

REBEL  
FOOTPRINTS

# REBEL FOOTPRINTS

*A Guide to Uncovering  
London's Radical History*

SECOND EDITION

David Rosenberg

Foreword by Ash Sarkar

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# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Foreword by Ash Sarkar</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction: Rebellious City	1
1. Writers and Rioters in the Fleet Street Precinct	17
2. Trailblazers for Democracy in Clerkenwell Green	45
3. The Spark of Rebellion in Bow	77
4. Coming in from the Cold: Immigrant Agitators and Radicals in Spitalfields	111
5. No Gods, No Masters: Radical Bloomsbury	143
6. Life on the Boundary: Fighting for Housing in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch	173
7. Stirrings from the South: the Battersea Four	205
8. Speaking Truth to Power: Suffragettes and Westminster	235
9. Not Afraid of the Prison Walls: Rebel Women and Men of Poplar	267
10. People's Power in Bermondsey	297
11. No Pasaran! Cable Street and Long Lane	329
Conclusion	361
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>370</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>374</i>

# INTRODUCTION

## REBELLIOUS CITY

*London from the 1830s to the 1930s*

*[A]gainst those who laud the present state of society, with its unjustly rich and its unjustly poor, with its palaces and its slums, its millionaires and its paupers, be it ours to proclaim that there is a higher ideal in life than that of being first in the race for wealth . . . Be it ours to declare that health, comfort, leisure, culture, plenty for every individual are far more desirable than the breathless struggle for existence, furious trampling down of the weak by the strong, huge fortunes accumulated out of the toil of others, to be handed down to those who had done nothing to earn them.*

Annie Besant

The writer and activist Annie Besant wrote these extraordinary lines in 1885,<sup>1</sup> when she was living in the comfort of London's West End but becoming increasingly immersed, albeit transiently, in the struggles for better lives led by impoverished Eastenders. She depicts a city mired in conflict between the powerful and the marginalised, the exploiters and the exploited, and the brazen

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Evolution of Society', published in *Our Corner*, September 1885.

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

sense of entitlement by those who were ravaging the lives of an underclass. Her description reads just as hauntingly today as the struggles for a more equal city that marked the decades after the Second World War have given rise to a widening gap between London's rich and poor. The wealthy classes are rampantly recolonising significant pockets of inner London, expanding the number of gated communities, installing exclusive boutiques, gyms, restaurants and luxury outlets, while pushing long-standing residents towards the city limits, where new pound shops open weekly.

But Besant was writing, speaking and acting in the middle of a remarkable era of campaigning and protest, in which significant numbers of London's citizens of all ages showed that they refused to accept injustice. Five decades earlier, on 13 May 1833, around 3,000 people gathered for a political rally in London's Coldbath Fields – an open space lying in the shadow of London's largest prison, the Middlesex House of Correction, which occupied the plot of land between Farringdon Road and Gray's Inn Road where Mount Pleasant Postal Sorting Office stood throughout the twentieth century. Until 1850 the prison housed men, women and children – some as young as six years old – usually serving short-term sentences. Its capacity rose from 600 in 1825 to 1,150 by 1832. Its inmates were typically described through their economic roles, 'beggars, tramps, thieves and debtors', though the prison occasionally held political radicals too. In 1820 it had temporarily housed the 'Cato Street conspirators', who had been accused of plotting to murder the Prime Minister and his entire Cabinet. Five of the conspirators were later executed at Newgate Prison.

After 1850 the Middlesex House of Correction accommodated

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

only male offenders over the age of 17. It became notorious for its widespread use of solitary confinement, its adoption of the ‘silent system’, which forbade conversation between prisoners, its use of leg-irons restricting prisoners’ movements, its paltry bread and water diets, and its rigorous application of ‘hard labour’. Some of these tasks were unproductive, making them especially humiliating for the prisoners. The poets Coleridge and Southey coined a verse:

As he went through Cold-Bath Fields, he saw  
a solitary cell;  
And the Devil was pleased, for it gave him a hint  
for improving his prisons in hell.<sup>2</sup>

Barely a stone’s throw away stood another prison: Clerkenwell Bridewell House of Detention. Less than a mile further east was Whitecross Debtors’ Prison.

Harsh and demeaning as the treatment was in these institutions – and Coldbath Fields certainly evoked the most fear – the rally in May 1833 was not about the treatment of prisoners or even about prisons at all. It was protesting about more mundane matters: rising prices, low pay and increasing unemployment, all compounded by the complete lack of political representation for the people suffering economic hardship. The much-vaunted ‘Great’ Reform Act of 1832, passed by a Whig government, had got rid of some of the rotten boroughs, such as Amersham, represented by two MPs from one large, landowning family – the Drakes – voted in by a tiny electorate since the 1600s. The Act

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The Devil’s Thoughts’, 1835 version published in Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London*, Vol. 2, London: Cassell and Co, 1879.

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

also created new constituencies in the larger cities that had grown up in the Industrial Revolution but the electorate was still tiny. Around one in six adult males now had the vote, all of them men of property. Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester gained their first MPs, but, in general, the newly emerging urban centres were still poorly represented.

The organisation that mobilised London's discontented people at that moment was the grandly named National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC). Its constitution proclaimed three key principles:

- to secure for every workingman the full value of his labour;
- to protect workingmen against the tyranny of masters and manufacturers;
- to bring about parliamentary reform (including suffrage for all adult males).

The government was in no mood to tolerate openly rebellious behaviour from the 'lower orders'. The Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, declared the gathering at Coldbath Fields illegal. The NUWC, convinced that its protest was justified, went ahead with the rally anyway. However, their numbers were soon more than matched by those of the police, who kettled the demonstrators. When the protesters were completely penned in, the police attacked them in order to break up the rally.

It was just four years since Sir Robert Peel's Act of Parliament had established the Metropolitan Police. The novice force had hardly any experience of handling demonstrations, though they would soon get more practice than they might have wished for.



## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

On that day the demonstrators fought back and three policemen were stabbed. Sergeant Brooks and PC Redwood later recovered from their knife wounds. PC Robert Culley stumbled into a nearby inn, announced that he wasn't feeling well, then collapsed and died.

An inquest was held with a jury comprising 17 men, most of them bakers from the nearby Gray's Inn district. The coroner set out the case and sent the jury to deliberate. He directed them to record a verdict of 'wilful murder'. They discussed the evidence for 30 minutes, then announced that they had a verdict on which 16 of the 17 jurors were agreed. PC Culley's death, they declared, was not wilful murder but a case of 'justifiable homicide'. Describing the police behaviour as 'ferocious, brutal and unprovoked', their foreman reported: 'We are firmly of the opinion that if they [the police] had acted with moderation the deceased would not have been stabbed.'

The coroner might have seen this verdict as perverse, but it was popular among ordinary people. So popular that cheering crowds carried the jurors through the local streets that night in a torch-lit procession. Their rebellious stand, defending the right to protest, won support beyond the working poor. Moneyed supporters laid on special treats for the jurors: a boat trip along the Thames to Twickenham and a free theatre visit to see *A Roland for an Oliver*. Each juror also received a medallion inscribed 'in honour of the men who nobly withstood the dictation of a coroner'.

This single incident reveals so much about London in the early 1830s. Economic divisions were widely acknowledged, though use of the term 'working classes' – plural – indicated that there was still a long way to travel before those exploited in different sectors would perceive their more profound commonality. Oppositional

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

forces, though, had begun to use the tools of mobilisation and protest – leaflets, placards and posters – and could mobilise beyond an immediate locality. Public protest was on the agenda and activists acquainted themselves with suitable outdoor venues. They were not cowed by the threats of politicians, backed by an emergent police force ready to use violent means to quell protest, and courts freely dishing out severe sentences.

In the decades that followed, London was a great centre of agitation and protest. The class-conscious Chartist movement placed the struggle for political rights firmly on the map, unimpressed by a ‘Great Reform Act’ that failed to live up to its title, offering crumbs to elements of a rising urban bourgeoisie. It adopted its People’s Charter at the Crown and Anchor pub on the Strand, and launched the first mass struggles for democratic rights in London. Assorted groups organised and campaigned for political and economic goals, and fought for rights they believed they were absolutely entitled to claim. Certain locations became especially associated with great protest rallies and platforms for free speech by political agitators: Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park (Speakers’ Corner) and Parliament Square in central London; Kennington Common and Southwark Park in south London;<sup>3</sup> and Clerkenwell Green and Victoria Park, north of the river heading east. As more and more areas gave birth to their own significant individuals and campaigning organisations, these groups established local pitches from which to share their concerns and demands with their public. Politics moved from the austere, forbidding surroundings of the House of Commons in Westminster to street corners, squares and public spaces.

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3 In 1854 the government enclosed Kennington Common, converted it into a park and banned political meetings.

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

The fear stalking London's elites in the late 1840s brought troops into the capital to guard strategic buildings, while Queen Victoria was spirited away from potential harm. In the 1860s, protesters, demanding political reform, unceremoniously removed the railings enclosing Hyde Park, London's most elegant green space. The 1880s saw bloody battles for free speech in Trafalgar Square and an explosion of industrial struggles, spontaneously ignited by atrociously paid women workers in London's original and largest manufacturing area – the East End. During the 1900s and 1910s, women's economic struggles in London were temporarily overshadowed by political battles. Rebellious women were imprisoned for smashing shop windows along London's showpiece thoroughfare of Oxford Street, attacking government property and randomly setting fire to pillar boxes – the modern equivalent of a cyberattack, given their crucial contents – as they forced politicians to notice and respond to their agenda for change. Even behind bars women protesters found ways to continue to challenge the authorities through hunger strikes and doing damage to their cells. In the 1920s, two London prisons – Brixton and Holloway – temporarily hosted elected councillors who refused to accede to demands on them, which they considered an injustice and an outrage to the people who had democratically elected them.

Fifty years *after* Besant's blast at inequality, the people of the East End and of Bermondsey built barricades on the streets to thwart the ambitions of Oswald Mosley, a true son of the aristocracy, who had focused his attention especially on the capital city. He had mesmerised segments of all classes within London, including significant numbers of workers, and built a paramilitary movement, spreading hatred and promoting dictatorship.

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

But rebellion has not always taken such sensational forms. Other dissenters adopted peaceful means to challenge and subvert the orthodoxies of the age, expose hypocrisies and pose questions and demands using the power of the written word. They published radical newspapers, wrote provocative pamphlets and generated mass petitions that simultaneously shook the powerful and gave heart and inspiration to those struggling for change.

This book tells stories of defiance: how Londoners responded to their circumstances, especially between the 1830s and the 1930s. It takes the reader into the heart of several localities where campaigning groups were born and developed; where they declared their agendas, captured the imagination of their wider public, mobilised for actions, took on powerful forces and suffered great setbacks, but also won important victories.

Who were these Londoners? In 1831 London was a city of 1.7 million people; a century later, the population of inner London alone had reached 5 million, with another 3 million in the growing suburbs of outer London. The development of the railways from the 1850s and 1860s displaced several very poor communities, without any compensation, but also enabled a massive expansion of factories and workshops. This drew new communities to the capital and, in turn, provided a basis for large numbers of workers to come together to fight collectively for better pay and conditions within their workplaces. The trade union movement expanded, especially among men in skilled work. An all-London Trades Council was formed in 1860, and towards the end of the nineteenth century local trades councils emerged, enabling workers across industries to support each other's struggles. By the 1890s a 'new unionism' was adding swathes of low-skilled and unskilled workers to a bigger and more combative trade union

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

movement in London.

When Annie Besant was writing, one out of three Londoners had been born outside of the metropolis. Some had travelled to the capital from other towns and villages within Britain; others arrived as international migrants seeking opportunities for economic advancement. In many cases they also sought greater freedom, security and refuge from persecution and oppression. London had long been a city of migrants, but their numbers increased dramatically towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century.

The influx and settlement of these people coincided with an upsurge of rebellious political movements. But this was not just a coincidence. Although new migrants were reluctant to put themselves in a position of confrontation with the authorities here, they were also determined that their children should have freer and more prosperous lives than they had had. They arrived with a finely tuned sense of the necessity to fight for their rights, and with a determination not to let those rights slip away once they had grasped them. Many new Londoners threw themselves into struggles for better lives and played an outstanding role in London's rebellious campaigns. This book features in particular the individual and collective contributions of migrants of African-Caribbean, Indian, Jewish and Irish heritage.

Rebellious Londoners spoke several different mother tongues but had a common campaigning language. They learned from each other's struggles and derived strength from each other's efforts and victories. Many participants had their eyes open to the wider world and were confirmed internationalists. Some among them found creative ways to give solidarity to their counterparts in other countries and publicise their causes here, but their efforts

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

were primarily focused on democracy, freedom and equality in the city where they lived and worked.

### *Grassroots Movements*

This book is about grassroots movements for change. To the extent that it celebrates outstanding and iconoclastic individuals, it highlights those who based their hopes for change on a collective movement. Some of these individuals are more well known, such as the docks strike leader Ben Tillett, suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, secularist and anti-war campaigner Bertrand Russell, writer and activist Eleanor Marx, and Labour politician George Lansbury. But readers will also meet individuals with whom they may be less familiar, such as the Chartist leader William Cuffay, whose father was born into slavery in the Caribbean (Chapter 2), the sweatshop worker and anarchist campaigner Milly Witkop (Chapter 4), Rosa May Billinghurst, a suffragette who undertook courageous acts of civil disobedience from her wheelchair (Chapter 8), the veteran East End brushmaker Mrs Savoy, who made a powerful impact on the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, when they met in June 1914 (Chapter 9), and Charlie Goodman, whose anti-fascist activism took him from the charge room at Lemn Street police station on the day of the Battle of Cable Street, over the Pyrenees to Spain where he joined the British Battalion, Fifteenth International Brigade (Chapter 11).

The word 'rebel' derives from the Latin *rebellis*, which signified a fresh declaration of war (*bellum*) after a defeat. Many of the rebels celebrated through this book were true to this spirit. They were resilient people, undaunted by temporary setbacks, who believed they would ultimately triumph. All of them challenged

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

the status quo, some from the most marginalised and embattled starting points, others more comfortably ensconced within the mainstream, but their common attributes were their fervent refusal to let injustices go unchallenged, their belief that change was possible, and their determination to see their battles through to a conclusion. The book explores these people's lives to find out what motivated and inspired them to act. It illuminates the methods they adopted and, with the aid of specially commissioned maps and suggested routes for each chapter, invites you to walk in their footsteps.

In keeping with its 'history from below' approach, this book particularly celebrates those movements that have been less conspicuous in mainstream narratives. Much has been written about the Chartist movement, but less about its predecessors, such as the London Corresponding Society and the National Union of the Working Classes, whose ideas and activities are outlined in the Introduction and first two chapters. The Women's Freedom League, whose motto was 'Dare to be Free', fought for the vote but also for equal opportunities, equal rights and equal justice for women. History records them as being less 'militant' than Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union but, as Chapter 8 argues, they were more politically radical. The Battle of Cable Street in October 1936 was an extraordinary event that dealt a severe blow to Oswald Mosley's fascist movement. But it was one battle in a long war, and the complementary actions of the people of Bermondsey, who took to the streets and built their own barricades exactly a year after the Cable Street conflagration, are described in Chapter 11.

The book ends on the eve of the Second World War, by which time the rebel Londoners and their counterparts nationwide, who

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

had mobilised, marched, petitioned, demonstrated and endured imprisonment, had chalked up several significant gains. Fascism had been defeated domestically and within years would be defeated internationally; trade unions were an accepted part of society; the Labour Party was a mass party seeking redistribution of wealth, whose members were drawn largely from the working class; there was free universal education, and higher educational opportunities were about to expand. With very few exceptions, all female and male adults could vote, basic freedoms were guaranteed, and organisations such as the National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty) were monitoring and challenging breaches of civil rights. A freely speaking national press was widely read and, although ownership of newspapers was still largely concentrated in the hands of Conservative political and economic elites, newspapers such as the *Daily Worker*, the *Daily Herald* and the *News Chronicle* flourished and provided accessible and affordable alternatives. The post-war Labour administration brought in further radical reform, reflecting a broad consensus in society, demanding greater fairness, democracy and equality of opportunity.

This war, in which, for the second time in three decades, ordinary workers had proportionally made the greatest sacrifice, was a watershed for Britain and especially for its capital city, which suffered so much damage during the Blitz. Thousands of homes were destroyed and communities dislocated. Slum clearance and renovation of the city's infrastructure, which had been taking place all too slowly from the end of the nineteenth century, suddenly presented itself as an urgent necessity. The economic divisions in British society and in its capital city remained conspicuous, but the rebels and protesters taking to



## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

London's streets in the 1950s, and in the decades immediately beyond, could generally undertake their activities from a more comfortable and stable starting point. Protests in London became focused on a more diverse and eclectic, though no less urgent, set of issues – for example, the environment, lesbian and gay rights, women's equality, antiracism, disability equality, nuclear disarmament, the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa, trade justice – all of which are much more difficult to locate specifically within the London context as opposed to the national or global context.

### *Areas Covered*

Most of the events described in this book took place within inner London boroughs and central London areas. London grew unevenly as a city. The financial centre developed first, while its legal and political institutions emerged to the west of the financial district. Industry in London was founded towards the east. The development of the East India and West India docks there brought a host of related industries into existence. Gradually the urbanisation combined with industrial development that occurred in the east was replicated across the capital. But this meant that the demands of rebellious movements for change were first fought out and often took their most dramatic forms in east London, so five of the chapters and the walks that accompany them are in different parts of the East End.

Several areas south of the river underwent rapid urbanisation and industrialisation later than east London, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The two southern districts that developed particularly strong

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

radical movements, motivated and energised by extraordinary individuals, were Battersea and Bermondsey, and they are the south London areas represented in the walks.

The most central location represented is Westminster. In contrast with the east London and south London districts, this was not at the heart of a local community struggle, but rather the focus of a broader movement – the suffragettes – spread over several areas, that concentrated its rallies and public protests on visible centres and symbols of political power, which were plentiful in Westminster.

Although the complete period the book covers ranges, with this edition's new material, from the 1790s to the end of the 1930s, most chapters with their corresponding walks relate to narrower slices of time. The Bermondsey chapter, for example, covers the 1890s to the 1930s. The Bloomsbury chapter is the exception to the pattern. This area was a hothouse for the development of radical ideas throughout the period the book covers and that is reflected in a wide-ranging walk. Two other important locations that the book will lead you through are Fleet Street and Clerkenwell. They are the focus of the first two chapters. Our story begins there.

### *Using the Book: Text and Maps*

This second edition of *Rebel Footprints* includes two brand new chapters, complete with their maps and annotated walks. All the other chapters have been revised to remove any inaccuracies that have been found, and to insert additional information gathered since the first edition. The chapters follow a roughly chronological pattern, although several are more thematic. Each

## REBEL FOOTPRINTS

chapter conveys accounts of rebellious individuals, movements, incidents and campaigns that occurred principally within that specific locality. The walks stop at key points mentioned in the chapter, and indicate physical remnants that recall this history, but also add other intriguing fragments of historical information. Each chapter, together with its accompanying walk, can be used in a 'stand-alone' manner, although it is worth reading the whole of the relevant chapter first in order to get the most out of the walk. And if you do the walks in the order in which they appear in the book, the way in which different individuals and movements inspired and related to each other will become more apparent.

The skyline of our city today is rapidly changing as tall glass-covered office blocks and luxury flats are built at breathtaking speed. The traces of a rebellious history are being erased before our eyes. This book attempts to resist that process. It cannot put back the bricks and mortar of the original buildings where momentous decisions were made or powerful words spoken, but it can help to preserve our collective memory of these struggles for better lives for people in the capital.

Londoners today are never short of issues to protest about. And as we continue to march through the streets of our capital city, holding placards and banners, singing, blowing whistles, chanting slogans and voicing our demands, we are walking on well-trodden ground. But we are also elevated, as we stand on the shoulders of those rebels who came before us, who refused to accept the status quo, and who set out on the paths of protest.

This book honours and celebrates these rebels who dreamt of a better life for all. It aims to ensure that their ideals continue to live in the hearts and minds of those who campaign for justice and equality in our metropolis today.