

## WRITING THE STRUGGLE AGAINST INJUSTICE

AN EXHIBITION OF TEXTS FROM UWTSO SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

On the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights'

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people. - *UDHR*, 10 December 1948

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was one of the greatest achievements of the post war responses to the horrors of World War 2. A 'civilised' country at the heart of 'civilised' Europe had engaged in acts of utter depravity against its own people. The declaration sought to provide the protection that custom had not ensured. Its assumption that 'the highest aspiration of the common people' lies in dignity and freedom rather than financial speculation for personal gain is as pertinent now as then. Today we again face 'disregard and contempt for human rights [resulting] in barbarous acts' – and the legal redress for such barbarity is mocked without any understanding of its continuing relevance. Yet the declaration of human rights is no aberrant, inexplicable act foisted on the majority by a few but part of a popular history of the struggle for rights that stretches back at least to the *Magna Carta*. Traces of that history can be found in the Roderick Bowen Archives in Lampeter, surfacing in the tempestuous tracts and pamphlets of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as in the more considered essays and arguments of the early 19<sup>th</sup>. It is essential that we still recognise these struggles, especially as memories of Nazi persecution fade, and their reductive narratives of historic purity and national destiny re-emerge from the shadows.

One of those who challenged such reductiveness was Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish intellectual who committed suicide on the Spanish border when facing deportation to a Nazi deathcamp. In his posthumously published last essay, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), Benjamin argued that grasping a 'tradition of the oppressed ... teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule'. For Benjamin, only a view of history that recognises its internal conflicts can counter the rise of Fascism:

one reason why Fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

- 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', VIII.

The many competing voices documented in this exhibition testify to an ongoing 'state of emergency'. One protests in 1648, against the army's arrest and imprisonment of members of parliament as Charles I was beheaded and the Puritan revolution turned sour. Another records the visions of the Fifth Monarchist prophetess, Anna Trapnel in 1653, revealing the tumultuous sectarian arguments of a few years later. Trapnel fell into a 12 day trance proclaiming the coming end of the world and the return of the Messiah. In Wales in the same period, Morgan Llwyd, the influential Puritan writer also belonged to the same movement.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century saw a bloody civil war, the overthrow of the monarchy, the establishment of a republic, the return of the king, the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, and the deposition of another king – all within 50 years. The 18<sup>th</sup> was no more stable. Two major revolutions in America and France changed the then world order, there was a European war and incendiary declarations of human rights from political commentators such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Tom Paine. Jac Glan y Gors, Iolo Morgannwg and Samuel Roberts heralded the equally restive 1800s. Protest shifted from God-given rights to claims of a common humanity: a shift that placed slavery at the heart of debate. At first, political tracts expressed outrage at the reduction of human beings to commodities but by 1791 French Revolutionary ideas had spread to the slaves of Saint Domingo and led to the Haitian. The published inquiry into the insurrection reveals the appalling conditions the slaves had endured. The slave voice is still clearer in an autobiography, The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, also of 1792. Equiano documents his own experience of being snatched from Africa and reduced to slavery. He tells of the horror of a human cargo trapped in a slave ship that foundered in the Bahamas in 1767.

This was a time when the philosophers and political scientists argued for equality as well. Two examples: in 1789, Jeremy Bentham's An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation rooted this in a shared human ability to suffer; in 1870 almost a hundred years later, John Stuart Mill argued against The Subjection of Women. Meanwhile novels like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) dramatised a shared human need for affection and companionship first expressed by Shakespeare. Threats to national stability posed by the corn law protests that began in 1815, triggered many creative responses. Seen from this perspective Walter Scott's conservative Ivanhoe (1819) defuses class conflict by shifting to a nationalist agenda with a history of Saxons struggling against their Norman-French oppressors. In the same year Percy Bysshe Shelley argued for radical political change after the massacre of unarmed protesters at Peterloo. His Masque of Anarchy demanded a peaceful mass assembly to claim existing rights – no one dared risk the charge of sedition by publishing it. In 1831, the Merthyr Tydfil Riots rose from unfair living conditions to workers in the iron industry and this led to the execution of Dic Penderyn by the authorities. Then, in 1839, the Chartist Movement's protests came to Newport led by Robert Frost demanding the People's Charter.

The texts in this exhibition do not show a stable and stately history, progressing from less to more 'civilised' times. Instead they reveal a complex history riven with conflict, full of injustice and characterised by insistent demands for political change. There were demands for what was repeatedly presented as a national 'birthright': a right in the legislature. The brittle pamphlets on display are remnants of the fierce argument and counter arguments of their day. Despite – possibly because of – their worn and battered state, they voice a vital, breathing past with demands and struggles that anticipate our own.

There is no surprise that denial of the past is characteristic of totalitarian regimes or their fictional counterparts. In Nineteen Eighty-Four as much as in the real USSR, history is repeatedly revised in line with shifting Party demands; in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World the difference of the past must be neutralised and, as a result, history is dismissed as 'bunk'. This is why the fragments that represent past struggles are so precious. As Benjamin pointed out 'every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' ('Theses', V).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights codified the human need for respect and dignity in the aftermath of genocide. Almost 350 years earlier Shakespeare had dramatized similar demands in The Merchant of Venice, and he was equally aware that persistent humiliation and degradation fuels a demand for revenge that will not disappear:

I'm a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.  
- The Merchant of Venice, (2:1) 1600

*\* exhibition text indicated by underlining*



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