everard et al. 1649: 7).

For the Diggers, the act of Creation was more than the generation of life and everything needed to sustain it: it defined man's status as a human being. Faced with God's Creation and Edenic profusion the most important decision was the social one of whether and how to share it. He envisages a second opportunity to assert the equivalence of all men and put right the post-lapsarian wrongs, when the dispute between Cain and Abel brought both the idea of property rights and of murder—and hence the law—into being. In Winstanley's version, God the father and Mother Earth are vividly personified and jointly respected; with Mother Earth providing bodily sustenance (or subsistence) as the Father provides it for the spirit (Winstanley 1649b: 4). Land ownership, enclosure and withholding of commons rights are equated with original sin, while the bondage of the common people of England is equated with the plight of the Israelites in Egypt, or a child torn from its mother: 'Therefore, once more, let Israel go free, that the poor may labour the wast Land, and suck the breasts of their mother Earth, that they starve not...' (Winstanley 1649b: 22).

It is interesting to note that while they are rich in metaphor the sections of Winstanley's writing that refer to Eden, Creation, and Mother Earth are also consistently grounded in the current, real world. Where we might expect to find a plea to return to Eden, or a desire to recreate Eden in England as is so common in botanical and gardening texts of the time (Rubel 2014), we in fact find Eden used to express broader ideas of potential, not a specific destination (Corns, Hughes, and Loewenstein 2009: 61-62). Perhaps this is because divine acts are understood as real and perfect acts that cannot be undone; rather, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Fall needs to be more fully understood as the result of man's designed imperfection. Having corrupted Creation with sin man must live with the consequences and seek redemption by following God's word more attentively.

Man's punishment for original sin was to leave the Garden to work the land, and Winstanley accepts this as the pre-millennial status quo. His argument, as we have seen, centres on precisely how this work of farming will be done, where it can be done, and by whom. The only possible earthly Eden is an internal, spiritual one found through true worship of God, and a life lived according to His word. In Winstanley's interpretation this means sharing Creation and its fruits equally among people who work and

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live together in peaceful community. However, the 38<sup>th</sup> of the 39 Articles of the Church of England drawn up in 1571 specifically dismisses community of goods: 'The Riches and Goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast' (Archbishops' Council 2014 [1571]). The savage response of the established church to the Diggers, in the person of Parson Platt in Surrey, can thus be read not only as a determination to retain ownership of and control over the land but also as a determination not to allow individual analysis of the holy word to take hold, especially when it came from dissenters and contained dangerous political and social ideas. The battle with Platt did turn, in the end, on interpretation of the Bible. As Winstanley reports it, Platt challenged him to demonstrate in scripture the justification for the path he was taking in occupying and cultivating the commons. Within four days of receiving Winstanley's manuscript, subsequently published as the first part of *An Humble Request to the Ministers of both Universities*, Platt had gathered a gang of fifty men, many hired from outside the parish, to burn down the houses of the Diggers and destroy their goods. Blocking their way to their crops and allowing animals to trample and graze upon them, he called them 'Heathens, who know not God' (Winstanley 1650a: 12).

#### Digger agriculture: commons, waste and improvement

The Diggers named themselves for their primary activity: digging. This agricultural effort, focused as it was on their own sustenance, is clearly important to an understanding of their food. A review of some of the contemporary texts on husbandry and improvement that may have influenced them alongside specific detail of their agricultural techniques gleaned from their own writing and that of observers, shows that they appear to have been skilled and successful enough to develop a reasonable crop. It seems that the Diggers probably followed the system, used at the time by the farmer-gardeners of Fulham and adopted by some men in Surrey, whereby a large proportion of the land was sown with grain crops or beans set in rows, with a smaller part set aside for intensive vegetable growing, in rotation (Thick 1998).

Winstanley declared that the Diggers' intention was 'only to improve the Commons and waste Lands to our best advantage, for the relief of our selves and others, being moved thereunto by the Reason hereafter following, not expecting any to be much offended, in regard the cause is so just and upright' (Winstanley, Barker, and Star 1649: 4). The success of the Diggers' work on the land (they produced several crops for their enemies to destroy) reveals that their knowledge of both contemporary husbandry and techniques for their promised 'improvement' enabled them to make previously uncultivated land fruitful within a very short space of time. As Thirsk reports it, 'in common parlance in the first half of the seventeenth century, improvement meant putting land

under the plough: arable was still conventionally deemed a more advantageous use of land' (Thirsk 1990: 139), making the Digger mission a clear case of 'improvement'. Continuing themes raised earlier in the century, a pamphlet of 1653 describes the wild and waste land across the country as 'a deformed chaos that' was 'a shame and a reproach' to the people of England (Thirsk and Cooper 1972: 135). The 'wild howling wildernesses' should be enclosed, tilled, manured and planted according to the soil type, so that they:

would bring forth plenty of flax, hemp, hops, corn, also increase cattle of all kinds, and many other things by which means the State would be sufficiently supplied with hemp for cordage for their shipping, and the poor more richly replenished with bread corn (the staff of sustenance) and many other necessary and profitable fruits (Thirsk and Cooper 1972: 135-36).

Improvement would supply plenty, enriching the state and feeding the poor with bread, their staff of life. This language of the improvers, who consistently point out the untapped potential of England's uncultivated land, is borrowed to explain the obvious logic of the Diggers' cause: 'Divide *England* into three parts, scarce one part is manured. So that here is land enough to maintain all her children, and many die for want, or live under a heavy burden of povertie all their daies' (Winstanley 1649a: 61). The critical difference between the Diggers and the improvers is that the former intend to improve the common land for themselves, the common people as a whole, while the improvers generally assume improvement is contingent upon mass enclosure and thus the leadership and control of landowners. The main difference is political, not technical.

#### *Ownership and management of the commons*

The initial reports of the Diggers' appearance reflect freeholders' fears of instability and insurrection relating to rules, property and land use. Henry Sanders of Walton-upon-Thames, the first to write a report about them, cannot say that they have already tried to steal any private land, but he raises the fear that they might: 'They doe threaten to pull downe and levell all parke pales, and lay open' (Firth 1894: 211). In reality, it was primarily the common and waste land that was at stake, not anyone's park or even their enclosures. In the Digger view, the common people required an extension or reinstatement of exclusive rights over land they should already have access to, not a grant of new land rights. To emphasise this point, in a letter to General Fairfax, Winstanley says:

they [the Gentry] shall have no cause to say wee wrong them, unlesse they count us wrongers of them for seeking a livelihood out of the common Land of England by our righteous labour, which is our freedome, as we are Englishmen equall with them, and rather our freedome then theirs, because they are elder brothers and Free-holders, and call the Inclosures their own land, and we are younger

brothers, and the poore oppressed, and the Common Lands are called ours, by their owne confession (Winstanley 1649b: 2).

However, these claims to the commons were not backed up by the legal system. Since the Norman Conquest the Lords of the Manor had effectively owned the soil of the waste commons—the surface, mineral and hunting rights—with some legal limitations on their exclusive personal use of it (Eversley (Baron) 1881: 187). Feudal law obliged them to meet their tenants' needs for pasture, fuel gathering and turf cutting through access to this land (Hammond and Hammond 1911: 29). Every social group from the Yeomanry down earned 'appendant' rights of access to the waste commons and common fields according to their arable rights (Hammond and Hammond 1911: 31). Winstanley argues that it is the right to determine exactly how the common land should be managed that is as much of an issue for the Diggers as its ownership, reporting the overstocking of the commons with the freeholders' own sheep and cattle, 'so that inferior tenants and poor Labourers can hardly keep a Cow, but half starve her; so that the poor are kept poor still, and the Common Freedom of the Earth is kept from them' (Winstanley 1652: 7-8). The cottagers' and other village inhabitants' already limited rights were granted by privilege, tightly controlled, often reduced without redress and entirely conditional upon the management practices and permission of the Lord of the Manor (Eversley (Baron) 1881: 190).

Even with permission granted there were detailed rules of enforcement. For example, a right to graze did not necessarily mean a right to graze anywhere one chose, and users could be fined for deviation from the rules. Livestock that wandered into areas designated as not permitted to particular owners, or belonging to those who had different commons rights, were penned up in the pinfold and only released after payment of a penalty to the representatives of the freeholder. In his Digger texts Winstanley attacks such commons management practices in rousing terms, evoking heavenly support for a return to true common use of common land: 'the Sonne will set you free; and truly he is coming on a maine, to breake downe all your pinfoulds, and to lay all open to the Common' (Winstanley 1650: n.p.). He rails equally passionately against all additional monies paid to the Lords of Manors such as rents, fines (the fees payable for acquisition or transfer of a tenancy); heriots (death duties owed by a tenant's heirs, usually taken in the form of the best livestock); quit rents (paid by freeholders and copyholders to evade services due); and homages (paid in formal acknowledgement of the obedience and service due) (Winstanley 1652). He argues that all of this should have been overturned as the outcome of the Parliamentary victory in the Civil War.

### *Enclosure*

Although the most decisive period of land reform and enclosure was in the eighteenth century, commons rights

had been in dispute for centuries, with the Statute of Merton (1235) extending rights of enclosure to lords of manors with limitations that mainly protected freeholders (Eversley (Baron) 1881: 191). In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, there were numerous enclosure attempts, many of them successful. Most were justified on grounds of 'improvement' of the land, best undertaken in large parcels made subject to consistent treatment (Hammond and Hammond 1911: 34). These acts sometimes met with armed resistance. The so-called Midlands Revolts of 1607 marked an early appearance for 'diggers' and 'levellers', named for their active protest in which they levelled and filled in (by digging) the drainage ditches and border markings of the new pasturage (Hiltner 2011: 129-31). Similar activities in the Fenlands in the 1620-40s resisted attempts to 'improve' land in order to grow oil and textile crops like coleseed, rape, hemp and flax, or to convert the 'fen and reed' (Hiltner 2011: 136-37) that supported village populations into pasture (feed) for 'beef and bacon' (Hiltner 2011: 133). Many attribute Cromwell's strength in the counties of the East to his defence of the commons during these enclosure attempts (Hammond and Hammond 1911: 35). This may also explain the strength of feeling behind the protests against Cromwell's conversion to the improvers' cause in the 1650s (Hiltner 2011: 155). While the Diggers' action should be understood within the context of enclosure, it is also notable for the extent of the claims they were making. Not only did they represent 'an articulate, positive, response to the assault on customary use-rights to the land'; they also explained in detail and positively claimed 'their time-hallowed birthright against the interests of "improving" landlords' (Kennedy 2008: 130).

### **Conclusion**

Bulstrode Whitelocke records the many letters and petitions that came to Parliament during the years of his diary, but on each occasion that he notes the Diggers he gives a far more detailed account of them than of most other events. Initially, he justifies giving the Diggers such a disproportionate amount of attention thus: 'I have set down this the more largely, because it was the beginning of the Appearance of this Opinion; and that we might better understand and avoid these weak Persuasions', but he continues to cover their actions in more detail than most other alarmist reports (Whitelocke (the Elder) 1732: 397). This is perhaps understandable given the very real threat the Diggers' apparently 'weak persuasions' actually posed. By advocating that all the common people should take charge of and effectively enclose for themselves all the common land of England, the Diggers were actively working to reinstate their true 'English' rights and deprive the existing landlords of their assumed, individualistic ('selfish') rights—unless they themselves joined the Digger project. By providing a working example of a successful conversion

of waste ground to arable cultivation, they showed that 'improvement' was not the preserve of the aspirant or actual landowner informed by theory and supported by hired and instructed labour, but an activity that these poor labourers could quite readily and competently carry out for themselves. By denying the legitimacy of the established church, the manorial courts, the market system and landlords expecting them to work for hire, the Diggers sought to set up a separate, independently self-sufficient movement. All of these factors combined to make them a significant social and political threat operating dangerously outside the control of their social superiors. This may explain why, doubly threatened as a cleric and a lord of the manor, Parson Plat chose crop destruction over confiscation, even in a time of food shortages.

While a few men with spades could initially be dismissed as a rabble of doomed crackpots, their flourishing acres of growing crops became a potent symbol of the far-reaching, real—and for those in power, frightening—possibilities contained in their revolutionary project. Deeply rooted in an Anabaptist interpretation of the Bible, the Diggers' vision for the righteous sharing of God's Creation and a society that could work and eat together in peace and plenty comes vividly alive through its direct links to food. Winstanley successfully brings together the idealistic realms of religion and politics with the everyday realms of food and eating, and in doing so presents us with an impressively practical vision of how both might be dramatically improved.

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#### Notes

- 1 A roode is the same unit of measurement as a rod, equivalent to a quarter of an acre. In other words, the Diggers began their experiment with a minimum of 10 acres of land.

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