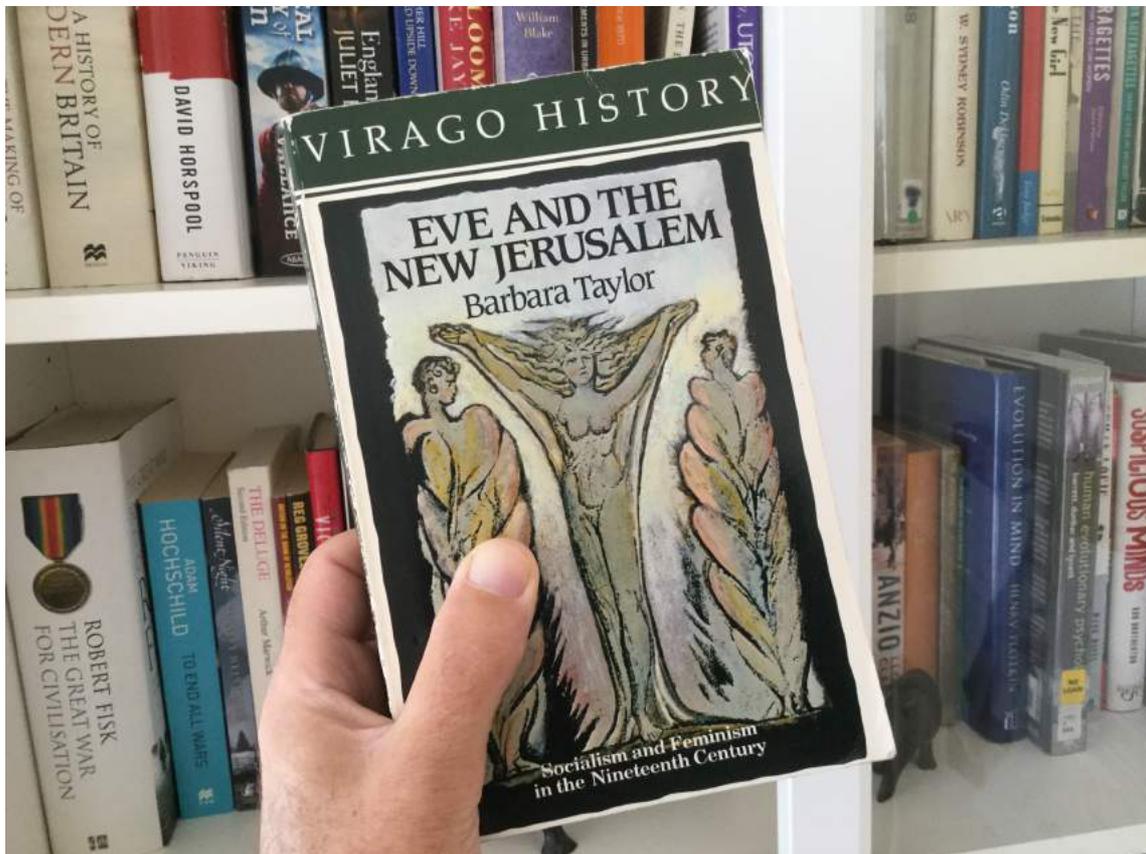


Jerusalem



The History

William Blake's (1857-1824) mystical poem *Jerusalem* had been set to music by eminent composer Hubert Parry (1848-1918) in 1916 at the behest of poet laureate Robert Bridges for an anthem “to brace the spirit of the nation”, then in the darkest days of the Great War. But Parry, a pacifist with socialist leanings¹, had no patriotic fervour for the war, and considered withdrawing the composition soon afterwards.

However when Parry's old friend Millicent Fawcett, the leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, heard it, she asked him if the women's suffrage movement might appropriate it. *Jerusalem* was, she felt, more modern than the slightly dreary *Shoulder to Shoulder* and less strident than Ethel Smyth's mildly terrifying *March of the Women*. A long time supporter of

1 It was in the family. In 1914 Parry's son-in-law Arthur Ponsonby had co-founded with Ramsay MacDonald the Union of Democratic Control, a prominent anti-war organisation in Britain, and as a Labour Party MP later served as a cabinet minister in MacDonald's Labour government).

women's suffrage, Parry enthusiastically agreed, and thus it was that *Jerusalem* was sung by a massed women's choir at a Suffrage Demonstration concert in the Royal Albert Hall on 13 March 1918.

In 1924 the song was adopted as the anthem of the Women's Institute, thus forever cementing its enduring association with the women's movement.

Why 'Jerusalem'?

*“And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem,
coming down from God out of heaven, prepared
as a bride adorned for her husband.”
Revelation 21:2*

'Jerusalem' has long figured in the history of British radicalism as a metaphor for or symbol of an envisioned and often imminent Utopia, from Francis Bacon's oblique references in his utopian *New Atlantis* through Ranter and pantheist Joseph Salmon's vision in 1651 of a 'new Jerusalem' in the revolutionary England of the Civil War, through to Clement Attlee's vision of building a 'New Jerusalem', the post-war welfare state, in 1945.

In Blake's own time, Richard Brothers (1857-1824), Blake's almost exact contemporary and an early exponent of British-Israelism, claimed to hear the voice of an attending angel proclaiming to him the fall of Babylon the Great, which he identified with London; and Brothers committed himself to the building of a 'New Jerusalem'. Brothers drew large crowds as a self-styled healer and preacher in London, and it is more than likely that Blake may have seen him or at least have heard of him.

In the first two verses of his poem Blake asks four questions, the answer to each of which is “No”: no, he is saying, there never was a Golden Age, a 'merrie England', an ideal past endowed by God that can now comfortably accommodate the contradiction of a “Jerusalem Among these dark Satanic mills”. Rather, it is only through our own struggle—a 'Mental *Fight*' very graphically evoked by the 'Bow', 'Arrows', 'Spear', 'Chariot', and 'Sword' that we can by and for ourselves forge Jerusalem, a utopia not “Among these dark Satanic mills” but “In Englands green & pleasant Land”.

In Blake's *Four Zoas* it is women who “actually build the city, the city that bears a female name, Jerusalem, and serves as the female's ultimate self-realization”.²

2 Anne K. Mellor, 'Blake's Portrayal of Women', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 16, Issue 3, Winter 1982/1983, pp.148-155
<http://bq.blakearchive.org/pdfs/16.3.mellor.pdf>

The Poem

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon Englands mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On Englands pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.