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Chartism: a New History

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Author: Malcolm Chase
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The campaign for the 'People's Charter', a democratic movement which thrived in the decade after 1838, was probably the most important mass movement in British history. Chartism captivated contemporaries and has had a magnetic attraction for historians, generating over 100 books and articles in the last decade alone. Some of the best contributions to that literature have come from Malcolm Chase, whose superb new book provides the first modern account of Chartism in its entirety. Sweeping across the whole of the British Isles and covering the entire duration of the movement, Chase has written a work of genuine importance and interest.

The sheer scale of Chartism remains astonishing, and Chase has an eye for the telling detail. The National Petition of 1842 covered six miles of paper and claimed 3.3 million signatures, equivalent to about a third of the adult population of Britain. There were branches from the Scottish Highlands to the north of France, and mass meetings drew crowds of 200,000 at Holloway Head, 300,000 at Kersal Moor and perhaps as many as half a million at Hartshead Moor. This was mass organisation on an unprecedented scale, and it created near panic among the governing classes. As Charles Greville confided to his diary, 'there is no military force in the country at all adequate to meet these menacing demonstrations' (p. 61).

Thomas Carlyle once described the Chartists as 'wild, inarticulate souls … unable to speak what is in them'. (1) It was not one of his more penetrating observations; for, as Chase makes clear, Chartism was articulate to the point of logorrhoea. Its orators spent months at a time on the road, criss-crossing the country like itinerant preachers in the Chartist Church. From June 1838 to August 1839, Feargus O'Connor alone spent 123 days on the road and made 147 major speeches – a remarkable record in the infancy of the railway network. The largest Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, had a peak circulation of around 50,000 copies a week, exceeding even *The Times* and giving it a claim to be considered the first truly national newspaper in Britain.

This was the more remarkable for the barriers to be overcome. Chartism relied upon those least able to purchase newspapers, to pay subscriptions or to take time off work for campaigning. Involvement could mean loss of employment, persecution by local officials and financial ruin. Men like O'Connor enjoyed a degree of protection by virtue of their social status, but poorer activists could expect severe penalties from the courts. Many Chartists had their health, if not their spirits, broken by solitary confinement, poor nutrition

and the treadmill.

Chartism was not just a political programme, it was a new and dynamic form of working-class culture. Fittingly, then, what Chase offers is less a political narrative than a cultural history. Petitioning and mass organisation are set alongside Chartist concerts, amateur dramatics and dances. He describes the Chartist schools and co-operatives, the homes decorated with prints from the *Northern Star*, and the letters signed affectionately, 'Yours in Chartism'. Chase writes particularly well on the Chartist press, which cultivated a new print culture embracing poetry and religion as well as politics. The practice of reading articles aloud, together with the declamatory style of the radical press, blurred the divide between oral and written communication. These readings, for Chase, were 'almost theatrical events', which located Chartism 'at the cusp of the transition from a largely oral to a mainly print-based popular culture. Through the *Northern Star*, O'Connor especially was able to thrive in both worlds' (p. 45).

Chartism was national in scale but very personal in application, and Chase writes convincingly on the relationship between the two. The National Charter Association (NCA) was 'the first national political party in history'; its president 'Britain's first, formally elected national political leader' (pp. 162–3); but it was individual experience that gave meaning and force to the Chartist diagnosis. Chartism was fired by the lived experience of suffering – men evicted from their jobs; women shaved of their hair in the workhouse; children lost to disease and malnutrition. The proliferation of 'Fearguses' and 'Bronterres' on the baptismal register marked symbolic – and very public – declarations of allegiance, requiring courage in the face of clerical disapproval. At periodic intervals, the church became a battlefield in other ways, too. Chartists would descend en masse for Sunday Eucharist, dressed in their working clothes and occupying the private pews reserved for wealthy parishioners. The authority of the Bible was turned against its exponents, with James 5:1 a favourite text: 'Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall be upon you'.

Chase does not disguise his respect for the Chartists, but nor does he conceal the divisions, tactical blunders and sheer incompetence to which they fell victim. His account is broadly chronological, following the classic arc of Chartism from its rise in 1838, through the pivotal year of 1842, to the collapse of the movement after 1848. He warns repeatedly, however, against a crude perception of rise and fall. Chartism, he shows, was a protean entity, which switched between a range of different forms. Even during 'the Doldrums Years', from 1843 to 1846, the movement nurtured benefit societies and popular education, as well as greater co-ordination between trade unions. Chase is reluctant to assign an end-point to the movement, for he sees it less as a structure than as a social ethic: 'an endeavour to improve every dimension of human life' (p. 270). As the coherence of the movement was lost, the Chartist ethic was absorbed into municipal politics, trade unionism and the burgeoning Liberal party. Even at its peak, it had been difficult to distinguish between 'Chartist' and 'non-Chartist' forms of activity. As Richard Otley told the jurors at his trial, 'In the manufacturing districts there are, at least, four out of every five of the working classes, that either are actually Chartists, or hold Chartist principles. This being the case, it is quite impossible that there should be a turnout for wages, without having a great number of Chartists among the turnouts' (p. 213).

One of the great successes of the book is its emphasis on women's involvement. As Chase demonstrates, 'Female participation was a crucially important factor in shaping Chartism' (p. 41). The campaign against the New Poor Law – one of the engines of Chartism – was driven by women activists, and women were also to the fore in exclusive dealing and popular education. If O'Connor inclined towards the sentimental in his appeals to women – promising, for example, 'to give the fond wife back to her husband, and the innocent babe back to its fond mother' (pp. 268–9) – his listeners proved rather more robust. When Vincent was attacked at a meeting in Cirencester, it was the women in the crowd who hunted down the perpetrators and dealt out 'a good thrashing' (p. 42). The female Chartists of Ashton warned ominously that no man but a Chartist would 'enjoy our hands … or share our beds' (p. 267).

The iconography of Chartism acknowledged women's involvement, depicting both male and female workers on the NCA membership card (p. 163). Nonetheless, as Chase shows, 'the majority of male activists saw women as fulfilling a subaltern role'. Chartism drew heavily on a romanticised image of pre-industrial

society, ‘in which the male was the breadwinner and the woman a wife and mother’ (p. 43). Women were hardly ever elected to formal positions in the movement, and the increasingly masculine culture of Chartism may explain why women’s involvement dropped over time, falling from 13–20 per cent of signatories in 1839 to a maximum of 8 per cent nine years later.

Women were also disproportionately active in religious movements, and Chase does an important service in restating the significance of Chartist religion. The rhetoric of Chartism was steeped in Christianity: as Ernest Jones put it in 1850, ‘Christ was the first Chartist, and Democracy is the gospel carried into practice’ (p. 338). The Revd. J. R. Stephens was more direct: ‘The Lord Jesus Christ … was the prince of Jack Cades!’ (p. 30). Chartism drew on the dissenting tradition of England and Wales as well as the Covenanters of Scotland, and both its organisation and its open air meetings owed a considerable debt to Methodism. Historians of Chartism have sometimes been uneasy of its religious language, seeing this primarily as a rhetorical strategy to turn established authority against itself. But as Chase makes clear, ‘a radical social gospel’ was at the very heart of Chartist thought (p. 141). He presents Chartism as a religious movement as well as a political campaign, drawing powerfully on the evangelical revival. Even O’Connor – to whom ‘religion meant little’ (p. 269) – recognised its significance to his followers. He was careful to distinguish his land plan from the sceptical rationalism of the Owenites, condemning as ‘a national evil … the infidelity [with] which Mr. OWEN and all the principal leaders of Socialism interlard their system’ (p. 250).

Perhaps inevitably, O’Connor casts a large shadow across the book. Chase’s account is broadly sympathetic, though there is no attempt to hide his many faults. O’Connor’s appeal lay partly in his rhetorical gifts and partly in his status as a ‘gentleman radical’. He projected himself as a foot-soldier, ‘promoted from the ranks of the aristocracy to a commission in the democracy’, and gave visual expression to this concept by wearing a suit of fustian cloth on his emergence from prison in 1841 (pp. 183–4). If the attention paid to O’Connor is sometimes to the detriment of other leaders, his imagination and charisma are skilfully conveyed. So, too, is the tightrope he had to walk between constitutionalism and physical violence. As the *Northern Star* put it, in a typical act of ambiguity, ‘Beware of the trap! THE TIME FOR FIGHTING HAS NOT YET COME’ (p. 40).

From about 1843, O’Connor’s energies were consumed by the Chartist Land Plan. Chase sees the Land Plan not as an ‘alternative to, or deviation from, Chartism’, but as a practical demonstration of ‘how society would be reconstituted under the Charter’ (p. 253). Given the poverty of its constituency, the scale of investment in the scheme was extraordinary. At its peak, there were at least 70,000 weekly subscribers spread across more than 600 local branches, while five model settlements were established as a living demonstration of Chartist principles. The Land Plan filled the vacuum created by the declining fortunes of the mainstream movement. It had the particular advantage, as O’Connor recognised, that it flourished in good times when radicalism was traditionally in retreat. It is no coincidence that when the Land Plan went bust in the 1850s, Chartism as a national movement expired with it. Its finances in ruins, the Land Plan was wound up by Act of Parliament in 1851. A year later, O’Connor was committed to an asylum.

Chase intersperses his account with a wealth of intriguing detail. There are passages on Chartist costume, on anti-Semitism and race, and on the regional diversity of the Chartist experience. He writes excellently on the torch-lit demonstrations that so frightened contemporaries, exploring the practical reasons for their prevalence and their insidious effect on Chartist rhetoric. Flashes of humour remind us that Chartism could be ‘immense fun’ (p. 142). George Julian Harney entertained the jurors at his trial by claiming to have been misreported: he had urged his followers to carry ‘biscuits’, not ‘muskets’ (p. 84). There are fascinating insights into O’Connor’s veneration for Sir Robert Peel, and his claim in 1846 that ‘for five years Peel has led an incipient Chartist Movement’ (pp. 272–3). O’Connor published a fulsome obituary of the former premier in 1850, and Peel was even added to the Chartist portraits issued by the *Northern Star*. Sandwiched between ‘Louis Kossuth’ and ‘The Presidents of the USA’, one can only imagine Peel’s distaste.

Chase also offers a series of ‘Chartist Lives’, which punctuate the narrative and bring out the diversity of the radical experience. A biography of John Watkins precipitates a discussion of Chartist poetry. Ann Dawson,

whose sampler adorns the back cover of this book, inspires a reflection on Chartist children and of family life in O'Connorville. William Cuffay prompts an exploration of racial attitudes and the relationship between the Chartist movement and American abolitionism. Many of those covered were known only in their localities, and Chase shows how much can be learnt about the movement from the skilful use of microhistory.

Chartism is a vast subject, and even a large book cannot cover everything. Chase's knowledge of Chartism is probably unrivalled, so it is a pity that he does not tackle more directly some of the great interpretative questions associated with the movement. There are hints and pointers throughout the manuscript, but the lack of a concluding chapter can make it difficult to be sure precisely where Chase stands. He insists, early in the text, that while Chartism 'cannot be explained without reference to economic conditions', economic cycles 'explain no more than the timing of the peaks of Chartist activity'. Chartism was 'a profoundly politicised response to recent political history', and 'not mere hunger politics'. (pp. 19–20, 270). Yet he clearly has reservations about analyses that privilege the political response to Chartism, like the work of Gareth Stedman Jones.(2) In 'accounting for the decline of Chartism', Chase writes, 'Peel's legislation is certainly not a sufficient explanation' (p. 273). It is not clear, however, what interpretative structure he erects in its place. Chase identifies 'an understandable drift towards the politics of the possible' (p. 333) – but the idea that there was a 'politics of the possible', in the absence of transformative constitutional change, marked a critical breach in the Chartist understanding of politics.

The book is stronger on what it was like to be a Chartist than on why Chartism superseded other forms of protest. For a period of about a decade, Chartism infused a campaign for the franchise with a degree of mass enthusiasm that has never been replicated. The movement succeeded in channelling a great array of particular grievances – ranging from starvation wages and the unstamped press to the poor law and the new police – behind a movement for constitutional rights, in a manner that no other movement was to equal. For most of the century, radicals found it rather difficult to agitate the masses on electoral reform. Chartism was an anomaly on an epic scale, and one that needs explanation.

Chartism has been of particular interest to historians of class and of the languages by which class is understood. The movement has been seen, at different times, as a progenitor of working-class consciousness, as a new articulation of older radical tropes and as a throwback to pre-industrial ways of thinking. Marx was famously ambiguous about the movement: though he hailed the Chartists on one occasion as 'saviours of the whole human race' (p. 289), he suspected Ernest Jones in particular of a form of 'feudal socialism'. Chase tends to emphasise the pre-industrial flavour of Chartist rhetoric, but it would be useful to know more clearly where he locates himself in this debate.

It should not be thought that Chase ignores these questions, for his analysis throughout the text is wonderfully sensitive to the language, iconography and historical reference of Chartism. There is abundant material for those who wish to draw their own conclusions, and it is in this respect that Chase makes his finest contribution. His account of Chartism is subtle, wide-ranging and richly detailed, synthesising a lifetime of research and engagement. Both students and scholars can mine it for their own areas of interest, assisted by a full and intelligently ordered index. *Chartism: a New History* is an excellent work of scholarship, which makes richly rewarding and highly enjoyable reading.

Notes

1. Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (London, 1840), p. 6.Back to (1)
2. G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983).Back to (2)

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