Funding the Future

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John Christensen, with whom I worked for many years in the Tax Justice Network, and I had the chance to catch up during our visit to Jersey for the funeral of our friend, the formidable Pat Lucas. We both also had the chance to talk about her life and work during the ceremony and were grateful for that.

Most amusingly, placed on Pat’s coffin during the ceremony was a piece of artwork made for her by one of her past art students. It was a wooden sculpture of three sticks of dynamite. That was because the pupil in question thought that was what she was. She was absolute dynamite, so big was her impact on those she taught.

I was able to say that this was true of her impact on the greater world. Through her influence on the tax justice movement, she said that we should try to change the world, and that is exactly what we tried to do.

With three hours to spare between the funeral and returning home, John and I talked about many things, including Jersey’s history. He mentioned a particular moment in that history when, following the 1848 year of revolutions in Europe, the leaders of many of the European uprisings sought refuge in London, only for many Germans, French, Polish, Hungarian and other leaders to be moved on to Jersey.

Once they arrived there, they formed Les Procrits - 'the proscribed'. A collection of thinkers, mainly of social democratic orientation, they still attracted the attention of the European countries from which they had come, and most especially France. As a result of the several hundred-strong community, some were forced to move on - but only to Guernsey, where they were allowed to finally settle. Victor Hugo was one of those who was forced to move in that way.

That said, many remained in exile in Jersey, and the community persisted for a long time, even getting its own graveyard. It's a part of Jersey's history that is hardly known now.

John and I visited that cemetery, which is called Macpela, yesterday to pay our respects to this community of people who fought for social justice, a universal franchise, women’s rights and much more 175 years ago. Amongst the graves was this one:

I also did a little digging on this history on the way back. This journal paper by Thomas Jones explores the history of this group, but paragraph 5 is especially poignant:

In the years after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, thousands of disappointed revolutionary, radical, republican, nationalist and socialist exiles from across Europe sought asylum in Britain (Fig. 1). Aside from its physical proximity to the continent, the country had no significant immigration restrictions and the Aliens Act of 1848, which granted ministers power to expel individual foreigners, lapsed in 1850 without having been used. This made Britain an attractive destination, as did its vaunted liberties of the press, of speech and of assembly. As reaction swept the continent, other, smaller potential refuges such as Belgium and Switzerland were pressured by neighbouring states into censoring or expelling resident refugees. In 1852 John Sanders, the Metropolitan Police officer often tasked with investigating exile affairs, noted of Britain's growing refugee population: "They cannot reside in any other country. […] They prefer coming to England." The vast majority of these refugees went to London but a significant minority settled in Jersey.

This was the UK acting as a place of exile and safe refuge for those who, in the interests of ordinary people, had sought to effect real change by rebelling against the oppressive regimes of their times. If only it was the same now.

This was also fascinating on Jersey:

Jersey was an appealing asylum for several reasons. Most prosaically, it was comparatively cheap, and several destitute refugees relocated there from London for the lower cost of living. For those determined to remain politically active, its location twenty-two kilometres west of the Cotentin Peninsula and its commercial connections to towns like Granville and St Malo made it an ideal location for smuggling propaganda, people and money in and out of Europe generally and France in particular. For the French, the island, which had come to the English crown in 1066 as part of the Duchy of Normandy, was also more culturally amenable than London. Official business, many newspapers and most place names were in French and Jersey's related local language, Jèrriais, was still widely spoken. Coinage in French denominations still circulated widely enough for L'Homme to be sold in francs and sous. For Hugo, the Channel Islands were "*des morceaux de France tombés dans la mer et ramassés par l'Angleterre*". Jersey also had a long history of asylum, most famously sheltering Huguenots during the French religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and royalist and clerical émigrés, including the author François-René de Chateaubriand, during the French Revolution. The early nineteenth century saw the arrival of exiles from further afield, including hundreds of veterans of the failed liberal and nationalist uprisings in the 1820s and 1830s in Spain, Italy and Poland. A small contingent of Polish exiles led by Swiętosławski were thus already on the island when the revolutions of 1848 broke out. For several exiles in the 1850s, the romantic appeal of following in the footsteps of these previous exiles was great, particularly for Hugo who read about Chateaubriand's sojourn in Jersey before he arrived.

Now, Jersey is occupied by the finance sector and access to housing is restricted for those coming from outside the island - all to ensure that the finance sector gets the access it wants for those it brings in to service its needs.

I am not pretending the 1850s were a better era than now: that would be absurd. But the idea that the UK, and most especially London, and Jersey were then places of refuge for those seeking to create a better world is poignant. There is, apparently, no room in the inn for such people now.