

# The Cause of the Peasants' Revolt

The first of a series of three articles entitled "The Peasants' Revolt of 1381"; its cause, progress and effect.

ALONG the trail of the centuries we find social and political events that denote the termination of certain historical epochs and, at the same time mark the inception of other cycles. Those events, by themselves, cannot be explained. They must be taken and considered as part of the warp and woof of human development. Their connection with other events that preceded and succeeded them must be understood. The nature of the material conditions from which they sprang; the state of industry; and the needs of the various classes that constitute the society of the time must all be familiar to the student who wishes to place in its proper order any important event of the past or present.

Bourgeois historians have repeatedly ignored this scientific method and, consequently, have utterly failed to reveal the causes and effects of those beacon lights that illuminate the path of recorded time. The environment in which those writers were born and educated was not conducive to scientific research. Being the products of class society, their social position prevented them from seeing or admitting the true state of affairs. An idealistic conception of history that looked on man, and the thoughts that resulted from the functioning of his brain, as the great moving force in social evolution rendered impossible a rational treatment of social data.

In the case of the subject matter under discussion in this essay—the Peasants' Revolt of 1381—the superficial method of master class historians is easily detected. In our school books the insurrection was attributed to a complication of causes beginning with the weakness of the boy king—Richard; passing on to the insulting of Tyler's daughter by a poll tax collector; and ending up with the perverted mind of the "mad priest of Kent."

Contemporary chroniclers, like Walsingham and Froissart, who were far from being keen students of society, or political philosophers, have merely attempted to describe the manner in which the rebels carried out their plans, and even this description is grossly colored by their zeal to preserve the lustre of those officials of state from whom they secured their titles and emoluments. Clowns, boors, robbers, and gluttons, are the endearing expletives made use of by those story tellers when referring to the principals of the peasants' revolt. They cannot explain the significance of the event.

To refer to this outbreak as the "Wat Tyler Rebellion" or the "Ball-Tyler Rebellion" is not an adequate statement of fact. It was something much more. A movement that involved the spontaneous uprising of peasants and artisans from Hampshire and Lancashire, to Suffolk and Kent, could scarcely be regarded as the fruit of personal whims, or the result of personal grievances. Though many outrageous acts were committed, and many grievances and disputes were prevalent, still, history records no complete national organization, with a central committee, to redress the afflictions, and right the wrongs of an exploited populace. Few popular movements of any age have been less influenced by the presence of leaders. As Powell in "The Rising of 1381 in East Anglia" points out, Ball alone of all the leaders was well known for any lengthy period of time. For twenty years he had preached discontent, but at the time of the outbreak he was in jail. Tyler and Straw, regardless of the emphasis that chroniclers and annalists have placed on their names, were never anything more than local leaders, whose influence had never extended beyond the boundaries of their home shires.

In reviewing the causes that led to the revolt we must be careful not to attribute too great importance to any single factor. Where the perspective is obscured by the lapse of time, and the dearth of data, there is sure to be a tendency to place too much stress on those constituents that are most apparent. Rogers, Cunningham, and Gibbin, in their otherwise valuable contributions to the subject, have dwelt too long on the theory that the discontent was due to

the lords' attempt to rescind the agreement made with their villeins, by which they could commute their customary days of labor for a money payment.

This was undoubtedly one of the causes, but later and more careful researches into that stormy period show that this was only one among many factors contributing to the insurrection. Oman, in his valuable work—"The Great Revolt of 1381"—shows that those attempts on the part of the masters were local and partial rather than national in their scope. That there was no general attempt to rescind whatever agreements were drawn up on the subject seems a rational conclusion. In most parts of the kingdom the scarcity of hands was so great that the lords were actually forced to do the reverse. They commuted service for rent rather than rescinding it.

The method of solving the labor problem varied, however, from manor to manor, and county to county. A means quite applicable to conditions in one part would of necessity be anathema in others. The "stock and land lease system," by which the peasant was provided with land, seed, implements, and stock, which could be paid for out of the proceeds of the annual crop, was no doubt the most common and satisfactory solution.

As for the poll-tax theory of insurrection, it is too weak to carry any considerable weight. The poll-tax of 1381 had no more to do with the rebellion than the shooting of an Austrian idiot by a Serbian fanatic had to do with the recent world war. It was the match that started the explosion, but not the cause of the accumulation of inflammable material that was awaiting the match. History supplies a more reasonable theory. A knowledge of conditions existing in England during the preceding century is quite sufficient to assign the cause. Trouble had been brewing for many years. The various factors at work were rapidly coming to a focus. A grievance, sufficiently national in character to unite all the malcontents, was now required, and the poll-tax supplied it.

From the time of the great plague in 1348 the landlords of England were at their wits end to devise ways and means of securing sufficient laborers to till their lands and also to keep those workers in a hypnotic trance where the splendid advantages which changed conditions conferred upon them could not be seen. The outcome of this campaign on the part of the masters was the "Statute of Laborers," the chief aim of which was to supply sufficient labor and cheap labor to the owners of England.

Drastic as were the clauses in the statute referring to the obligations of the workers, and the penalties inflicted for a refusal to obey, still various means were discovered for getting around the act. In this respect the landless laborers were much better equipped than the villeins. They were not forced to remain in one section. If they violated the statute they could move without losing anything. As Langland, in his "Piers Ploughman," tells us, they were an independent portion of the community who could not be controlled. Of course, the villeins themselves were forced to try their strength against their masters on numerous occasions, but with no appreciable degree of success. Being scattered over the country, and having no central organization to consolidate their forces, their methods of attack fell far short of what was required.

The antipathy shown toward the statute of laborers did not emanate entirely from the rural sections. There was urban discontent as well. The growing towns were having troubles of their own. The burghers were trying to obtain municipal privileges from the lords and the church who, jointly, controlled them. Even in those towns where charters and constitutions had already been secured, the conflict between the "inferiores" and the "patentiores," between the unprivileged and the privileged, continually proceeded. In old established towns like London the relations which long existed between master and man were rapidly changing.

The new struggle was one of a rising trading and merchant class against the workers whom they em-

ployed. In such towns the manufacturers and entrepreneurs had managed to gain control in every craft. They hired men to work by the day, thus rendering obsolete the old advancement into a condition where those at the bottom could attain the status of masters and business men themselves. Further below was a cless of unskilled and casually employed laborers, whose numbers were greatly augmented by fugitive villeins and other workers from rural districts. Being long on the move they had little respect for the social system of the towns, and took advantage of every opportunity to show their dislike.

The foreign emigrants, the Lombards, the Zealanders, and the Flemings, who came to compete with the English workers in the job market were greatly despised and often murdered. The "right to work" was as jealously guarded at that time as it is today. Not alone the workers, but also the merchants and manufacturers of Flanders, who established themselves in England, and exploited labor to a greater degree than the native business men, were roundly hated.

With all these groups, and the conflict of interests between them growing ever keener, there was little likelihood that peace or contentment would obtain. With a strong hand at the helm, an outbreak of a violent nature might have been averted at least for the time. But strength was not the chief characteristic of the rulers of England at that day.

John of Gaunt, Archbishop Sudbury, Sir Robert Hales, and a boy king were the heads of the state. None of them possessed the ability necessary to manage affairs at such a critical stage. There was war with France and expenses were high. Scottish raiders harassed the north and could not be stopped. Trouble with Flanders prevented the merchants of that country from buying the usual supply of wool, which meant disaster for the English wool growers and greatly reduced revenues for the state. Borrowing was resorted to, but the credit system was still in its infancy, and little financial assistance could be obtained. Three methods of raising the requisite funds were left to choose from. These were the poll-tax, poundage, and tenths and fifteenths. The Commons chose the former as the most suitable means of replenishing the treasury.

The Commons was composed largely of members of the middle class. Poundage would have fallen heavily on the merchants, while tenths and fifteenths would be placed in the shoulders of the landed proprietors. The poll-tax would apply to all citizens equally, so would not encounter the wrath of any particular section.

Every lay person in the realm over fifteen years of age excepting beggars, was assessed three groats. The distribution of the whole sum was gradated so that the wealthy in each district could take the burden of the poorer members. This method worked splendidly in the rich parts of the country where the tax on the poor amounted to only one groat per man and wife. But in the poor districts they were dealt the hardest blow. There was no one to make up their allotment, so each villein and cottager was forced to find his shilling.

To obviate the necessity of making payment, the workers resorted to the method of making false returns, and wholesale fraud was practised against the government. A revision was ordered. Commissioners were sent to the districts with a few clerks and sergeants, but no armed force. Their compelling power was weak, and their task anything but pleasant.

The temper of the people was not such as would warrant success in collecting, when the means of enforcing the collectors' demands were not revealed. An explosion of wrath was certain to follow, and after a month of attempting to extract the tax by a mild form of coercion, one of the most important outbreaks of the middle ages took place. The rapidly changing conditions of the years previous were now at that stage where the fagots were awaiting the match. It came.

J. A. McD.