

# London Socialist Historians Group Newsletter

No.63 Spring 2018

## The left and royal occasions: a long history

The left, being supporters of democracy and elections, have never been great enthusiasts for unelected rulers, particularly - as many have done historically - when they have claimed a 'divine right' to rule.

Yet in Britain republicanism, the idea that there should be an elected head of state, has been a minority trend if one is to compare it for example to French Republicanism which had a revolution in 1789 to remove the King permanently.

It's true of course that on 30 January 1649 King Charles I lost his head in Whitehall, and a Commonwealth was in place until 1660. At that date the monarchy was restored although the events of 1649 have a place in radical history and thought to this day.

Republicanism in Britain in addition has not always been associated with the left. One need only look at President Trump to understand why in the present moment this might be.

Rather the majority trend on the left has been to have a distaste for the patronage, privilege and forelock tugging that goes with royalty, but to be clear that politically there are other priorities.

It is this anti-monarchism, identified by Antony Taylor, an academic who has provided perhaps the best modern template for the study of opposition to royalty, that has been the dominant trend in British republicanism. The monarchy is not liked but it is specific instances of excess and extravagance that are the focus of protest.

It's in this general context that the forthcoming marriage of the actress Meghan Markle and Prince Harry should be seen.

There are complications. Harry is of course a child of the late Princess Diana whose life, and particularly death, did much to highlight twenty years ago how out of touch with the modern world the Royal Family had become.

Blair tried to fashion Diana as the 'People's Princess' though it is difficult to see any lasting impact of a campaign that made a considerable mark at the time.

Prince Harry however has noted that Donald Trump will not be getting an invite to the wedding as he is a threat to human rights. This seems to go somewhat further than Theresa May has managed. It seems very unlikely that her Government is up to 'launching' Harry and Meghan as the 'modern' face of the monarchy, in the way Blair did with Diana.

Yet there is already commentary that Harry marrying a person of mixed race, Meghan, will change the position in respect of race in Britain. It may certainly boost the fortunes of the relatively small BAME middle class, but it will take a great deal more than a wedding to shift institutional racism, or 'whitewash' the colonial era and the Empire and the crimes carried out in its name.

It also leaves us with a wider issue and one that was central to nineteenth century protests at royal occasions.

These protests centred on what William Cobbett had called 'Old Corruption'. That is a political culture of deference, patronage and forelock tugging where those who hold ultimate power in society - Britain remains a constitutional monarchy not a parliamentary democracy - do so by virtue of accident of birth rather than on merit or electoral choice.

Royal occasions in the second half of the nineteenth century when Queen Victoria was on the throne, such as weddings and jubilees, provoked significant protest.

There were a number of underlying motivations for such protests - not all progressive, there was an element of anti-German xenophobia - but a key one was the cost.

Expenditure on royal pomp and ceremony was contrasted with the large numbers in society who lived in absolute poverty. The radical Reynolds' Newspaper became the biggest selling Sunday paper of the time centrally based on virulently attacking the Royal Family and its aristocratic hangers on.

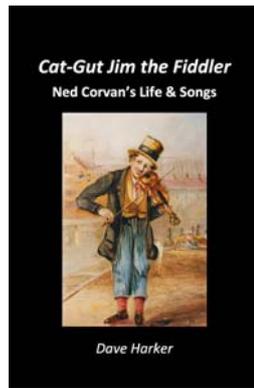
Expenditure on things like the royal yacht and the royal train were particular targets outside of specific ceremonial occasions even at that time.

The May 2018 wedding of Meghan and Harry will no doubt be seen by numbers in this familiar context: Austerity Britain and universal credit versus a pageant of the rich with expenditure being no object.



Keith Flett

# “But now the masters grasp at all”



**Cat-Gut Jim the Fiddler: Ned Corvan's Life & Songs**  
By Dave Harker  
Wisecrack Publications, 2017, £20.00  
ISBN 978-0995741812

The mid-nineteenth century is both very near and very remote, as we realise in this study of Ned Corvan (sometimes spelt Corven). The society depicted here is only two lifespans away - my grandmother (who went into the mill aged eight - factory at 6.00 a.m., school in the afternoon) was born into the world of Corvan's children. Yet the differences, in physical experience and in ways of thinking, are immense. Dave Harker, who regrets that “today most north-east children have to follow the ‘National Curriculum’ and focus on the history and culture of London”, has rescued from oblivion a remarkable figure.

Ned Corvan was a singer, comedian and artist. Born in 1827, he died aged only 37 - largely as a result of his excessive use of alcohol and tobacco - but having established a substantial reputation. Dave Harker will be known to many for his work on Robert Tressell

[ <https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/tressell/> ] and the Shrewsbury pickets [ <http://www.labournet.net/ukunion/0801/building1.html> ], as well as his study of the origins of Bolshevism [ <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/events/revolution/> ], but he has also written a number of books on the history of popular music, for example his study of George Ridley reviewed here. [ <http://londonsocialisthistorians.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/book-review-blaydon-racesa-song-and-its.html> ]

The book is based on an immense labour of research, and is beautifully illustrated with reproductions of original documents. Harker presents his material in a somewhat disconcertingly staccato style, confronting his readers with a mass of information that builds up a picture of Corvan's life and its material context.

Life for working people was miserable. There were diseases like cholera, pit disasters like that at Hartley Colliery in 1862 when 204 died, and above all grinding poverty - when miners struck in 1844 they were turned out of their homes and had to live in tents. But there was resilience, and then as at many times that resilience took the form of laughing and singing - comedy and music, the two themes of this book.

Corvan lived before even the most primitive forms of recording device described in Harker's penultimate chapter. He could scarcely have imagined the world of today, when half the population walk the streets with what we used to call gramophones on the top of their heads. If people wanted to hear music they went to the theatre. The Tyne Concert Hall held 2840 people; at Nelson Street Music Hall “Ladies and

Gentlemen” paid sixpence and “the Working Classes and Children” paid threepence. He also recreates aspects of the music industry. Thus he quotes a letter about performers who “write to distant managers for situations at extravagant terms ... arrive, make their first appearance to an astonished public and petrified manager, who discovers, when too late, that he has been made the dupe of a miserable trickster” - the Strangers were doing much the same thing a century and more later.

Modern readers will wince at some of the language used to describe black musicians - and at the occasional references to Jews. But we also read of the Alabama Minstrels, advertised as the “*only Troupe of Real Blacks in England*”, and it is clear that black musicians exercised an important influence on English popular music. The milieu was against slavery and sympathetic to radical figures like Garibaldi.

Corvan's act combined songs of his own composition, violin-playing, comic monologues often inserted within the songs - and visual art. One account describes how “the accomplished entertainer swept in a masterly style the strings of his violin, which responded in the grand chorus of Paganini's *pièce de résistance*. Ere the thunderous plaudits of the delighted assembly had died away, he produced from his pocket a piece of chalk, with which he drew in rapid succession the most life-like portraits of then living celebrities, including the late Emperor of the French, Mazzini, Kossuth and others.” He combined humour and pathos.

Comedy depends very much on context - imagine someone in a hundred years' time reading *Private Eye* and needing footnotes to explain who Boris Johnson was. Lines like “When a chap begins ti tawk aboot eatin' cats, it's a sign he's gannin' ti the dogs” may be a bit flat on paper, but we are assured that audiences were “never tired” and some were “convulsed” with laughter. The North-East dialect rendered phonetically is a bit of an obstacle but is easily got used to.

Corvan's songs confronted some of the major questions of the day. He was an anti-militarist; his song *He wad be a noodle* mocks a young man who wants to be a soldier, but in a shooting competition “He fired reet past the target an' kill'd an aud cow”.

Taxes were the theme in *Gladstone's Budget* [Gladstone was then Chancellor of the Exchequer]:

“Oh! Curse the budget, aw'd hang each thunerin' thief,  
For raisin' rum and whisky, wine, brandy, bread, and beef.”

Corvan was no Marxist:

“With a fair day's wage for fair day's work, we'll ask for nothing more.”

But he condemned greedy employers:

“But now the masters grasp at all, working men they still oppress,  
And while making fortunes for themselves, they make our wages less.”

So in *Carpenters' Strike* he praised Sunderland shipwrights who had won a strike:

“Aws glad they've got raised, lads, it's truth aw noo speak,  
For they'll flock to see me on maw benefit neet.”

When Queen Victoria came to Newcastle to open the station, Corvan wrote *The Queen's Second Visit*. While he did not openly criticise the monarchy, there was an element of irony, recalling that the population paid for royalty:

“Beyth rich and poor from a’ pairts flock’d for ivery yen was keen,  
To hev a look at them they keep, Prince Albert and the Queen.”

And he pointed out that the monarch could have shown more generosity:

“Or had she opened oot her purse, she might dune warse, aw’m sure, sir,  
And left a hundred pound or se to help to feed the poor sirs.”

And beyond the satire there was an aspiration to a better world in the future. In *the Funny Time Comin’* he looked forward to the day when

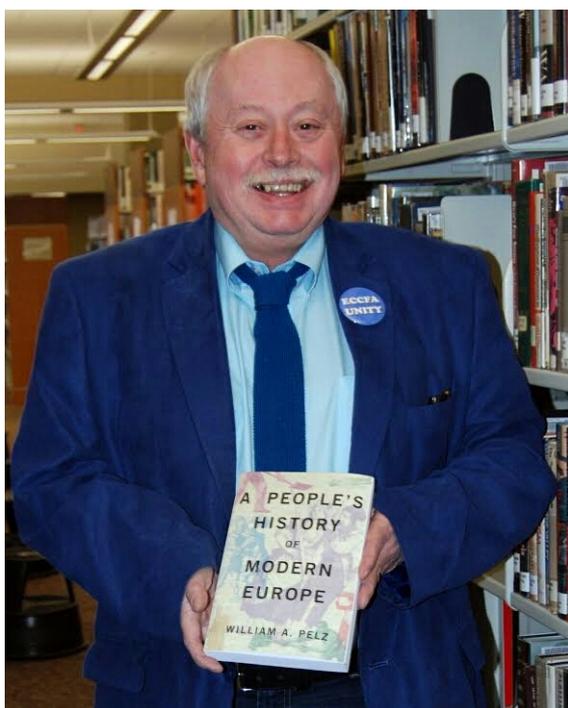
“We’ll hae no shippin maisters then  
We’ll mayke them work like other men  
I’ the funny time comin’.”

Corvan now lies in an unmarked grave beneath crumbling tarmac. But Harker has brought back to life his combative spirit.

Ian Birchall

## Obituary

# William A. “Bill” Pelz



A brief obit, put together quickly by Patrick Quinn and myself. A version will be published in *Against the Current*. Feel free to publish and edit, as you see fit.

Eric Schuster

Bill Pelz, a well-known socialist activist and prolific scholar in the field of European and comparative Labor History died at the age of 66 in Chicago on Sunday, 10 December, 2017, following a heart attack. Bill was born into a working class family on the South Side of Chicago.

After graduation from high school he became a bus driver, “but later lowered my expectations and became an academic historian”.

An SDS member for a brief time before its demise, he joined the Chicago branch of the International Socialists (IS) at the beginning of the 1970s and soon became one of the best known leaders of the Left in Chicago.

He was an early member of the Red Rose Collective, along with historians Mark Lause and David Roediger, and later a long-time member of the New World Resource Center.

Both were radical Chicago book shops and important local organizing and information centers. He helped organize Chicago's first Rock Against Racism concert, and later joined Solidarity, served as International Secretary for the Socialist Party USA, and was the Chicago Political Education Office for the Democratic Socialists of American (DSA).

Bill became a Chicago-based academic scholar and professor of history and political science, first at Roosevelt University; then DePaul University, where he was Director of Social Science Programs; and for the last 20 years a popular and award-winning faculty member at Elgin Community College.

He received a history PhD from Northern Illinois University, where he studied with Marxist Historians Meg and C.H. George, completing a dissertation on the German Revolution and the Spartakusbund. He founded and led the Institute of Working Class History, co-founded the International Association for the Study of Strikes and Social Conflicts, and helped edit the Encyclopedia of the European Left. Bill also served on the board of the Illinois Labor History Society, which oversees the Haymarket Memorial and the Haymarket Martyrs' Monument.

As a scholar Bill produced many books and articles, including *A People's History of Modern Europe* (2016), *Karl Marx: A World To Win* (2011), *Against Capitalism: the European Left on the March* (2007), *The Spartakusbund and the German Working Class Movement* (1989), and *Wilhelm Liebknecht and Germany Social Democracy: A Documentary History* (2016). Also of note, Bill edited the *Eugene V. Debs Reader* (2000) (2007), with an introduction by Howard Zinn.

For many years Bill published film reviews in *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*.

At the time of his death *A People's History of the German Revolution* had been completed for Pluto Press. He also served on the editorial board for *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, and co-edited a forthcoming volume in that series.

Generations of workers, students, and leftists in Chicago looked to Bill for inspiration, good humor, generous friendship, and political curiosity. The international academic community widely admired his commitment to revolutionary principles, and in that milieu he was known as a careful, serious, and rigorous historian.

He will be sorely missed. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Adrienne Butler. A memorial service for Bill will be held in Chicago in January 2018.

# When the Nazis came for the Left



## **KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps** By Nikolaus Wachsmann

ISBN 978-0349118666  
Abacus 2016  
880pp

Wachsmann, in this extraordinary minutely researched tome, addresses many of the myths and misconceptions that have grown up over who were the victims of Nazism as well as the contradictory and shifting impulses behind Concentration Camps (CCs). This review will focus on these narratives, rather than the minute and distressing details of how the CCs operated. This book provides us with a warning from history

What is regularly forgotten is that the SA and SS's first enemies were socialists. Himmler was obsessed with the left. On the night of the Reichstag fire in February 1933, many leading Communists were detained.

Within 3 days of the 'election' in March, 1933, 5,000 Communists were arrested; in March- April alone, 40-50,000 political opponents were taken into 'protective custody'.

The SA/SS trashed 'town halls, publishing houses and party and union offices and hunted down political and personal enemies'. The focal point was 'Red Berlin' but the SA/SS did not just come for the leading revolutionaries: the KPD had built close local links with sports clubs, artistic circles, humanist groups etc.

All were seen as 'terrorists'. 'Up to 200,000 political prisoners were detained...in 1933.' Indeed the first camps were constructed for Communist prisoners where hundreds lost their lives in 1933. The hatred of the Nazis towards Communists was so overwhelming that, as revealed in a footnote, Soviet POWs were the only nationality in the camps where Jews were not separately listed.

Although many of the early political prisoners were eventually released (though those who didn't get out of Germany, were picked up again first in 1938 and, if still alive, again in 1944 with deadly consequences), Communists still accounted for about 80% of camp inmates in 1934 and were the main focus for the sweeps of 1935. In 1936, 3,694 of all the 4,761 concentration camp inmates were political prisoners. Even by mid-1938, the majority of inmates were classified as political prisoners.

Other groups were also targeted, for example some Christians, in particular Jehovah Witnesses with their 'passive resistance', 'homosexuals' and later 'roma'. Significantly, despite serious harassment, in the early years, German Jews only constituted about 5% of those detained.

The group whose fate is particularly illuminating and who are rarely acknowledged are the 'asocials': the 'degenerates'. The Nazi's treatment of Communists provided the model. By the end of 1938, 'asocials' made up 70% of the entire prisoner population, forming the largest group in the camps up till the beginning of the war. From 1938, their death toll in CCs rocketed (not to ignore the continuing use of sterilisation and the later deadly T4/euthanasia programme).

There was a 'reason' for the Nazi's repression of the 'asocials'. What Wachsmann brings out is the increasingly economic- as opposed to ideological - imperative of Nazi decision making. The camps were expanding in number and size and increasingly under the control of the SS. 'Asocials' were seen as workshy: non-productive. This proved their death warrant.

The camps were increasingly seen as contributing to the SS economy, using forced or slave labour. No room to go into detail here but between 1938 and 1945, CC inmates were used in many of Germany's commanding industries

and in the last couple of years in the war were used extensively in preparing for and creating armaments. Indeed, though Wachsmann does not provide figures presumably because none are available, millions died because of hard labour -and starvation, maybe more than were deliberately exterminated.

It was prisoners' workability which drove the decisions about who was to live, whom to die. We are all familiar with how people in one of the queues at the camps were going to be sent straight to their deaths. But this is an even more telling than we recognise.

Prisoners were seen as potential slaves: if the work killed them, which it usually did, there was always another consignment of prisoners being delivered. Indeed, the original supply were the tens of thousands of Russian POWs - and as Slavs as well as Communists, they were doubly 'sub-humans'.

But as the war turned against Germany and the Russian prisoners had almost all been worked to death, it was the 'sub-human' Jews who were seen as their natural replacement and who were put onto convoys from the ghettos and prisons across Europe to the camps. (Even by 1943, most European Jews were still in ghettos, not camps.) Wachsmann suggests that one reason for the Jewish inmates' exceptionally high death toll was that so few were accustomed to physical labour.

While Nazi policy towards Jews has been heatedly debated, Wachsmann highlights that before 1938, few Jews were taken to the camps and of those who were, most survived. But after the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom, there was mass incarceration of Jews, firstly from Austria, although many, if not most, were subsequently released. The Nazi policy at this point was not extermination but expulsion: Jews were encouraged to leave eg to Palestine, although Wachsmann suggests, this was as much to get hold of their property as for more ideological reasons.

Only when that failed, was the policy to push them East and incarcerate them in ghettos. Even when war first broke out, in theory, 'productive' Jews were exempt from imprisonment. As Wachsmann explains, 'Nazi Germany did not follow a preordained path to extreme terror'. The death camps were not an inevitability.

But from 1939, the camps changed drastically: the level of violence and terror increased as did the number of camps. The language had irrevocably shifted. Communist agitators were singled out for 'eradication'. Political prisoners were again one of the first groups of prisoners to be chosen for special punishment, particularly those picked up in France who had fought in the Spanish Civil War.

It was Germany's takeover of Poland, the first of their 'racial' wars, which pushed racial/genetic stereotypes up the agenda. Many Poles were sent to the camps where they were regularly executed and subjected to extreme labour, especially in Auschwitz. A figure which deserves more attention is that about 6 million Poles perished under the Nazis, almost all civilians, about half of whom were Jewish. Massacres were becoming commonplace.

Jews in the camps were now becoming a prime target. But

mass gassing was yet to come. Victims were in their dozens, not even hundreds. The transition to systematic mass extermination did not occur till late 1941/early 1942, when thousands started to be gassed. The first large scale gassing was of course of Soviet POWs in Auschwitz.

Auschwitz is the camp we most associate with the Holocaust and the mass killing of Jews, deported from much of E. Europe, especially Poland, accelerating in 1942. But Auschwitz was not just about murdering Jews. Many 'non-Jewish' Poles were also sent there, especially oppositionists, as well as Soviet POWs.

But Auschwitz was also the hub of the SS forced labour programme, the SS's desperate attempt to boost war production, increasingly stressed as Germany's position deteriorated from late 1942. The plan was to produce armaments, including the V2s, and repair war damage. In January 1943, Himmler ordered the police to deliver some 50,000 prisoners to the camps for slave labour, in particular Jews to Auschwitz. This led to a rapid rise in the camp population from 1943. Many were already weak or sick and over half died 'naturally'. But the contribution of camp labour to the war economy remained marginal. Yet these manhunts continued till the very end of the war. It is terrifying that the number of CC inmates was at its highest point in January 1945, when everybody knew Germany had lost.

So Auschwitz represents one of the contradictions at the heart of Nazism; between the ideological goal of destroying the *Untermensch* - and using those fit enough to work to further Germany's economic interests. But Wachsmann argues that for Nazi hardliners, the goals were not inconsistent: economics and extermination were two sides of one coin as it was 'only' people not fit to work who were exterminated.

But the increase in camp numbers in 1944 and 1945 cannot be reduced to Himmler's drive for slave labourers. As defeat loomed and especially after the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life, 'Operation Thunderstorm' first dragged in any remaining leftie and foreign resistance fighters. But it was from this point, in 1944, that more Jews - from France, Holland, Slovakia, Greece and Italy and of course later from Hungary - were sent to the camps than ever before.

This is not the place to explain that tragic escalation, which Wachsmann anyway only suggests. He considers many factors, none sufficient: the switch of line at the time of the Wannsee conference, the shifts in the Nazi policy, the role of the T4 doctors, the need to 'top-up' the SS's 'work to win' slave programme, the lethal 'hysteria' of some camp commandants and leading Nazis faced with defeat: Himmler stated in April 1945 'No prisoner must fall alive into enemy hands.'

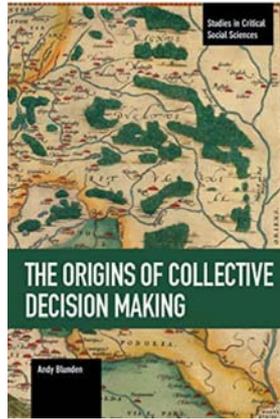
Today, we need to learn from the Nazi catastrophe. The rhetoric of the right today is racist and xenophobic. But, but have no doubts, if a 'neo-Nazi' government holds power, we will be the first of many of its victims.

**Never again!**

**Merilyn Moos**

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# The Chartists and democracy



**The Origins of Collective Decision Making**  
(Studies in Critical Social Sciences)  
By Andy Blunden  
Haymarket 2017  
ISBN 978-1608468046

Andy Blunden's chapter on the Chartists in this book gives a decent summary of how the movement worked, at least up until 1848 (after which he is on less certain ground).

He rightly notes the importance of the 1834 Poor Law Act in mobilising activity and particularly that of women. The Chartists contended for universal male suffrage, but women were active in Chartism, except at the level of leadership.

The Chartists focused on political democracy, a vote in Parliamentary elections and representation in Parliament, and as Blunden notes, the three Chartist petitions were central to this. They were able in a few cases to elect Chartist MPs - Feargus O'Connor sat for Nottingham - under the very limited democracy introduced by the 1832 Reform Act.

As Blunden also notes the Chartists used various means, familiar in the modern labour movement, to organise and mobilise activity. The Chartist weekly paper the *Northern Star* was the key organiser and had the largest sale of any paper in the 1840s. The early trade unions were also engaged and many were sympathetic to Chartism.

The National Charter Association formed in 1841 was the world's first working class party based, as Blunden notes, on the kind of local organisation used by the Methodists. This was the model available to the Chartists.

Delegate conferences were held based on majority voting and Blunden points out that meant that the views of middle class reformers like Joseph Sturge were marginalised. Neither on the one side the

influence of money (the Chartists had power of numbers), nor on the other the idea of a block vote of affiliated interests, was yet present.

Where Blunden doesn't quite capture the essence of Chartism and democracy is looking beyond the upfront policy of petitioning for Parliamentary representation, although he clearly references the much wider range of tactics and strategies the Chartists used.

They had no model of workers' democracy to look to, hence the focus on an expanded and popular Parliamentary democracy. However as Trotsky noted in *Where is Britain Going*, the Chartists laid down the original template for what was to follow, pursuing every angle from the petition to an armed rising (in Newport in 1839) and a General Strike (in 1842).

As the leading Chartist J R Stephens expressed the Chartist strategy to win the vote 'peacably if we can, forcibly if we must'.

There was still an element of old style conspiratorial politics about Chartism up to the summer of 1848, as David Goodway's *London Chartism* underlines. After that, with the failure of the petition in that year, Chartism moved decisively away from conspiratorial politics and adopted the social democratic programme *The Charter and Something More*.

The 1850s saw the development of forms of Chartist democracy familiar to this day. A Labour Parliament was held in 1854 but in practice Ernest Jones became a one-person Chartist leadership.

Blunden makes the point that after 1848 George Julian Harney and Ernest Jones established 'secret societies' rather than engaging with democratic working-class politics. This is a misunderstanding of what took place. Harney and Jones were involved with groups of political refugees from the defeat of the European 1848 and no doubt there was an element of secrecy about at least some of this.

The significant change to democratic practice in the 1850s and beyond however was the rise of organised labour in the form of trade unions, which while encouraging mass activity, such as that which led to the 1867 Reform Bill, were also concerned to put in place a much more formal democratic framework around their activities which many have seen as the beginnings of the development of a bureaucracy.

Blunden's book which ranges across a much wider range of example in the context of consensus and majority voting decision making methods, provides a very useful and insightful comparative historical tool.

# London Socialist Historians Group

## LSHG SEMINARS Spring 2018

All seminars take place in Room 304 (third floor) at 5.30pm in the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU and entry is free without ticket although donations are welcome.

**Monday 22 January**

Steve Cushion

'By Our Own Hands': A People's History of the Grenadian Revolution

**Monday 5 February**

Kevin Morgan

Communism and the Cult of the Individual:  
Leaders, Tribunes and Martyrs under Lenin and Stalin

**Monday 19 February**

Marika Sherwood

'They were not Communists they were Independistas!'  
The Beginning of the Cold War in Ghana and Nigeria in 1948

**Monday 5 March**

Keith Flett

1848 Revisited

### **The Newsletter**

Letters, articles, criticisms and contributions to debate are most welcome.  
Deadline for the next issue is 12 March 2018.

### **London Socialist Historians Group**

We receive no official funding and rely entirely on supporters for money for our activities. To become a member of the LSHG, send £10. (Cheque payable to 'Keith Flett')

Email: [keith1917@btinternet.com](mailto:keith1917@btinternet.com)

Phone: 07803 167266

Web: [londonsocialisthistorians.blogspot.co.uk](http://londonsocialisthistorians.blogspot.co.uk)

Post: LSHG c/o Keith Flett, 38 Mitchley Road, London N17 9HG