

Chapter Three

Oratory, Print and Political Agency

Three broad themes have characterised the study of Chartist political media over the past twenty-five years. Firstly, James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson have emphasised the importance of newspapers (especially the *Northern Star*) in establishing Chartism's unprecedented national organisation and identity.¹ As we also saw in chapter one, Epstein, Eileen Yeo, Paul Pickering and other historians have also examined some of the rituals and symbolic forms of communication of popular radicalism and Chartism, partly in response to the new interpretative agenda set in train by Stedman Jones in 1982-3.² Thirdly, Owen Ashton and Philip Howell (developing themes originally raised by David Jones, Martha Vicinius, Brian Harrison and Patricia Hollis) have stressed the importance of the spoken word, and the way in which effective oratory was almost synonymous with political authority in Chartist political culture.³

James Epstein has emphasised how Feargus O'Connor carefully promoted himself as a reborn Henry Hunt following the latter's death in 1835, and this claim was clearly cemented by the time of O'Connor's imprisonment at York Castle in 1840-1.⁴ Whilst O'Connor has been denigrated by generations of historians on the left, amongst working people his popularity was never been in doubt. Benjamin

¹ Epstein, 'Feargus O'Connor and the *Northern Star*'; Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, ch. 2; Thompson, *The Chartists*, ch. 2.

² Epstein, *Radical expression*; Yeo, 'Christianity in Chartist struggle'; Pickering, 'Class without words'.

³ Howell, "'Diffusing the light of liberty'"; Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists*, pp. 102-12; M. Vicinius, "'To live free or die": the relationship between strategy and style in Chartist speeches, 1838-39', *Style*, 10 (1976), pp. 481-503; B. Harrison and P. Hollis, *Robert Lowery: radical and Chartist* (London, 1979) pp. 1-35; O. Ashton, 'Orators and Oratory in the Chartist movement' in O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts, eds., *The Chartist legacy* (Rendlesham, 1999), pp. 48-77.

⁴ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 90-1; Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, p. 36. Illustration 1 is from Roberts and Thompson, *Images of Chartism*, p. 29.

Wilson, the Halifax Chartist, recalled in the 1880s that ‘From 1838 to 1848 O’Connor was the most popular man in England amongst the working classes; the bulk of old radicals still living got their political opinions from him and the *Northern Star*.⁵ ‘O’Connor was the idol of the day’, added W.E. Adams, ‘Wherever he went he was assured of a vast and appreciative audience’.⁶ Consider George Weerth’s vivid description of a scene which must have been constantly replicated during the 1830s and 1840s:

I shall never forget the moment when I first set eyes on him at a meeting. The audience had been waiting a long time, the hall was full to overflowing ... There was an uncanny silence. O’Connor’s appearance was awaited with the solemnity and anxiety which is felt at the approach of a thunderstorm ...

Suddenly a wild uproar arose outside the door; a wave of intense excitement passed through those in the front; they stretched their necks to right and left; elbows dug into other people’s ribs; all were drawn as by a magnet in the direction whence the hubbub came. O’Connor had crossed the threshold into the hall.

Flanked by a group of his friends, he made his way through the crowd, shaking hands with many, calling some by name, greeting everyone heartily like a father greeting his children on his return home.⁷

Men and women alike fell under the spell. Recalling his first contacts with the movement whilst staying with relatives, Ben Wilson wrote that not only was his aunt ‘a famous politician’ and a Chartist, but also ‘a great admirer of Fergus O’Connor’.⁸ Thomas Cooper recalled that he ‘would have gone through fire and water’ for his

⁵ B. Wilson, ‘The struggles of an old Chartist; what he knows, and the part he has taken in various movements’ in D. Vincent, ed., *Testaments of radicalism: memoirs of working-class politicians, 1790-1885* (London, 1977), p. 222.

⁶ W.E. Adams, *Memoirs of a social atom* (New York, 1967 rep.), p. 157.

⁷ Belchem and Epstein, ‘The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited’, p. 178. For a slightly less exuberant translation of Weerth’s account see S. Pollard, ‘Feargus O’Connor: as seen by a contemporary’, *Bulletin for the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 24 (1972), pp. 22-3.

⁸ Wilson, ‘The struggles of an old Chartist’, p. 197.

leader.⁹ By 1846, however, Cooper and O'Connor had become completely estranged.¹⁰

Until the publication of Epstein's revisionist biography in 1982, O'Connor had also fared badly with historians who portrayed him as a 'dictator' whose 'autocratic' and 'reactionary' methods were quite at odds with the progressive and democratic elements of Chartist organisation.¹¹ Gammage's *History*, first serialised in 1854, was one of the main sources of this antipathy. But even an ardent O'Brienite like Gammage could only admire O'Connor's public persona: 'Upwards of six feet in height, stout and athletic, and in spite of his opinions invested with a sort of aristocratic bearing', Gammage remarked, 'the sight of his person was calculated to inspire the masses with a solemn awe'.¹² The boasts of sacrifice and cultural exile which O'Connor constantly made at his public appearances (and in his open letters) were actually important components of what might be called a demagogic contract between leader and follower. Epstein points out that 'O'Connor was not elected to the platform, he was unpaid and possessed no formal mandate'.¹³ As such, his audience expected him to 'rehearse his achievements, his steadfastness, his sufferings, his intention to continue undaunted by persecution, danger, pecuniary loss and regardless of the apathy, desertion or betrayal of others'.¹⁴ These ritualised boasts of sacrifice and exile, in fact, effectively supplanted the robustly democratic processes which governed most aspects of Chartist organisation.

⁹ T. Cooper, *The life of Thomas Cooper* (Leicester, 1971 rep.), p. 179.

¹⁰ Cooper and O'Connor finally fell out in June 1846 when Cooper accused Feargus of propping up the *Northern Star* with Land Plan receipts. See *Northern Star*, 13 June 1846, p. 1; 20 June 1846, pp. 1, 5-6; 27 June 1846, pp. 4-5; 4 July 1846, p. 5.

¹¹ For generally unsympathetic accounts of O'Connor's leadership see Gammage, *History*; Hovell, *The Chartist movement*; Cole, *Chartist portraits*; Ward, *Chartism*.

¹² Gammage, *History*, p. 45.

¹³ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, p. 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Despite O'Connor's cultivation of a gentlemanly public persona (this theme will be further discussed in chapter five), George Weerth's words also intimate the ease with which he moved amongst working people. This sense of familiarity no doubt helped quell potential contradictions between the gentleman leader and his proletarian constituency. When O'Connor visited a town for the first time he usually took care to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of local affairs. Consider his first speech in Carlisle in 1838, made at a 'moonlit' gathering in the marketplace under the gaze of a detachment of soldiers. 'Though he was a stranger', O'Connor admitted, 'he knew enough of Carlisle to know that there were 800 hand-loom Weavers ... and that, out of that number, only 19 had votes'.¹⁵ What 'most astonished his hearers', emphasised a *Star* reporter brought along to record the performance, was 'the correct knowledge which he seemed to possess of all local matters, even to the names of the local parties and their former professions and present opinions'.¹⁶ The care O'Connor took to engage with the specific interests of his immediate audience is also evident in other contexts. At the St Patrick's Day Confederate-Chartist alliance meeting at Manchester's Free Trade Hall in March 1848, for example, he spoke in English and Irish, translating as he went for his Mancunian listeners.¹⁷

The mass platform, it is commonly remarked, was a form of political theatre.¹⁸ Certain rhetorical devices were consistently drawn upon through the years. At the massive public welcome given to O'Connor at Salford and Manchester during his prison liberation tour in 1841, for example, he told the audience assembled at

¹⁵ *Northern Star*, 21 July 1838, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Northern Star*, 25 March 1848, p. 1; Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, p. 96.

¹⁸ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 112-14; Vernon, *Politics and the people*, p. 251; Joyce, *Democratic subjects*, p. 137.

Stevenson Square in Manchester that he had received a number of death threats from his own countrymen (O'Connellite Repealers) warning him not to enter Manchester.¹⁹ At the Kennington Common meeting of 10 April 1848 O'Connor again raised the spectre of his possible assassination: 'I have received at least 100 letters, telling me not to come here today' he told his audience, 'for that, if I did, my own life would be the sacrifice. My answer was this – I would rather be stabbed in the heart than resign my place at the head of my children. (Shouts of "Bravo!")'.²⁰ As John Belchem notes, this was a tactic that Henry Hunt had also used to good effect before his death in 1835.²¹

Most of the great Chartist orators were highly skilled comic performers.²² Gammage, who was obviously keenly interested in the mechanics of popular speaking, remarked how Henry Vincent took delight in recounting the way in which he, a poor journeyman printer, had driven the unfortunate Marquess of Londonderry from the chair of a public meeting called to congratulate Queen Victoria upon her accession. 'His imitation of the grave stammering of the noble lord', wrote Gammage, 'caused his voice to be drowned in shouts of laughter'.²³ Warned by a Tory magistrate not to enter Trowbridge on his 1839 West Country missionary tour, Vincent publicly dubbed his opponent 'a person made up of "*two sticks for legs, a beer-barrel for a body, and a turnip for a head*".²⁴ 'This was a great treat to those who knew the man', noted a correspondent, 'and the audience was convulsed with laughter'.²⁵ Of

¹⁹ *Northern Star*, 2 October 1841, p. 6.

²⁰ *Times*, 11 April 1848, p. 5; *Northern Star*, 15 April 1848, pp. 6-7; Belchem, '1848', p. 282.

²¹ Belchem, '1848', p. 282.

²² Gammage, *History*, p. 45.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39; Ashton, 'Orators and oratory in the Chartist movement, 1840-1848', p. 65.

²⁴ *Charter*, 27 January 1839, p. 5. Italics in original.

²⁵ *Ibid.* See also the account of Vincent's visit to Hull in the *Northern Star*, 13 November 1841, p. 1: 'he has made great improvement in Normanby's colleges. His style and tone are admirable; and it is difficult to decide whether his sound and powerful reasoning in favour of the Charter, or his keen satire gave the greatest satisfaction'.

O'Connor, William O'Neill Daunt remembered: 'His talents as a mimic were considerable. His was not that mere parrot mimicry that intimates sounds only; he was a mimic of sentiment and feeling; he could take up the whole train of thought as well as the voice and present you with an exquisitely ludicrous resemblance of mental as well as vocal characteristics'.²⁶ On his first visit to Carlisle O'Connor 'gave a specimen of a Tory and of a Whig addressing a constituency at a contested election; and drew the picture so near to life so as to convulse the whole meeting with laughter, so that it was impossible to give anything like a correct report'.²⁷ At a mass-meeting on Newcastle Town Moor in June 1838, O'Connor regaled a large audience with a famous joke in which Henry, Lord Brougham finds that a newly enfranchised people have entrusted treasury funds to Cerberus, the three-headed canine of classical myth. Finding his salary revoked,

Harry would cry, 'Oh! what will become of me! what shall I do!' and Cerberus would say 'Go into the Bastile that you have provided for the people'. Then when Lord Harry and Lady Harry went into the Bastile, the keeper would say, 'This is your ward to the right, and this, my lady, is your ward to the left; we are Malthusians here, and are afraid you would breed, therefore you must be kept asunder'.²⁸

As O'Connor related this scathing inversion of the social order, Gammage wrote, 'it was impossible to control the bursts of laughter and cheering with which he was greeted'.²⁹

²⁶ W.J. O'Neill Daunt, *Eight-five years of Irish history* (London, 1888), p. 142.

²⁷ *Northern Star*, 21 July 1838, p. 3. For other examples of O'Connor's use of mimicry see *Northern Star*, 25 September 1841, p. 1; 15 November 1845, p. 6.

²⁸ Gammage, *History*, p. 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

II

David Jones reminds us that many working people remembered Chartism as a lecturing society, such was the importance of public speaking at the local, regional and national levels.³⁰ Even within small village communities amateur or ‘Sunday’ speakers could be relied on to elucidate Chartist grievances and remedies, and it was not uncommon for these unpaid advocates to venture into surrounding neighbourhoods to spread the radical catechism. After the formation of the National Charter Association in 1840, however, lecturing became increasingly professionalised, evolving as one of the main responsibilities of local Chartist Councils. Jones, Pickering and Howell all remark upon the comprehensive system put into operation in South Lancashire by James Cartledge in the early 1840s, which at one stage boasted about twenty paid lecturers (including such notables as James Leach, Joseph Linney, John Campbell and Richard Marsden).³¹ According to Cartledge, many of these lecturers ‘could not for twelve months, speak with any degree of confidence before an audience more than a quarter of a hour or so without notes, but now they can deliver lectures which occupy two hours with perfect composure’.³² In contrast with the well-paid Anti-Corn Law League activist, however, Chartist organisers were often obliged to support themselves by way of a ‘Trade of Agitation’. Even activists with national reputations such as Julian Harney had to rely upon precarious sources of income

³⁰ Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists*, p. 103.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105; P. Pickering, ‘Chartism and the “Trade of Agitation” in early Victorian Britain’, *History*, 76 (1991), p. 226; Howell, “Diffusing the light of liberty”, p. 27. A copy of the plan can be found in HO 45/56.

³² *Northern Star*, 15 January 1842, p. 2; Howell, “Diffusing the light of liberty”, p. 28.

derived from lecturing, newsvending, journalism or teaching in Chartist schools.³³ As Paul Pickering has shown, many local leaders also set themselves up as agents or hawkers of various ‘Chartist’ products: clothing, breakfast powders, quack-medicines, shoe blacking, Chartist rosettes – even Chartist funerals were offered by the Rev. James Scholefield of Ancoats.³⁴ As Pickering also points out, there was a cultural obligation on the part of those who profited from the sale of Chartist blacking and breakfast powder to contribute to the invariably bare NCA coffers.³⁵ Criticisms of exploitation, however, often dogged the professionalisation of radical-democratic politics: ‘I have no doubt that we shall have every trade in the country hoisting the Charter for the sake of self’, lamented ‘Nemo’ in the *National Association Gazette* in 1842.³⁶

A level above the lecturers in Chartism’s national hierarchy were the regional or county advocates. As Jones remarks, these were often well-known figures who made up the national leadership under O’Connor – Chartists such as the surgeons Peter Murray McDouall and John Taylor, or intellectual activists with proletarian backgrounds such as Harney.³⁷ Taylor’s and McDouall’s medical qualifications facilitated their rise through the Chartist ranks. McDouall had been ‘introduced to the people’ in 1838 by Matthew Fletcher, another radical Bury surgeon. Unlike the comparatively respectable Fletcher, however, Harney, Taylor and McDouall were all

³³ Harney established a ‘Democratic Store’ whilst the Sheffield correspondent for the *Northern Star* in the early 1840s. See *Northern Star*, 18 December 1841, p. 5; Schoyen, *The Chartist challenge*, pp. 105-6.

³⁴ Pickering, ‘Chartism and the “Trade of Agitation”’, pp. 224-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *National Association Gazette*, 26 March 1842 cited in Pickering, ‘Chartism and the “Trade of Agitation”’, p. 221.

³⁷ Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists*, p. 104.

romantic militants who cultivated Byronic public personas.³⁸ ‘A picturesque figure was Dr Taylor’, remembered W.E. Adams:

Harney described him as looking like ‘a cross between Byron’s Corsair and a gipsy king,’ with a lava-like eloquence that set on fire all combustible matter in its path.’ It was said that he had inherited a fortune of £30,000, the greater part of which he spent upon revolutionary exercises.³⁹

Gammage added that Taylor’s

personal appearance exhibited a touch of romance, and was well calculated to produce a favourable impression. Above the middle height, and proportionately stout, with a handsome intellectual face, large brilliant dark eyes, a head of black flowing hair, parted in the middle, and hanging in long curls below his broad shoulders, in his loose sailor’s dress, he looked the very personification of careless ease.⁴⁰

Revealingly, the cropping of Taylor’s hair by a felon after his arrest at Birmingham in 1839 became a national news item in the *Star*.⁴¹

Peter Murray McDouall projected a similar persona from the platform. Although said by Gammage to have ‘suffered terribly from nervous excitement’ at the commencement of his career, the Scottish Chartist leader was soon sporting ‘a long cloak’ and ‘long graceful curls’ which gave ‘him the appearance of a hero of a melodrama’.⁴² This flamboyant image was no doubt enhanced by McDouall’s riding of a white horse at the head of the procession which delivered the 1842 national petition to Parliament.⁴³ Taylor and McDouall were also good examples of Chartist leaders who attempted to consolidate their positions through radical publishing ventures. According to Gammage, Taylor edited a short-lived paper (no copies appear

³⁸ Ashton, ‘Orators and oratory in the Chartist movement, 1840-48’, p. 53.

³⁹ Adams, *Memoirs*, p. 211.

⁴⁰ Gammage, *History*, pp. 28-9.

⁴¹ *Northern Star*, 13 July 1839, p. 1; Gammage, *History*, p. 133; C. Godfrey, ‘The Chartist prisoners, 1839-41’, *International Review of Social History*, 24 (1979), p. 221.

⁴² Gammage, *History*, p. 67; Adams, *Memoirs*, pp. 211-12.

⁴³ R. Challinor, ‘P.M. McDouall and physical force Chartism’, *International Socialism*, 12 (1981), p. 72. Ashton, ‘Orators and oratory in the Chartist movement, 1840-1848’, p. 55 also notes that the Trowbridge leader William Carrier sometimes arrived at Chartist public meetings mounted on ‘a white charger’.

to have survived) called the *Glasgow Liberator*.⁴⁴ *McDouall's Chartist and Republican Journal* (later *McDouall's Chartist Journal and Trades Advocate*) lasted about six months before McDouall fled to France following the general strike of 1842.⁴⁵ After returning to England in the mid-1840s, McDouall resumed his controversial career at the periphery of the national leadership, before becoming the best-known Chartist said to have emigrated to Australia in the 1850s. His ultimate fate, however, remains something of a mystery.⁴⁶

James Vernon has discussed the fascination with leader heroes in the nineteenth century, whether they were the famous gentlemen-orators such as Hunt and O'Connor, or the 'Gallant Generals' and 'Courageous Captains' who 'popped up all over the place' in the electorates upon which Vernon's study is based.⁴⁷ Although military service records were often fabricated by aspiring popular politicians, few Chartist leaders could hope to pass off such credentials. That said, the term 'Captain' had long been used in various industrial and rural social contexts as a designation of authority, and can also be found in radical-Chartist political culture.⁴⁸ In 1855 Thomas Cooper wrote to Gammage correcting some of the errors in the original serialised *History*: 'as for the title of "General,"' Cooper wrote, 'it was given to me by admiring and loving working men. I adopted it in sport, at first, but afterwards it was not easy to lay aside'.⁴⁹ In proletarian communities age was also an important element of cultural authority, and 'veteran' radicals (note the military overtones) such as John 'Daddy'

⁴⁴ Gammage, *History*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ See P. Pickering and S. Roberts, 'Pills, pamphlets and politics: the career of Peter Murray McDouall', *Manchester Region History Review*, 11 (1997), pp. 34-43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Gammage, *History*, pp. 401-2. Pickering and Roberts note that McDouall could not have drowned in the wreck of the *President* of the Australian coast in 1853-4 as has been assumed, because at the time the vessel was deployed as a hulk off Melbourne.

⁴⁷ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, p. 263.

⁴⁸ For examples see *Charter*, 10 March 1839, p. 107; Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartist in Manchester and Salford*, p. 118.

⁴⁹ Gammage, *History*, p. 405.

Richards of the Potteries, Benjamin Rushton of Ovenden, near Halifax and John Glenister at Cheltenham were invariably called to chair and speak at radical gatherings in their communities.⁵⁰

‘It often occurs that when one of the toiling class exhibits superior speaking or argumentative powers to his fellows’, wrote J.B. Leno, ‘he is chosen to be their advocate’.⁵¹ Of Glenister, who eventually emigrated to Australia, Adams recalled:

Glenister was probably the least educated among them. But he had one qualification which the others had not – he could make a speech. Not much of a speech, perhaps, though the speaker generally contrived to make his audience understand what he wanted to say. The old blacksmith usually, in virtue of his standing among us, presided over our meetings.⁵²

Public speaking ability sometimes neutralised the authority implicit in seniority. W.E. Adams proudly recollected chairing Chartist meetings at Cheltenham at the age of nineteen, ‘and corresponding with members of Parliament concerning the treatment of Chartist prisoners’.⁵³ On the other hand, others besides McDouall had nervous starts to their public careers.⁵⁴ Robert Crowe, an Irish Chartist and Confederate recalled his early efforts as a temperance lecturer:

I was not slow to discover my deficiency as a speaker ... so I adopted the following novel expedient: I selected a retired, secluded spot (Soho Square), and, every night, after 11 p.m., and continuing for about three months, I made the railings and the trees my imaginary audience, and soon learned to shudder at the echo of my voice.⁵⁵

Robert Lowery also prepared himself for the ordeal of public speaking by ascending a deserted local hill and addressing grazing sheep, whom he recalled were ‘quiet and

⁵⁰ For Richards see R. Fyson, ‘Homage to John Richards’ in O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts, eds., *The duty of discontent: essays in honour of Dorothy Thompson* (London, 1995), pp. 71-96.

⁵¹ J.B. Leno, *The aftermath: with autobiography of the author* (New York, 1986 rep.), p. 53.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵³ Adams, *Memoirs*, p. 151.

⁵⁴ For Gammage’s memories of his hesitant start in public speaking see W.H. Maehl, ed., *Robert Gammage: reminisces of a Chartist* (Manchester, 1983), p. 41.

⁵⁵ R. Crowe, *The reminisces of Robert Crowe, the octogenarian tailor* (New York, 1986 rep.), p. 5.

orderly'.⁵⁶ The most widely attended practical academies of public speaking, however, were the chapels of dissenting Christianity.

As David Hempton has pointed out, 'there has been widespread agreement that Chartism based some of its organisational structures on Methodist precedents. Class meetings, weekly subscriptions, hymns, camp meetings, and Love Feasts were all employed by Chartists, especially in areas of longstanding influence'.⁵⁷ The odd case can also be cited where Independent Methodist societies actually evolved from Chartist associations, as occurred in Bingley in the late 1840s.⁵⁸ A Methodist influence is obvious in the original rules of the National Charter Association, which provided for members to be divided into classes of ten from which a leader was to be nominated by the class, and then ratified by the Executive Council.⁵⁹ Covert, quasi-insurrectionary organisation in militant communities such as Sheffield during 1839 was also based upon Wesleyan models in order to ensure secrecy: 'meetings similar to those in use amongst the methodists, called classes, have been established in almost every part of the town' wrote a correspondent; 'we are now organising into small parties meeting in each other's houses to read the news, and receive such information as we had before done in public'.⁶⁰ But as Hempton also points out, important differences need to be recognised: 'structures borrowed from Methodism were skilfully democratised to guard against a Wesleyan-style oligarchy. Chartist leaders

⁵⁶ Harrison and Hollis, *Robert Lowery*, pp. 72-3.

⁵⁷ D. Hempton, *Methodism and politics in British society, 1750-1850* (London, 1984), p. 211; Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, p. 45.

⁵⁸ D. Valenze, *Prophetic sons and daughters: female preaching and popular religion in industrial England* (Princeton, 1985), p. 230.

⁵⁹ See generally Faulkner, *Chartism and the churches*, ch. 2. For the original organisational plan of the National Charter Association see *Northern Star*, 1 August 1840, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *Northern Star*, 7 September 1839, p. 5; 14 September 1839, p. 4.

were elected, not appointed, and there were sophisticated checks on the power and duration of local offices and officials'.⁶¹

It might be argued that Chartist organisation was somewhat more *ad hoc* than Hempton suggests; nor was O'Connor particularly bound by democratic structural constraints. Land Plan policy and finances, for example, were almost entirely controlled by O'Connor and a small group of associates such as Thomas Martin Wheeler, the builder Henry Cullingham and the manager of the National Land and Labour Bank, Thomas Price.⁶² Despite these caveats, connections between the Methodist *experience* and speaking skills constantly arise when examining Chartism at the local level.⁶³ For example, at Sheffield leaders such as Samuel Holberry and Peter Foden conducted 'street preachings' on Sundays in various parts of the town, and numerous other examples could be given of Chartist organisers whose speaking abilities were nurtured in the ranks of various Wesleyan connexions.⁶⁴ Charismatic figures such as Joseph Rayner Stephens, Thomas Cooper and Joseph Barker were merely the most famous members of a proselytising phalanx. Other speakers with active Methodist backgrounds included Benjamin Rushton at Halifax, James Cartledge at Manchester, John Skevington of Loughborough, John Markham at Leicester, George Harrison and Henry Dorman of Nottingham and Joseph Capper of Tunstall.

Stephens' apocalyptic 'political sermons' were enhanced by the black robes of his calling; in the Potteries Capper was known for wearing a white cravat on Sundays

⁶¹ Hempton, *Methodism and politics*, p. 211.

⁶² See Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company*, ch. 2 and *passim*.

⁶³ Hempton, *Methodism and politics*, p. 213. For Nottingham see Epstein, 'Some organisational and cultural aspects of the Chartist movement in Nottingham', pp. 249-55.

⁶⁴ Moore, Holmes and Baxter, 'Samuel Holberry', p. 12.

in the traditional Wesleyan manner.⁶⁵ Described as a ‘kind of saintly John Bull’, he commonly preached out of doors by simply mounting a stool taken from his workshop. Yet like O’Connor and Vincent, Capper knew how to humour an audience:

His broad, masculine face was full of kindness and wit, and his speeches seldom failed to convulse his hearers with laughter. Whenever he rose to speak the cry was ‘Old Capper’s going to talk now for fun’ ... It was his powerful satire that made him so bitterly hated by his political opponents.⁶⁶

In the aftermath of the general strike of 1842, Capper was imprisoned for two years for inciting a crowd near Hanley in February with the Biblical text, ‘To Your Tents, O Israel’.⁶⁷ Brought before Chief Justice Tindal at the Stafford Special Commission on a charge of sedition, Capper argued that he had dealt with the phrase ‘scripturally’ rather than politically.⁶⁸ The ploy did not succeed, however, and ‘the venerable-looking old man’ was ‘thoroughly broken down’ by his experience of imprisonment.⁶⁹ Yet as we shall see in chapter nine, the Biblical metaphor which led to Capper’s downfall was to find re-expression in Victoria during the political crises of the late 1850s.

Thomas Cooper, who was also arraigned at the Special Commission, is best remembered for his epic ‘prison-rhyme’, *The purgatory of suicides*.⁷⁰ Cooper’s autobiography is also one of the better-known examples of its genre, and is a rich source of information upon the role played by regional organisers in the Chartist movement culture.⁷¹ A classic autodidact, Cooper juggled the roles of teacher, preacher, newsagent, shopkeeper, commercial traveller and leader of Leicester’s

⁶⁵ Thompson, *The Chartists*, pp. 197-8.

⁶⁶ H.A. Wedgewood, *People of the Potteries* (Bath, 1970), pp. 53-62.

⁶⁷ *Times*, 17 October 1842, p. 6; *Northern Star*, 22 October 1842, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Wedgewood, *People of the Potteries*, p. 60.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62; Fyson, ‘The crisis of 1842’, p. 213.

⁷⁰ T. Cooper, *The purgatory of suicides. A prison-rhyme* (London, 1847). Illustration 2 is taken from Gammage, *History*, p. 201.

⁷¹ Cooper, *Life*.

‘Shaksperean Chartists’.⁷² What shines through Cooper’s recollections of the Shakspereans activities, moreover, is the importance of oral culture:

We ... usually held one or two meetings in the Shaksperean Room on week nights as well as on a Sunday night. Unless there was some stirring local or political topic, I lectured on Milton, and repeated portions of the ‘Paradise Lost,’ or on Shakespeare, and repeated portions of ‘Hamlet,’ or on Burns, and repeated ‘Tom o’ Shanter;’ or I recited the history of England before young Chartists, who listened with intense interest.⁷³

In the Shakspereans’ productions of *Hamlet*, ‘performed to a densely crowded audience’, Cooper of course took the leading role.⁷⁴ One interesting element of Cooper’s leadership was his use of natural amphitheatres as improvised political stages at places like Nottingham Forrest. He even likened one local ‘pulpit of syenite’ (a quarry at Mountsorrel) to Gwennap Pit, ‘Wesley’s grand Cornish preaching place’.⁷⁵ However, it should also be remembered that Cooper relied heavily on printed media as a source of income, and also as a means of promoting Chartism. In fact, he published no fewer than four radical journals from Leicester between 1841-3.⁷⁶

James Vernon has emphasised the power popular political audiences wielded upon popular political speakers. Melodramatic political oratory was an intensely dialogic medium whose plots, characters and motifs were well known to successful orators and appreciative audiences alike.⁷⁷ H.R. Nicholls recalled how W.J. Linton

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 163. The spelling is Cooper’s. For local Chartist activity see also A. Temple Patterson, *Radical Leicester: a history of Leicester, 1780-1850* (Leicester, 1954), chs. 15-18; J.F.C. Harrison, ‘Chartism in Leicester’ in A. Briggs, ed., *Chartist studies* (London, 1974), pp. 99-146.

⁷³ Cooper, *Life*, p. 169.

⁷⁴ *Northern Star*, 21 January 1843, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Cooper, *Life*, pp. 174-5. Robert Lowery and Abram Duncan concluded their 1839 Chartist missionary tour to Cornwall with an provocative ‘Demonstration of the County’ at Gwennap Pit. See Harrison and Hollis, *Robert Lowery*, pp. 135, 232-7; J. Rule, ‘The Chartist mission to Cornwall’ in J. Rule and R. Wells, *Crime, protest and popular politics in southern England, 1740-1850* (London, 1997), pp. 74-5.

⁷⁶ Cooper, *Life*, pp. 145-71. After the *Illuminator* folded in 1841, and prior to his imprisonment in 1843, Cooper published the *Chartist Rushlight*, the *Extinguisher*, and the *Commonwealthsman or Chartist Advocate*.

⁷⁷ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, ch. 3.

reluctantly had to abandon his preferred mode of rational argumentation and adopt a romantic alternative to capture his London audience's attention: 'casting reason aside, as he put it, he launched out in the ordinary manner, denouncing the tyrants'.⁷⁸ O'Connor may have projected a quasi-aristocratic persona far removed from the proletarian identity of his followers; yet he also emphasised that he was propelled by popular force. 'I don't lead, I am driven by the people' he told William Lovett.⁷⁹ George Weerth also made some revealing comments upon the interplay between the great Chartist demagogue and his audience. After 'listening attentively for half an hour', Weerth noted, O'Connor's listeners began to grow restless. They were not bored; they were simply expectant. Sensing the signs, Feargus responded accordingly:

He had already several times audibly slammed the edge of the rostrum with his right hand, several times he had stamped his foot more and more angrily and shaken his head more wildly. He made preparation to attack the enemy – the meeting noticed this and spurred him on by loud clapping – it was a red rag to a bull. Then the Titan had gripped his victim! The voice took on a fuller sound, the sentences became shorter, they were wrung in spasms from his seething breast, the fist drummed more wildly against the edge of the rostrum, the face of the orator became pale, his lips trembled, the cataract of his rage flooded over the last barrier, and onwards thundered the tide of his eloquence, throwing down all before it, breaking up and smashing everything in its way.⁸⁰

'I do believe that the man would have talked himself to death' Weerth concluded, 'if he had not been interrupted by an applause which shook the whole house and set it vibrating'.⁸¹ The sexual connotations of the performance are also unmistakable.

Louisa Nisbett, O'Connor's best-known mistress, was a famous stage performer and contributed considerably to his libertine image.⁸² 'There was as much

⁷⁸ Nicholls, Typescript memoir of London Chartism, p. 8.

⁷⁹ A. Briggs, 'The local background of Chartism' in A. Briggs, ed., *Chartist studies* (London, 1974), p. 10; Pickering, 'Class without words', pp. 150-1; Vicinius, "'To live free or die'", pp. 487-8.

⁸⁰ Pollard, 'Feargus O'Connor', p. 23; Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists*, p. 104.

⁸¹ Pollard, 'Feargus O'Connor', p. 23.

gossip in Chartist circles about the two', recalled W.E. Adams, 'as there were in Irish circles forty or fifty years later about Mr. Parnell and Mrs. O'Shea'.⁸³ Other Chartist orators such as Robert Crowe, Abram Hanson of Elland and William Chadwick of Manchester also tried their hand at acting.⁸⁴ Chadwick, who as a teenager was amongst the Lancashire Chartists and Confederates arrested in 1848, spent much of his later life as an itinerant Liberal party orator.⁸⁵ One impromptu speech he made at a public meeting held on Irish issues in the Black Country in the early 1890s was recalled by T. Palmer Newbould. As the meeting was breaking up, Chadwick was recognised in the audience and called to the stage:

At first, among those who had never heard the old man, there was a subdued titter of merriment at the quaint figure of the veteran ... But within three minutes you could have heard a proverbial pin drop. And at the end of five minutes I saw a sight I have never witnessed before or since.

The old man had reached a height of fervid pleading for Ireland which had glued upon himself the eyes of everyone facing him. Then, as though mesmerised, the audience, seemingly without consciousness of it, *rose from their seats* as by a concerted movement ... For five whole minutes the audience were on their feet staring into the old man's eyes and listening to the torrent of beautiful words which came from his mobile lips.

And then he sat down. Instead of a great outburst of cheering there was an almost painful silence. Grown men began to sob. They had never heard anything like that before ... That scene will live in my memory till my dying day.⁸⁶

Mesmerised or not, Palmer Newbould's vignette gives an idea of the potential power of the speaking skills learnt by a generation of Chartist activists upon makeshift platforms throughout Britain.

⁸² Belchem and Epstein, 'The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited', p. 180. O'Connor's illegitimate son to another woman, Edward O'Connor Terry, became a celebrated actor and impresario. See Read and Glasgow, *Feargus O'Connor*, p. 142.

⁸³ Adams, *Memoirs*, p. 208.

⁸⁴ Crowe, *Reminiscences*, p. 6; Thompson, *The Chartists*, pp. 182-3.

⁸⁵ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, pp. 118-20.

⁸⁶ T. Palmer Newbould, *Pages from a life of strife: being some recollections of William Henry Chadwick, the last of the Manchester Chartists* (New York, 1986 rep.), pp. 31-3. Italics in original.

III

Thus far I have stressed some of the strengths of Chartist oratory. As Paul Pickering and Owen Ashton have pointed out, however, radical leaders and lecturers faced many problems when attempting to spread the Chartist catechism. The dilemmas of attempting to earn a livelihood in the ‘Trade of Politics’ have been touched upon; it is also clear from autobiographical sources that itinerant lecturers occasionally had to ward off physical attacks, particularly when venturing into rural districts.⁸⁷ That said, Chartists themselves were certainly not above employing similar tactics.⁸⁸ Travelling orators were also prey to the natural elements, exhaustion and the inherent limitations of the human voice when faced with large and sometimes massive crowds. Overcrowded meeting rooms even occasionally collapsed – as happened at Castle Douglas, Peter Murray McDouall’s boyhood home, when he was forced to lecture in a coachbuilder’s workroom after local Magistrates prevented the use of more suitable accommodation.⁸⁹ According to McDouall, ‘the greater part of the flooring gave way, and some 500 people were cast down with dreadful force on the top of each other and into the apartment beneath, where a scene of confusion ensued which totally baffles all description’.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ For violent anti-Chartist rioting during a public meeting held in the Devizes market-place in March 1839 addressed by Henry Vincent, W.P. Roberts and William Carrier see *Northern Star*, 6 April 1839, p. 5. For Thomas Cooper’s jocular reminiscences of an election battle between Chartists and ‘Tory lambs’ at Nottingham in 1841 see his *Life*, pp. 156-9. Gammage recollected being pursued by drunken mobs during his 1848 tour of Buckingham, Bedford and Northampton. See Maehl, *Robert Gammage*, pp. 22-3. J.B. Leno also recalled being violently assaulted by a Metropolitan police officer whilst ‘standing on the pavement discussing the Irish question’ during 1848. See *The aftermath. With autobiography of the author*, p. 57.

⁸⁸ The ex-Anti-Corn Law League activist and Land Plan critic Alexander Somerville was terrorised by O’Connorite ‘Old Guards’ in Manchester during 1847. In *Somerville’s diligent life* (p. 226) he recalled being ‘waylaid at night, thrown in the mud, thrashed with a stick, kicked, and on one occasion all but strangled, and twice thrown into a canal’.

⁸⁹ *Northern Star*, 13 February 1841, p. 8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Reporters, too, had little chance of accurately recording speeches emanating from the platforms of larger meetings. As Pickering, Thompson and Ashton have pointed out, these factors have important ramifications for historians: the written record of the Chartist speech is typically a somewhat hollow text, purged not just of content, but also of dialect, profanity, audience interaction and the visual devices deployed by democratic orators.⁹¹ A further complication arises in the often markedly different accounts which can be found of the same meetings and speeches arising from political antipathies.⁹² Notwithstanding these interpretative complexities, more attention might be paid to some of the cultural strategies deployed to overcome some of the problems of the mass platform as a mode of national political communication.

Print, of course, was the obvious alternative media to oral propagation. Dorothy Thompson has remarked that it would have been impossible to conceive of Chartism without the *Northern Star* – and *vice versa*.⁹³ David Vincent adds that no ‘major working-class movement has ever owed so much to a single paper’.⁹⁴ Commenced in Leeds by O’Connor in late 1837 the *Star* attained a weekly circulation as high as 50,000 per week during 1839, although the true ‘readership’ is virtually impossible to calculate because of the way in which the paper was shared and read aloud.⁹⁵ As suggested earlier, one of the most distinctive features of Chartist political culture was the intimate relationship discernible between orality and print. Whilst

⁹¹ Pickering, ‘Class without words’; Thompson, *The Chartists*, pp. 238-40; Ashton, ‘Orators and oratory in the Chartist movement, 1840-1848’, p. 51.

⁹² Pickering, ‘Class without words’, pp. 147-8. The *Star* occasionally reprinted divergent accounts of the same event to illustrate how Chartist activity was deliberately mis-represented in the anti-Chartist press. See, for example, the accounts of a Preston Land Plan tea party and ball taken from the (sympathetic) *Preston Chronicle* and the (ill-disposed) *Preston Pilot*, *Northern Star*, 18 March 1848, p. 6.

⁹³ Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 49.

⁹⁴ D. Vincent, *Literacy and popular culture: England, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 250.

⁹⁵ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 60-89; S. Roberts, ‘Who wrote to the *Northern Star*?’ in O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts, eds., *The duty of discontent: essays for Dorothy Thompson* (London, 1995), p. 64.

historians have stressed the way in which speeches reported in the *Star* were commonly modified from demotic to standard English, one of the most intriguing features of O'Connor's prose is that he continually attempted to replicate demotic or oral communicative conventions in print. This process of accommodation is most obvious in (but was not limited to) O'Connor's famous open letters, usually published upon the first page of the *Star*, the public reading of which became something of a movement culture institution during the 1840s.⁹⁶ W.E. Adams recollected an aged shoemaker named Larry who

made his appearance every Sunday morning, as regular as clockwork, with a copy of the *Northern Star*, damp from the press, for the purpose of hearing some member of our household read out to him and others 'Feargus's letter.' The paper had first to be dried before the fire, and then carefully and evenly cut, so as not to damage a single line of the almost sacred production. This done, Larry, placidly smoking his cutty pipe, which he occasionally thrust in the grate for a light, settled himself to listen with all the rapture of a devotee in a tabernacle of the great Feargus ... and interjecting occasional chuckles of approval as some particularly emphatic sentiment was read aloud.⁹⁷

This engaging convivial scene would have been common across Britain during the 1840s. Informal readings of the O'Connor letter not only gave Chartists an entertaining week-to-week political focus, but also were a means of overcoming the possibility of illiteracy amongst the rank and file.

'MR O'CONNOR BEGS US TO STATE *that he has received a letter from Brighton, of which he cannot read one word, not even the name of the writer*', the *Star* lamented in 1840.⁹⁸ In the same columns some years later an 'UNSHORN CHIN' abruptly was informed: 'We can make nothing of your letter. You must write

⁹⁶ Thompson, *The Chartists*, pp. 50-1. O'Connor also published open letters in other journals. See, for example, his early series of missives upon the land, *English Chartist Circular*, 2 (1842-3), pp. 57, 61, 65, 69, 93-4, 101.

⁹⁷ Adams, *Memoirs*, pp. 164-5.

⁹⁸ *Northern Star*, 10 October 1840, p. 5. Emphases in original.

plainer'.⁹⁹ James Vernon notes that although pertinent statistics are 'notoriously imprecise', a consensus about literacy rates in England now exists for the modern period.¹⁰⁰ It is very generally agreed that about one-third of the male, and half of the female population could neither read or write effectively in 1840.¹⁰¹ Distinctions between the illiterate, functionally literate and literate portions of the working population, as well as those able to read but unable to write complicate the picture further – even before the differences attributable to region are added to the equation. Whilst the question of Chartist literacy has not been taken up in any depth, it would be fair to say that the typical local activist possessed at least rudimentary reading and writing skills to complement the speaking ability evidently required to lead.¹⁰² That said, even local organisers with corresponding duties seem to have had problems committing their thoughts to paper: 'We are not mesmerists', the Carlisle Land Branch was informed after submitting another indecipherable letter in 1845.¹⁰³ Organised lecturing was one obvious strategy which could be deployed locally to combat the degrees of illiteracy implicit in the citations just given; but print could also be creatively exploited in order to serve an illiterate yet nonetheless fervid political audience personified by Larry the veteran O'Connorite cobbler.

As mentioned earlier, much of the condemnation that has been heaped by historians upon O'Connor can ultimately be traced back to his open letters. References to his 'emotionalism and instability', his 'megalomania', his supposedly 'autocratic'

⁹⁹ *Northern Star*, 29 January 1848, p. 4. For other examples see Roberts, 'Who wrote to the *Northern Star*?', p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ See R.S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy, 1750-1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), pp. 437-54; Vincent, *Literacy and popular culture*, pp. 22-41.

¹⁰¹ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, pp. 105-6.

¹⁰² Godfrey, 'The Chartist prisoners, 1839-41', pp. 191-200 notes that 9 of a group of 73 Chartist prisoners interviewed by Home Office inspectors in 1840-1 were illiterate, whilst another twelve could read but not write.

¹⁰³ *Northern Star*, 29 November 1845, p. 5. See also Roberts, 'Who wrote to the *Northern Star*?', pp. 56-7.

tendencies and so forth were commonplaces in earlier historiography.¹⁰⁴ However, as James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson have more recently argued, O'Connor was a remarkably tolerant proprietor who allowed editors and journalists a great deal of latitude.¹⁰⁵ Nor did he shy away from criticism. Part of his heroic public persona, in fact, was to reprint wholesale criticisms made against him. 'My practice is to give the ravings of the Press unmutated', he boasted in 1848, 'and then to answer them'.¹⁰⁶ The connections that have been made down the years between O'Connor's printed demotic communications and his mental illness, however, are not difficult to understand. In the late 1840s Feargus commonly addressed his open letters to his 'Children' from a 'fond and affectionate father'. Later examples are also strewn with increasingly prolix reiterations of the demagogic boasts which O'Connor had always cultivated. Thomas Frost described the process of composition:

The letters which he published at the time were dictated by him to his nephew and secretary, Roger O'Connor, he pacing the room all the time, with an occasional pause at a table on which a tumbler of strong brandy-and-water stood. In this manner he would dictate a letter to the hostile critics of his land plan, addressing them as the 'press-gang' ... Roger committed every word of his ravings, which appeared in the *Northern Star* just as they came from his lips.¹⁰⁷

The accuracy of this account is difficult to corroborate. Frost speaks of his 'frequent communication' with O'Connor, and of 'gleaning particulars' and 'hearing anecdotes' from the *Star's* editor, Julian Harney.¹⁰⁸ Nor is it known whether this mode of dictation was an established practice, or a habit O'Connor fell into only as the Land Plan began to disintegrate in 1848-9.

¹⁰⁴ Cole, *Chartist portraits*, p. 301; MacAskill, 'The Chartist Land Plan', p. 313.

¹⁰⁵ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 76-80; Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁶ *Northern Star*, 15 July 1848, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ T. Frost, *Forty years' recollections, literary and political* (New York, 1986 rep.), pp. 181-2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

James Epstein describes Daniel O’Connell’s 1836 attack upon English democratic radicals as a ‘pivotal point in the development of pre-Chartist radicalism’.¹⁰⁹ O’Connor subsequently published a series of six open letters addressed to his former Parliamentary mentor detailing O’Connell’s tactical manoeuvring which Epstein also suggests were amongst O’Connor’s best and most controlled polemic.¹¹⁰ Thomas Frost noted how these early open letters lacked the coarseness of O’Connor’s later attacks upon various opponents. Revealingly, Frost also suggested that the contrast between O’Connor’s 1836 critique of O’Connell and his later diatribes ‘showed that he could adapt his style’ to suit a particular audience.¹¹¹ Feargus himself distinguished between the norms and conventions of journalistic prose and those he used in his letters.¹¹² In the Cobbettite tradition, he littered the latter with various formal emphatic devices such as capitals, italics and large fonts.¹¹³ As H.R. Nicholls put it, the ‘printers made his arguments and his eloquence, and a large audience proved he was admired.’¹¹⁴ Frost added: ‘His style was vigorous, but coarse, being well sprinkled with expletives, often set forth in capitals, and spiced for the taste of the “fustian jackets” of the Midlands and the North’.¹¹⁵ These formal characteristics had at least two functions when placed in the context of the national Chartist movement culture. First, they could direct the individual reader to fundamental themes; secondly, they were also simple cues or stage directions for the local readers charged with transforming O’Connor’s printed words into local political events.

¹⁰⁹ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, p. 39.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

¹¹¹ Frost, *Forty years’ recollections*, p. 181.

¹¹² *Northern Star*, 14 February 1846, p. 1.

¹¹³ For Cobbett see R. Williams, *Cobbett* (Oxford, 1983); I. Dyck, *William Cobbett and rural popular culture* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹¹⁴ Nicholls, *Chartist memoirs*, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Frost, *Forty years’ recollections*, p. 181; Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 76-7.

Although some years elapsed before the oral performance of the O'Connor letter became a weekly NCA institution, tradition dictated that the paper be read aloud in both formal and informal, private and public contexts from inception. In early 1838 a correspondent from the Mossley Working Men's Association told how they read the *Star* and other papers:

we admit anybody, whether they are members or not; we read the news of the week, and discuss it paragraph by paragraph, as it is read. We have a good fire in the room, and so it is that we spend our leisure hours, without ever coming into contact with drunkenness or immorality.¹¹⁶

Note the early emphasis upon 'members unlimited' and independent action, perhaps the classic features of the movement culture. Despite the stress upon rational endeavour and respectability also evident here, Chartists often had problems securing rooms for their didactic counter-cultural activities. At Sheffield, where O'Connor's letter calling for the abandonment of the sacred month had caused 'some surprise amongst the listeners' when read aloud by Peter Foden in August 1839, Chartists seem to have had a particularly difficult time engaging rooms for indoor (and often family-oriented) activities.¹¹⁷ In October 1840 a correspondent of the local Working Men's Association complained:

We have been terribly put about, having been ejected out of six or eight rooms since August, 1839; but nothing daunted, we will go on. We have established a News-room and a Mutual Instruction Society, and on Saturdays we have recitations, songs, & c., besides sermons on Sundays. The room is in the paw of a landlord so how long we shall keep it God alone knows ... We have no hesitation in saying that no town in England has met with such an amount of opposition as the intelligent and respectable Chartists of Sheffield.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Northern Star*, 24 February 1838, p. 7. See also 3 February 1838, p. 5 and Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 72-3.

¹¹⁷ *Charter*, 11 August 1839, p. 463. O'Connor's letter recommending the abandonment of the sacred month appeared in the *Northern Star*, 3 August 1839, p. 4.

¹¹⁸ *Northern Star*, 10 October 1840, p. 5.

These travails, no doubt, were exacerbated by the events of the previous twelve months, when local democrats had engaged in skirmishes with local police and troops on more than one occasion.

It is abundantly clear from the *Star's* 'Chartist Intelligence' columns that by the mid 1840s the reading of the O'Connor letter had become an important formal ritual of Chartist counter-culture. At the Carpenter's Hall, Manchester, in late December 1845, for example, 'Mr. O'Connor's letter to the people was read on Sunday night ... which elicited general applause'.¹¹⁹ Similarly, at the Chartist meeting room at Bradford, John Cole (a delegate to the previous Chartist Convention) read aloud O'Connor's words, and 'was received with great applause'.¹²⁰ A fortnight later at Manchester 'Mr. O'Connor's letter, commenting on the arrest of Mr. O'Higgins, through the baseness of O'Connell, was read to the meeting, and caused great sensation; after which the concluding part of the letter from the *Augsburg Gazette* was read, the audience responded to it by crying "that's true."¹²¹ Still, there was nothing like the real thing. 'Great confusion' prevailed at Manchester in 1849 when O'Connor failed to appear as announced, and his letter was performed instead.¹²²

Other kinds of printed material were also commonly read out aloud, particularly after the inception of the Land Plan in 1845. At Merthyr Tydvil, for example, 'members of the No. 1 locality ... have resolved to devote two hours every Sunday evening to the science of agriculture, by reading Mr. O'Connor's "Small Farms", and other practical works on that highly important subject'.¹²³ By mid-February the fledgling Chartist farmers had read O'Connor's book twice over, and had

¹¹⁹ *Northern Star*, 3 January 1846, p. 3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Northern Star*, 17 January 1846, p. 6.

¹²² *Northern Star*, 22 December 1849, 5.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

also embarked upon ‘a large portion’ of Cobbett’s *Cottage Economy* – a work previously recommended by O’Connor.¹²⁴ At Manchester, O’Connor’s ‘letter on the land’ and other parts of the *Star* were also read aloud at meetings held in the new year, in one instance as a prelude to a harangue upon “Class Legislation: its effects upon the destinies of Britain”.¹²⁵ No less than three co-operative societies had then been formed in the city, and another contemplated, for the purpose of purchasing O’Connor’s handbook on small farms.¹²⁶

In late 1845 O’Connor had exhorted his readers and listeners to form discussion classes to imbibe the ‘ABC and the grammar of agriculture’ on Sunday evenings.¹²⁷ He proposed that someone should speak to the group for a half an hour or so, whilst other members would then comment and criticise the speaker’s views.¹²⁸ This call, of course, drew upon the existing conventions of working-class self-help. Robert Lowery, for example, had commenced his political career in Newcastle by starting a similar kind of debating society.¹²⁹ Some years later the miners’ leader Martin Jude (who also played a key role in Tyneside Chartism) wrote that a ‘Detrosier Debating Club’ had been formed in Newcastle for the ‘express purpose of enabling the working classes to acquire a sound knowledge of all that appertains to their welfare in political and social science’.¹³⁰ Despite the financial and organisational difficulties that typically beset such ventures, concerted efforts also were invariably made to build an independent library. By the time of Frost’s return to England in

¹²⁴ *Northern Star*, 21 February 1846, p. 2; For O’Connor’s commendation of ‘all Mr Cobbett’s works on agriculture’ see *Northern Star*, 6 December 1845, p.4.

¹²⁵ *Northern Star*, 31 January 1846, p. 8.

¹²⁶ *Northern Star*, 7 February 1846, p. 8.

¹²⁷ *Northern Star*, 15 November 1845, p. 1.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Harrison and Hollis, *Robert Lowery*, pp. 72-3.

¹³⁰ *Northern Star*, 29 January 1848, p. 7.

1856, for example, the ‘PEOPLE’S NEWS ROOM’ at Newcastle’s Chartist Institute subscribed to a number of newspapers including the *Evening Star*, the *Northern Daily Express*, the *Newcastle Guardian*, the *People’s Paper*, the *Illustrated London News*, the *Weekly Times*, *Lloyd’s Newspaper*, *Punch* and the *Reasoner*. Local activists had by that time also managed to accumulate 700 books, which were made available for perusal on payment of a monthly subscription of 5d.¹³¹

All that is now extant of O’Connor’s polemic is the printed component. But historians need to acknowledge the oral logic evident in much of his printed prose, as it was the imperatives of reception which influenced the form and content of O’Connor’s letters. Walter Ong has emphasised some of the fundamental distinctions between oral and literate cultures.¹³² In oral cultures ‘words are events’, and people are united by the act of communication. Oral cultures are typically ‘homeostatic’, as unrecorded words ‘live in the present’. As such, oral communication is characterised by mnemonic aids such as repetitions, antitheses, alliteration, assonance and highly formulaic aesthetic characteristics. Oral art forms often contain ‘heavy characters’ – ‘persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public’.¹³³ Ong also notes that oral cultures can seem ‘insincere, flatulent and comically pretentious’ to the literate, and this point has considerable historiographical significance. Take Karl Marx’s opinion of O’Connor:

He unites in himself countless contradictions which are resolved in a certain banal commonsense, and enable him, year in, year out, to write his endless weekly letters in the *Northern Star*, each of which is in open conflict with its predecessor.¹³⁴

¹³¹ *People’s Paper*, 23 August 1856, p. 1.

¹³² W. Ong, *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (London, 1982).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹³⁴ Cited in R. Challinor, ‘Chartism’, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 45 (1982), p. 42. Compare Marx’s earlier laudation (as a member of the Committee of the German Democratic Communists of Belgium) of O’Connor, *Northern Star*, 25 July 1846, p. 1.

Yet Ong suggests that oral culture actually ‘allows for inconvenient parts of the past to be forgotten’ – and perhaps this point has some relevance to O’Connor’s letters.¹³⁵ Certainly, Marx and subsequent historians have given little consideration to the distinctive ways in which the *Star* could be used as a demotic conduit.

The alliterative phrases, repetitions, bombast and political abuse that ‘spiced’ the typical O’Connorite missive were arguably assets within the oral, collective and convivial context of the mass-reception of this particular form of Chartist media. Typical was O’Connor’s assault upon a Land Plan critic in the aftermath of the select committee hearings of 1848. Although Albany Fonblanque, the proprietor (and hitherto editor) of the *Examiner* had been appointed to a position at the Board of Trade, he continued to contribute to the paper. His critical commentary upon the Plan, moreover, summed up the orthodox liberal position.¹³⁶ Interestingly, Fonblanque also observed that O’Connor shaped his language variously to suit his ‘children’ and his Parliamentary audience, and there can be little doubt as to the oral logic of the abuse O’Connor heaped upon his target.¹³⁷ As usual, O’Connor reprinted Fonblanque’s criticisms in great detail, to which he added a running commentary peppered with repetitious phrases such as: ‘You incorrigible noodle’; ‘you snivelling tool’; ‘you hired prostitute’; ‘you vile sycophant’; ‘you ugly devil’; ‘you disreputable animal’ – the list could go on.¹³⁸ O’Connor also commonly developed verbal puns in his letters. Thus the Judge Advocate (Sir William G. Hayter, a member of the Parliamentary select committee) became ‘THE HAYTER’, whilst John Revans was derided as the

¹³⁵ Ong, *Orality and literacy*, p. 49.

¹³⁶ *Examiner*, 12 August 1848, pp. 514-15.

¹³⁷ *Examiner*, 19 August 1848, p. 530. See also Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, p. 77.

¹³⁸ *Northern Star*, 19 August 1848, p. 1; 26 August 1848, p. 1. For similar examples of this kind of abuse see *Northern Star*, 5 July 1845, p. 1; 11 November 1845, p. 5.

‘Muddle pated RAVEN’, or alternately, ‘THE RAVEN’.¹³⁹ Feargus’ Chartist adversaries received a similar treatment. For example, James Beattie – a particularly vociferous critic resident at Charterville in the late 1840s – was derided as the ‘BUM BEATTIE’.¹⁴⁰

More importantly, historians have also failed to recognise the significance of O’Connor’s letters in mobilising political activity at the local level. In early 1846 we again find Merthyr Chartists meeting in their reading room, and listening to an O’Connor plea for the return of Frost, Williams and Jones: immediately ‘it was resolved to get up a public meeting in a few days, to adopt a petition to the House of Commons for the restoration of the above patriots’.¹⁴¹ Other localities were similarly motivated. Once pecuniary matters had been disposed of at the local Chartist Council meeting at Carlisle,

Mr. O’Connor’s letter was then read from the *Star*, and it was agreed to, that the council adjourn until five o’clock, P.M., to take the contents of the letter into consideration. At five o’clock the letter was again read to a good number of strangers who made their appearance, and it seemed to be the opinion of everyone present, that a public meeting should be held immediately to petition Parliament for the restoration of the individuals *spoken of* in the letter. The town was then divided into districts, and persons appointed to collect them to obtain the necessary funds. A requisition was then drawn out, and signed by upwards of fifty inhabitant householders of the borough, to be presented to the Mayor to grant the use of the Town Hall on the occasion, and we are happy to state that he has kindly granted them their request, and a public meeting will be held on Wednesday evening, the 14th inst., at eight o’clock, which we are sure will be a bumper.¹⁴²

A deputation was also appointed to wait upon Richard Cobden and John Bright, who were due to ‘harangue our natives at a “ticketed meeting”’.¹⁴³ This exclusionary device, of course, was a protective measure increasingly deployed by Anti Corn Law

¹³⁹ *Northern Star*, 22 December 1849, p. 1; for Revans see *Northern Star*, 15 July 1848, 13 October 1849, p. 1. Emphases in original.

¹⁴⁰ *Northern Star*, 9 May 1850, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ *Northern Star*, 10 January 1846, p. 5.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* My emphasis.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

activists to control indoor space and keep their meetings from being invaded by tumultuous bands of Chartists. Whilst we will look at the battles waged over the control of space in the next chapter, this comparatively detailed report points to the importance of the O'Connor letter as a cultural nexus between print and orality, centre and periphery, organisation and action.

Inevitably, however, the formula began to wear thin. The collision between O'Connor constitutionalist instincts and republican enthusiasm in the late 1840s has already been touched upon. Perhaps the last words on O'Connor's open letters should go to one of his lesser-known antagonists, the 'BUM BEATTIE' of Charterville. Tolerant of his most 'ungrateful' offspring to the end, the *Star* published a jibe sent in by O'Connor's Irish critic:

O'CONNOR'S BUDGET, OR, THE LYING FIRST
PAGE OF THE 'NORTHERN STAR'

Tune – *The Lion of Freedom*

Ye millions of toilers that's suffering wrongs
To you the indicter addresses his song,
Don't read, nor hear read, lest your cause it should mar,
The lying first page of the *Northern Star*

'Tis nearly ten years since it first caught my eye,
I read it, oh! curs'd be that moment for aye
My then peace and comfort are banished afar,
By the lying first page of the *Northern Star*

I've struggled through life against oppression and wrong,
With a head passing clear, and an arm pretty strong,
And regret freedom's cause should be baffled so far,
By the lying first page of the *Northern Star*.

May knowledge increase that the people may know,
How rightly to judge between a friend and a foe,
Then truth, sense and reason will join in a war,
'Gainst the lying first page of the *Northern Star*.
JAMES BEATTIE, CHARTERVILLE.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ *Northern Star*, 30 March 1850, p. 1.

Note how Beattie implicitly equated the ‘first page of the *Northern Star*’ with the O’Connor letter, here juxtaposed with rationalist notions of ‘truth, sense and reason’. Beattie’s bitter, self-recriminating lines were also set to the metre of the most famous O’Connorite song.¹⁴⁵ Irony was not a deep current within the discursive sea of Chartist political culture, but here it ran deep. Nor could O’Connor resist the opportunity of undercutting the parody by publishing Beattie’s lines in the precise cultural location they decried.¹⁴⁶

Postmodern historians such as Joyce and Vernon have emphasised the melodramatic, romantic and intensely theatrical ‘narratives’ of popular political authority that linked radical democratic demagogues like Hunt, O’Connor and Ernest Jones with popular liberal heroes such as W.J. Fox, John Bright, Richard Cobden or William Gladstone. Yet the heavy oral residues and inflections of Chartist print media also need to be integrated into this line of thinking, for clearly the ‘melodrama’ and theatricality of popular politics owed much to the accommodation of oral communicative tactics. O’Connor, Harney, Cooper, Taylor, McDouall and other flamboyant Chartist orators arguably had little alternative to cultivating romantic personas. As Ong reminds us, ‘colourless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics’.¹⁴⁷ O’Connor’s letter writing techniques were arguably assets, rather than liabilities, in this particular cultural context with its persistent oral imperatives. To us, the printed, partial remains of this innately ‘symbiotic’ media may well appear insincere and pretentious. Yet the open letters linked the organisational centre and periphery, and the literate and illiterate. As such, they were an integral component of

¹⁴⁵ Gammage, *History*, p. 407.

¹⁴⁶ The Irish Chartist Patrick O’Higgins later wrote to the *Star* reminding readers how Beattie had in 1842 warmly commended the proselytising role of the paper in Ireland. See *Northern Star*, 14 April 1850, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ong, *Orality and literacy*, p. 70.

the Chartist cultural commitment to ‘members unlimited’. The ritual which came to surround the O’Connor letters also might be seen as a communicative tactic which overcame some of the practical difficulties posed by the mass-platform, whilst simultaneously replicating some its oral advantages. In sum, we need to be wary of arguments equating print with the dilution of customary or oral modes of political contention. Orality and print, quite simply, were two sides of same coin. But what uses did the rank-and file find for print? Was it a technology which marginalised those excluded from the political nation even further? Or was print a medium of empowerment that had almost magical properties for the rank and file?

IV

Thus far I have pointed to some of the potential problems of transposing the model of the bourgeois public sphere to Chartist political culture. In conclusion, I will also suggest that the Vernon’s Foucauldian re-working of Habermas’ theory (the print-closure thesis) ignores the way in which print (particularly the *Northern Star*) provided working people with a remarkably open and inclusive outlet for expressing their views. Although Stephen Roberts’ discussion of the more obscure contributors to the *Northern Star* touches upon this subject, he tends to dwell upon the content of the contributions and the biographical details of the authors, rather than the idea of writing and publishing as forms of political power.¹⁴⁸ James Vernon, on the other hand, stresses the sense of agency vested in the production and display of the visual iconography of popular politics whilst simultaneously presenting print as a debilitating

¹⁴⁸ Roberts, ‘Who wrote to the *Northern Star*?’.

technology.¹⁴⁹ Yet it is impossible to read much Chartist news, prose, poetry, resolutions or public addresses without being struck by a sense of the power invested in the printed word.

Again, this subject requires a significant degree of empathy on the part of the historian. These unknowns entered an heroic sphere of political contention in which charismatic heroes battled the manifold enemies of ‘the People’. Similarities in the styles deployed by leaders and followers were evident. Consider the adulation heaped upon Feargus O’Connor and Joseph Rayner Stephens in the first phase of Chartist mobilisation. The following sentiments were written by Bristol radicals and addressed to O’Connor, Stephens and Richard Oastler:

HONOURED AND BELOVED PHILANTHROPISTS, – Your undaunted and magnanimous devotion to snatch virtuous industry from the cruel claws of fiendish oppression, had won our admiration and respect, antecedently to the recent attempt at immolation by the blood-hounds of corruption; but that filthy attempt to vanish virtue, and thereby thinking to frustrate our exertions in obtaining our political emancipation, has more closely wedded us to your persons and principles. Our lives, our all is yours.

O’Connor, we love you. Oastler, we love you. Stephens, we love you. Persecution, we defy thee. Tyranny, we loathe thee. Death, we don’t fear thee. Liberty we love, and will have thee.

Patriotic Sirs,– Accept of those sincere, though succinct expression of our feelings, and rest assured, if the oppressors of liberty goad us to the alternative of death or liberty, we shall be found in the ranks of those who are determined to die freemen, rather than live slaves.

Signed on behalf of the association,
WILLIAM BURDEN, Secretary.¹⁵⁰

This address drew upon stylistic precedents O’Connor had nurtured in the pages of the *Star*. A month earlier he had written:

Radicals, I will never desert you. My life, my time, my health, my purse is yours. FRASER, I love you; Duncan, I thank you; Brewster, I don’t know you; Tyranny, I hate you; Malice, I despise you; Liberty, I love you; Death, I don’t fear you’.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Vernon, *Politics and the people*.

¹⁵⁰ *Northern Star*, 19 January 1839, p. 8.

¹⁵¹ *Northern Star*, 15 December 1838, p. 3.

An almost poetic rhythmic structure, with distinct oral overtones, can be discerned in these dialogic extracts. Print-culture not only helped to forge Chartism's national identity; it was an empowering political medium in which the rank and file could commune with their champions – and be seen doing so by the rest of the national Chartist community.

This was 1839 and the millenarian atmosphere appropriate to such rhetoric was partly fired by the sensational claims of cruelty, infanticide and body snatching associated with the implementation of the new poor law in industrial communities.¹⁵² Whereas Daniel O'Connell had advocated the new system of relief with some enthusiasm, O'Connor co-ordinated a resistance campaign with the 'Tory Radicals' Richard Oastler at Huddersfield, and Joseph Rayner Stephens in the Stalybridge-Ashton area.¹⁵³ Stephens lived and ministered to this most passionate of Chartist communities for many years, and it was he who brought the infamous 'Marcus' pamphlets (which advocated the forcible removal and 'painless extinction' of new-born infants) to public attention in late 1838.¹⁵⁴ Stephens (erroneously) attributed the pamphlet to a Poor Law Commissioner, and speculation abounded about its origins.¹⁵⁵ 'The three Commissioners at Somerset House, the Devil-king's headquarters, have disavowed it for themselves individually', insinuated the *Star*, 'but they do not say whether it has been written by some of the deputy-devils, the Assistant-Commissioners, under their command'.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² See Knott, *Popular opposition to the 1834 poor law*, pp. 225-45.

¹⁵³ For Oastler see C. Driver, *Tory radical: the life of Richard Oastler* (New York, 1946)

¹⁵⁴ Marcus, *On the possibility of limiting populousness* (London, 1838).

¹⁵⁵ Knott, *Popular opposition to the 1834 poor law*, pp. 238-9.

¹⁵⁶ *Northern Star*, 12 January 1839, p. 4.

Until his trial in August 1840 (when he publicly renounced Chartism) Stephens vied with O'Connor as the popular hero.¹⁵⁷ Dorothy Thompson reminds us that it was the excommunicated Methodist preacher who propelled his audiences into a state of hysteria with allegations of infanticide and a Biblically saturated protest rhetoric of 'For child and wife/We will war to the knife'.¹⁵⁸ The utterances of Stephens' admirers after his release on bail in early 1839 also illustrate how ordinary Chartists attempted to manufacture small triumphs in published words. Having decided to adopt the Charter and contribute to the National Rent, Crosland Moor radicals further resolved:

2nd. 'That we are convinced that the Whig-Malthusian-Painless-Extinction crew intended to victimize our champion Stephens, but are proud that, by his wisdom and transcendent talents, he rose like a phoenix from its ashes, and soared above their venom, their malice and their power; and are proud to witness him standing upon the very pinnacle of fame and about to be handed down to posterity, as the greatest and most virtuous man of this or any other age'.

3. 'That our best thanks are due to Feargus O'Connor, Esq., for his mighty efforts in the people's cause, for the numerous and splendid triumphs he has achieved over the enemies of justice and right principle; to that gentleman we are mainly indebted for the rapid progress which the great principle of Universal Suffrage has made; and we hope and trust that he will long continue in health and vigour to fight our battles, and call forth the blessings of the millions who look to honour him for succour and support'.¹⁵⁹

Note the transcendent images of flight and moral might: it is almost as if these proletarian words had set Stephens free as much as his tyrant-captors. Chartists meeting at Huddersfield were equally determined to laud their hero:

2nd. That Mr. Stephens having, by his bold, unflinching and irresistible advocacy of short hours and good wages for the factory children, his denunciation of the base, bloody and brutal persecuting Malthusian-limitation-to-three-of-a-family-painless-extinction-coarser-food-lower-wages-Bastille-Whigs brought down upon himself their ire, we hereby determine to afford him every protection and support that may be found necessary, whether moral, pecuniary, or physical.

¹⁵⁷ For Stephens' trial and imprisonment see Edwards, *Purge this realm*, pp. 87-96.

¹⁵⁸ Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 75; *Northern Star*, 16 February 1839, p. 6. For other typical sermons see *Northern Star*, 23 February 1839, p. 6; 2 March 1839, p. 6; 9 March 1839, p. 7; 16 March 1839, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ *Northern Star*, 26 January 1839, p. 4.

3rd. That this meeting are convinced that the persecutors of Mr. Stephens are as weak and imbecile as they are malignant and vindictive, and have witnessed some degree of pleasure by their blundering, mean and contemptible proceedings.¹⁶⁰

Again, a distinct sense of triumph is unmistakable in these breathless oral resolutions framed for a national, printed audience. Here we have also an implicit confirmation of the significance of Ong's colourful heroes within a political culture heavily reliant upon what I have dubbed 'synthetic' modes of propagation.

If an intense sense of political agency could be invested in proclamations of unity, it also was manifest in the castigation of the enemy. In 1838 Daniel O'Connell again attacked leading English radicals, and O'Connor duly replied by reprinting his 1836 critique.¹⁶¹ 'We republish these letters', the *Star* announced, 'because they contain a mass of information ... of which all ought to be in possession'.¹⁶² Reminded of the *minutiae* of the Liberator's transactions with the Whigs, the Chartist rank and file set about damning 'that arch apostate and bribed betrayer of the factory children' at locality meetings.¹⁶³ A 'society' of the Worsboro Common Northern Union appointed 'for the purpose of watching public men' gratuitously informed O'Connell:

Our intention is to reprove you of your manifold abominations; but really we are at a loss how or where to begin ... you are really and truly indescribable ... the word O'Connell only meant a man's name previous to your existence; now that same word means all the combined baseness and villainy of which the human character is susceptible.¹⁶⁴

Sowerby democrats avowed to having similar difficulties in mustering words:

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶¹ For O'Connell's criticisms of 'THE PERSONS STYLING THEMSELVES THE RADICAL REFORMERS OF ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND WALES' see his address on behalf of the Precursor society published in the *Northern Star*, 8 December 1838, p. 8. For O'Connor's open letters see *Northern Star*, 8 December 1838, p. 6; 15 December 1838, p. 2 (I); 22 December 1838, p. 6 (II); 29 December 1838, p. 2; 5 January 1839, p. 3 (III); 12 January 1839, p. 2 (IV); 26 January 1839, p. 2; 2 February 1839, p. 2; 9 February 1839, p. 3 (V); 16 February 1839, p. 7 (VI).

¹⁶² *Northern Star*, 24 November 1838, p. 4.

¹⁶³ See *Northern Star*, 15 December 1838, pp. 5, 8; 22 December 1838, pp. 4-5; 29 December 1838, p. 5; 5 January 1839, pp. 5, 8; 12 January 1838, pp. 6, 8.

¹⁶⁴ *Northern Star*, 12 January 1839, p. 6.

we are at a loss for language to express our abhorrence of that monster in the shape of a man Daniel O'Connell, who is in our view the very personification of all that is despicable and base; and we contemptuously spurn him from us as the vilest of the vile.¹⁶⁵

Bradford radicals meeting at Peter Bussey's Queen's Head Tavern pronounced their 'utter abhorrence, and unmingled indignation of the conduct of that arch traitor, pampered and pauper bred hell-bat, Daniel O'Connell'.¹⁶⁶ We 'look upon the Hibernian Chief of the Precursor Society as one of the most venomous reptiles that ever disgraced a country', concurred democrats at Dewsbury.¹⁶⁷

What needs to be remembered about these vitriolic denunciations is that the demonisation of O'Connell was an integral component of O'Connor's extra-parliamentary leadership strategy. Having assumed Hunt's mantle, Feargus immediately set about disassociating himself from his former ally O'Connell. At Leicester in late 1838, for instance, 'Mr. O'Connor spoke at great length, chastizing Mr. O'Connell with a bitterness of sarcasm we never heard equalled, and pointed out his desertion of the people so clearly, that all acknowledged the truth of all his positions'.¹⁶⁸ Crucially, O'Connor also provided a ready discursive outlet (the *Northern Star*) for the hatred he so effectively fuelled. But note also the suggestions in the citations just given that words had limitations as instruments of rage. One alternative lay in the emotive symbolism of fire – a topic which will be discussed in following chapters. Chartists meeting at the Royal Oak Inn in Hull took just this course, and resolved to burn 'several portraits of Daniel O'Connell, the arch traitor to the people' at the next meeting of the Working Men's Association. The feeling of the

¹⁶⁵ *Northern Star*, 26 January 1839, p. 5.

¹⁶⁶ *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838, p. 5.

¹⁶⁷ *Northern Star*, 12 January 1839, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Northern Star*, 24 November 1838, p. 6.

meeting was so decided', added the correspondent, 'that one copy was immediately burnt amid the execrations of all present save one. "So perish all traitors"'.¹⁶⁹

The discursive agency inherent in these collective rituals surely took on an even greater significance as failure compounded failure in the 1840s. O'Connor continued to deploy a gentlemanly public persona, its attendant language and rhetorical motifs until syphilitic-induced insanity engulfed his faltering career in the early 1850s. And as we shall see in the following chapters, O'Connorites of all ages continued to utilise the freely available 'Chartist Intelligence' columns of the *Northern Star* as an heroic political medium. Since Gammage, historians have stressed the unprecedented nature of working people speaking in public and engaging in politics. Yet the *Northern Star* also enabled un-enfranchised, anonymous and marginalised working men, women and children to enter hitherto privileged spheres of contestation. The Chartist inheritance that eventually found its way to Australia, however, was not limited to rhetoric, oratory and printed forms of political media. Various forms of symbolic communication also need to be considered, and this task takes up the rest of the British section of the thesis.

¹⁶⁹ *Northern Star*, 12 January 1839, p. 8.

Chapter Four

The Theatre of Collective Action

One of the definitive features of the linguistic turn has been the recovery of the symbolic meanings of popular politics in the nineteenth century. As we saw in chapter one, the search for symbolic meanings has been taken up by historians of Chartism working loosely in the Thompsonian tradition (Epstein, Belchem, Yeo and Pickering) as well as overtly postmodern scholars such as Joyce and Vernon. Epstein, Belchem and Pickering all note that by the Chartist period a tradition of radical counter-pageantry became firmly associated with the extra-parliamentary ‘mass platform’.¹ ‘As Hunt realized’, argue Belchem and Epstein, ‘radicals had to both ridicule establishment pageantry and to outmatch it, offering not just misrule, but more attractive forms of public ceremonial’.² The symbolic dimension of radical-democratic political culture was also an important element of the political inheritance of the emigrant. In fact, the recognition of symbolic political meanings is crucial to the rationale of this thesis – the exploration of the cultural origins of colonial popular radicalism in the post-1848 period. If popular political contention has received only passing attention in the existing historiography of this period, then it would be fair to say that symbolic media have been virtually ignored. In response, this chapter examines various elements of what might be termed the symbolic repertoire of Chartism, or the ways in which non-literal meanings were mediated in various forms of collective activity.

In their recent critique of revisionist arguments upon the gentleman leader,

¹ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*; Belchem, ‘Orator Hunt’; Pickering, ‘Class without words’; Belchem and Epstein, ‘The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited’.

² Belchem and Epstein, ‘The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited’, p. 181.

Belchem and Epstein stress the importance of teasing out the ‘meanings associated with the use of urban public space and the complex relationships between space, political language, and the exercise of authority’.³ In the last chapter we briefly saw the problems Chartists often had in obtaining (and keeping) indoor meeting rooms, and the issue of the control of space also extended to Chartism’s great outdoor mass-meetings. Sites such as Kersal Moor in Lancashire or Peep Green in the West Riding, Belchem and Epstein note, were not subject to the administrative authority of any one town. On the contrary, they were places of ‘freedom, the site of touring circuses, races’ and so forth.⁴ Improvisation was an important factor of these gatherings: at a democratic camp meeting held on Pendle Hill near Sabden in Lancashire, for example, locals erected a temporary hustings ‘composed of earth and covered in sods’, in order that the 2000 strong crowd could see the speakers, which included William Beesley and the Sabden radical Henry Wood.⁵ The topography of moorland peaks also played an important role in sustaining the sense of counter-cultural agency. James Vernon points out that

Invariably the significance of these outdoor locations lay in their geographic position. Often they were used because of their proximity to a number of separate towns ... And yet it was surely no accident that so many of these sights were moorland summits, hills or edges, all of which provided breathtaking panoramas ... For radicals the land became a symbol of regeneration and fertility. By marching and meeting on these hilltops, they played out this belief as the low literally became high, masters of the landscape for a few hours.⁶

As Vernon implies, these counter-cultural worlds had only a fleeting life. But massed Chartist activity also had a contestatory function, particularly in urban contexts. This tendency itself acts as a reminder that the distinction between counter-cultural and

³ *Ibid.*, p. 177. See also J. Epstein, ‘Spatial practices/democratic vistas’, *Social History*, 24 (1999), pp. 295-310.

⁴ Belchem and Epstein, ‘The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited’, p. 177.

⁵ HO 45/249.

⁶ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, pp. 211-12.

contestatory practices was often somewhat blurred in practice.

Antony Taylor's doctoral research into late and post-Chartist radicalism specifically deals with the contestation of urban space.⁷ Unlike James Vernon, Taylor makes few concessions to postmodern theory. Whilst Taylor also excludes Salford, Oldham, Ashton and other satellite towns from his definition of 'Manchester', he argues that the industrial city and the metropolis were almost mirror opposites in terms of Chartist mobilisation. Whereas London was relatively weak in the late 1830s and early 1840s, Manchester was then a major Chartist centre. Apart from the brief Chartist-Confederate resurgence of 1847-8, however, the movement went into a marked decline in Manchester from about 1842.⁸ Not only did traditional Peterloo 'mournings' cease between 1842 and 1847; during 1848 Manchester Chartists lost access to the Carpenter's Hall, the large indoor arena they had hired on a full-time basis in 1843, following a number of bruising encounters with O'Connellite Repealers.⁹ As Taylor also points out, no significant Chartist mass-meetings were held in Manchester for nearly two years after the arrests of the summer of 1848.¹⁰ Thus the 'eclipse of the movement' was mirrored by its 'loss of public presence in Manchester's open spaces'.¹¹ London, by contrast, witnessed considerable mass-mobilisations after 1848, including struggles over the right to gather at traditional open-air meeting places such as Bishop Bonnor's Fields.¹²

Perhaps the most common symbolic devices displayed during collective outdoor displays of radical-democratic political will were flags and banners. In his

⁷ Taylor, 'Modes of political expression and working-class radicalism'.

⁸ Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, ch. 10.

⁹ *Northern Star*, 28 January 1843, p. 1.

¹⁰ Taylor, 'Modes of political expression and working-class radicalism', pp. 64-6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Taylor, "'Commons-Stealers'", "Land-Grabbers" and "Jerry-Builders".

book on Manchester and Salford Chartism, Paul Pickering conducts an analysis of some of the meanings embedded in radical-democratic banners, many of which predated the movement itself.¹³ Examples which had survived Peterloo, for example, came to be regarded as ‘sacred relics’ in Manchester’s radical culture.¹⁴ The focal points of the attack upon those who had assembled to hear ‘Orator’ Hunt at St Peter’s Fields in August 1819, their survival carried powerful historical meanings into the Chartist present some twenty years later.¹⁵ At the immense Peep Green (West Riding) mass meeting of October 1838, for example, Leeds Chartists marched behind a ‘Peterloo Blood stained banner, with a representation of the yeomen cutting down the people with their sabres’.¹⁶ Banners had a number of symbolic purposes. As symbols of unity they identified local communities and interests within the larger political processions. As tools of contestation their slogans and images mediated Chartist claims in a visual, mobile shorthand, and demarcated the boundaries of radical incursions upon civic spaces.¹⁷ In addition to being used in outdoor protests, banners typically had a decorative counter-cultural function in repose, and commonly adorned Chartist meeting rooms along with the portraits of radical heroes such as J.R. Stephens, Richard Oastler and Feargus O’Connor. Even the absence of these visual representations sometimes made curt political statements. At a dinner held in honour of the local leader William Aitken in Ashton-under-Lyne in 1845, for example, ‘The large room was splendidly decorated, and ornamented with portraits of all the public characters associated with the Chartist movement. Those of O’Brien, McDouall and Collins, did not appear in their former places, but instead, were committed to the

¹³ Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, pp. 160-5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁵ See S. Bamford, *Passages in the life of a radical* (Oxford, 1984 rep.), pp. 207-11; Epstein, ‘Understanding the cap of liberty’, p. 99.

¹⁶ *Northern Star*, (Extraordinary) 16 October 1838, p. 1.

lumber room'.¹⁸ This form of reproach was meted out for perceived political apostasy, although McDouall later regained the confidence of Ashton's O'Connorites during his tempestuous career.

In his analysis of forty-four banners taken from six processions which took place in the heyday of Manchester Chartism, Pickering classifies slogans in a number of ways: structural political demands; historical associations; general social principles (including religious views); patriotic declarations; opposition to Government policies; economic principles; and support for Chartist heroes.¹⁹ James Vernon, on the other hand, takes a somewhat different approach. As noted in the last chapter, Vernon's wide-ranging discussion of the 'politics of sight' emphasises the political agency invested in the production and display of flags and banners, colours and ribbons.²⁰ He argues that the melodramatic pageantry of popular politics was so powerful and inclusive that the 'distinction between participants and spectators was a flimsy one – all took part in the performance'.²¹ Vernon also stresses that women became marginalised as banner producers from about the 1830s.²² In Manchester, as elsewhere, Chartist examples were sometimes produced by members themselves, and occasionally entrusted to professional flagmakers.²³ Despite this slow process of exclusion, Vernon also notes that banners could be modified to suit new exigencies. Unlike print, he suggests that they were an 'elastic' medium in the sense that they

¹⁷ Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, p. 160.

¹⁸ *Northern Star*, 7 June 1845, p. 6. For Aitken see R.G. Hall, 'Chartism remembered: William Aitken, Liberalism, and the politics of memory', *Journal of British Studies*, 38 (1999), pp. 445-70.

¹⁹ Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, pp. 162-5.

²⁰ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, pp. 107-16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²³ Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, pp. 160-1.

could be repainted or resewn.²⁴ Note, for example, the evident modifications made to the Peterloo banner taken to the Peep Green meeting by Leeds Chartists. Vernon's print-closure thesis, however, perhaps underplays the importance of printed media in visual political insignia.

In the last chapter we saw how oral and printed media were intimately related within Chartist political culture, and a number of links also can be made between banners and newsprint. Portraits sold from the *Star* office in Leeds were commonly integrated in Chartist banners and flags, either directly, or as templates for larger images. Banners were also occasionally adorned with written advertisements such as 'Read the *Northern Star*, to be had of Mrs. Smith's, Tradesman's Mart', which appeared near the head of a Nottingham procession in late 1838.²⁵ Newsprint itself was used as a raw material. At a Carlisle demonstration in 1838, on the rear of a black flag, adorned with a death's head, crossbones and the inscription 'Death or Liberty', appeared a 'tasty frame, with the *Northern Star* newspaper, bound in pink, and decorated by a splendid Star, composed of wire and spangles – underneath the Carlisle *Journal*, and *Patriot*, bound in black; above the *Star*, the cap of liberty'.²⁶ A similar fate met other opponents of the fourth estate: at Peep Green, the *Leeds Mercury* was trimmed with black, and mounted upon banner bearing the inscription 'THE GREAT LIAR OF THE NORTH'.²⁷ The *Northern Star*, of course, took pride of place mounted upon a silk Union Jack at the head of the procession.²⁸

Although its connotations with liberty went back at least to the seventeenth

²⁴ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, pp. 109-10.

²⁵ *Northern Star*, 10 November 1838, p. 6.

²⁶ *Northern Star*, 27 October 1838, p. 5.

²⁷ *Northern Star* (Extraordinary), 16 October 1838, p. 1. Another flag carried by Chartists from Dawgreen warned that the *Mercury* was 'on the besom of destruction'.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

century, green had particularly close associations with postwar popular radicalism and Peterloo. Chartist meetings and processions were also distinguished by this popular radical colour, and green ribbons, rosettes and sashes were worn by participants and crowd marshals alike. Chartist banners were commonly built up upon this primary background, although quite complex textual and visual arrangements were often created. Consider a *Star* description of a banner paraded at the head of a Wigan demonstration in 1838:

Banner, eight feet by six feet. Green Silk.

Trimmings – Red Fringe.

1st side.

A full length portrait of Feargus O'Connor, Esq., in the attitude of addressing the Public, holding the People's Charter in one hand, Hunt's monument in the distance. Motto on Scarlet scroll, gold letters

– O'Connor Hunt's successor.

Reverse–

The British lion roused, and in the attitude of trampling under his feet

Starvation bastiles,

Debt Funds

Jew-Jobbers-Aristocracy,

Shopocracy,

White-Slavery-State Paupers,

Holding a three-edged flaming dagger in his fore-Paw – the black flag suspended between the point of the dagger and the point of his tail.

Motto on black flag –

Down, down to hell and say I sent you there.

Also a death's head and cross-bones, and a viper's sting at the extreme end of the flag.

Motto, on a scarlet scroll over all, in gold letters,

Tremble, Tyrants, tremble.²⁹

Clearly this banner was a large visual device in which precious surface area was fully utilised on both sides: the front contained an explicit recognition of O'Connor's accession to Hunt's mantle; the rear portrayed the British lion, the symbol of national virility and constitutional integrity, crushing old corruption. Intertwined with both

²⁹ *Northern Star*, 17 November 1838, p. 6.

these representations of constitutionalist vigour, however, lay rather more fearsome and intimidatory figures such as the death's head and its attendant mottoes.

Sound and music was an integral component of Chartist counter-pageantry. Prior to the Peep Green meeting in 1838, for example, 'the merry sounds of martial music roused the sleepers from their beds', and 'many excellent bands' accompanied the participants as they marched to the central meeting place.³⁰ According to the report contained in an extraordinary edition of the *Star*, one 'shout loud and long seemed to rend the air as the new comers mingled with their fellows, who had previously arrived'.³¹ At an earlier meeting convened at Keighley in August, the six bands which had assembled with the marchers stopped playing when O'Connor was sighted, when the 'multitude gave three immense cheers'.³² Groans, cheering and inchoate yelling also had important contestatory functions in urban contexts. At a torchlit parade held in Bolton in 1838, for example:

As the people passed the residence of friend or foe, they gave striking proofs of the moral power which they possess of discriminating between their friends the people and their enemies. A frightful yell seemed to burst spontaneously from the whole body, resembling an earthquake, upon passing the office of the *Chronicle*, the Tory journal. And, upon the other hand, as the procession passed the house of a friend, cheering countenances from the illuminated windows gave joyous response to the welcome salute. In going down the hill to Little Bolton, the sight was truly grand – the whole town appeared to be in a blaze.³³

It is probable that these aural outbursts were not as spontaneous as the correspondent suggested, but co-ordinated by Chartist marshals. Whilst brass ensembles (often drawn from the ranks of trade and benefit societies) seem to have been particularly welcome inclusions in Chartist processions, sometimes organisers had little choice but

³⁰ *Northern Star* (Extraordinary), 16 October 1838, p. 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Northern Star*, 4 August 1838, p. 6.

³³ *Northern Star*, 3 November 1838, p. 8.

to resort to unaccompanied singing. Thomas Cooper recalled how the poverty-stricken Leicester Chartists simply sang ‘through the streets, to shew our numbers, and also to vex our middle class opponents. But ... they were always harmless, for we never committed any violence’.³⁴ Nonetheless, co-ordinated clapping by thousands of participants marshalled in military formations could be made to resemble a volley of musket fire. It is certainly doubtful whether Chartists and Confederates at Bradford – who wore pieces of green paper in the absence of more elegant ribbon, and banged upon empty tin cans instead of drums – had any conciliatory concerns whilst drilling on the outskirts of the town in 1848.³⁵

Earlier we saw how the absence of visual insignia could have symbolic connotations, and in September 1839 Chartists also used silence as a form of intimidatory protest. Whilst the silent demonstrations seem to have been unique, they have not received much attention from historians. In Sheffield ‘ulterior measures’ adopted in August 1839 included selective trading, the withdrawal of cash from banks, church occupations and the adoption of underground forms of organisation based around the Methodist class model.³⁶ At the end of the month local authorities moved to prevent Chartists from meeting in the parish churchyard during services and the traditional open-air meeting site of Paradise Square.³⁷ The constitutional right to assembly and free speech having been proscribed, and leaders such as Peter Foden and William Martin having been arrested upon charges of sedition, on Tuesday 10 September,

a silent meeting was held in Paradise-square, from seven to eight o’clock, when about 5,000 were present, called solely by the means of the classes. Soon after

³⁴ Gammage, *History*, p. 406; Cooper, *Life*, ch. 16.

³⁵ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, p. 111.

³⁶ *Northern Star*, 14 September 1839, p. 4; *Times*, 21 September 1839, p. 6.

³⁷ *Northern Star*, 7 September 1839, p. 5.

seven o'clock, a procession arrived from Ecclesfield in solemn silence, with their hands on their mouths to denote peace; but what was most remarkable, the Ecclesfield lads had large walking sticks to help them on their journey.³⁸

The hint of menace implicit in this new form of protest (at least in a political context) was borne out the following night, following William Martin's committal to York Castle.³⁹ This meeting was also held in darkness, as Paradise Square's gaslamps were twice extinguished by the protesters. A pistol-shot broke the silence, however, as did the crashing of broken windows. The next day magistrates issued further warnings, and the silent protests culminated in a riot as Chartists armed with stones, pikes, knives and sticks were chased through the streets by police and a detachment of dragoons.⁴⁰

Robert Gammage was of the opinion that the tactic of meeting at night by torchlight in 1838 had been undertaken to avoid the threat of reprisals from employers.⁴¹ The *Star* account of the first torchlit meeting at Stockport described the demonstration as a 'safety valve', after operatives originally intent on attending the 'Kersal Moor day' in September had been threatened with dismissal by their masters.⁴² Other communities soon followed Stockport's example. Leeds Chartists even paid thanks to their brethren for developing an innovative form of political protest.⁴³ 'It was almost impossible to imagine the excitement caused by these manifestations', wrote Gammage:

people did not go singly to the place of meeting, but met in a body at a starting point, from whence, at a given time, they issued in huge numbers, formed into procession, traversing the principal streets, making the heavens echo with the thunder of their cheers on recognizing the idols of their worship ... and sending forth volleys of the most hideous groans on passing the office of some hostile

³⁸ *Northern Star*, 14 September 1839, p. 4.

³⁹ Martin's subsequent trial and imprisonment is discussed further in chapter five.

⁴⁰ *Northern Star*, 21 September 1839, p. 8.

⁴¹ Gammage, *History*, p. 94.

⁴² *Northern Star*, 6 October 1838, p. 8.

⁴³ *Northern Star*, 13 October 1838, p. 4.

newspaper ... The banners ... viewed by the red light of the glaring torches, presented a scene of awful grandeur. The death's heads represented on some of them grinned like ghostly spectres, and served to remind many a mammon-worshipper of his expected doom.⁴⁴

Epstein and Belchem argue that the 'decision to take by night what had been denied by day, to move from the town's edge to the centre, after parading the town's periphery with thousands of torches, was a gesture of class defiance: a challenge to the authority of factory, town and national government'.⁴⁵ And as Gammage recognised, the heady atmosphere (which in this case included pistol reports and men carrying pikes) had a significant bearing on the kind of rhetoric that could be uttered. 'A recommendation to moral force' in such a context, he commented, 'would have been laughed to scorn'.⁴⁶

As noted in the last chapter, fire could also be deployed as a tool of execration. In 1847 the *London Weekly Dispatch*, a paper which had published criticisms of the Land Plan, was 'put on trial, condemned and burnt' in the presence of Bury St Edmunds members.⁴⁷ At the Kossuth welcome at the Copenhagen Fields in 1851, a copy of the *Times* was gibbeted and burnt in front of the large and appreciative audience.⁴⁸ Just like the use of newsprint in some banners, the natural properties of fire were also utilised to illuminate printed inscriptions. At the torchlit meeting convened at Hyde in mid-November 1838 'large triangular' transparencies were carried inscribed with Stephensite physical force mottoes such as 'We'll die freemen rather than live slaves – No surrender and death to all tyrants' and 'Universal suffrage

⁴⁴ Gammage, *History*, pp. 94-5.

⁴⁵ Belchem and Epstein, 'The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited', p. 184.

⁴⁶ Gammage, *History*, p. 97.

⁴⁷ The *Dispatch* was also burnt at Dewsbury. See *Northern Star*, 30 October 1847, pp. 7-8. The protests were motivated by O'Connor open letters published upon 16 October 1847, p. 1 and 23 October 1847, p. 1, in which he attacked a number of Land Plan critics.

⁴⁸ Taylor, 'Modes of political expression and working-class radicalism', p. 65.

or universal vengeance ... A happy Home, or war to the knife'.⁴⁹ By the end of 1838, when Stephens was finally arrested in Ashton, this form of ultra-constitutional protest had been well and truly doused.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the use of firelit gatherings continued sporadically – even if some of these isolated examples lacked the menacing aspect of their forbears. When candles were substituted for torches at Carmarthen in early 1839, for example, marchers were abused by hostile onlookers and assailed by crackers.⁵¹ In June 1841 Manchester Chartists were forced to seek police protection after their avowed intention of publicly burning O'Connell in effigy resulted in the appearance of a large and menacing body of Irish 'bludgeon men' at the Carpenter's Hall, where this rather provocative ceremony was to take place.⁵² According to the Manchester Chief of Police Sir Charles Shaw, the inflamed Irish 'broke the heads of a few Chartists, and dispersed the remainder'.⁵³ In March 1848, however, Peter Murray McDouall led Nottingham Chartists singing through the city's principal streets in a torch-lit, military-like procession which ended with three cheers for the 'British Revolution'.⁵⁴

'We give the mottoes upon their several banners', the *Star* commented upon the Hyde torchlit demonstration that led to Stephens' arrest, for they 'are more explanatory of their condition, their feelings, their knowledge of right and detestation

⁴⁹ *Northern Star*, 17 November 1838, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Edwards, *Purge this realm*, pp. 56-9.

⁵¹ *Northern Star*, 26 January 1839, p. 6. The chair at this gathering addressed the crowd in Welsh.

⁵² HO 45/46.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Shaw also prevailed upon the O'Connellites not to 'destroy the Chartist Association rooms in Tib street', as was their avowed intention. The Salford Chartist leader R.J. Richardson subsequently appealed to Shaw for protection after learning that he would be 'waylaid and beaten by the Irish'. Richardson also accused the police of complicity in the attack upon Chartists at the Carpenter's Hall, and threatened that he would 'not stir out unarmed, and whether Irishman or Policeman interferes with me, he must take the consequences'.

⁵⁴ *Times*, 25 March 1848, p. 5; Somerville, *Somerville's diligent life*, p. 260.

of wrong ... than if we were to write volumes'.⁵⁵ Most research upon the symbols of Chartist protest has relied upon these printed descriptions of processions, demonstrations and meetings. Yet Chartist reporters commonly stated that they could not adequately describe the visual spectacle they witnessed.⁵⁶ Whilst many printed descriptions exist, very few flags or banners appear to have survived. James Vernon notes the 'remarkable history' of Skelmanthorpe's 'Flag of Freedom', which dates from the aftermath of Peterloo. At first hidden from the parish constable when not being used, the flag later became a venerated community icon, being displayed at local celebrations of the end of the American civil war, and then even at the openings of local churches.⁵⁷ The stunning Daguerreotypes taken by W.E. Kilburn of the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common on 10 April 1848 – perhaps the first photographs ever taken of a large outdoor crowd – unfortunately give nothing more than a fleeting glimpse (primarily due to exposure requirements) of the large banners and flags decorating the two visible hustings.⁵⁸ The only explicit political sentiment that can be identified, in fact, is a motto fixed at the bottom of one of the hustings reading 'LABOUR IS THE SOURCE OF ALL WEALTH'.

One of the more intriguing features of the Kennington Common images, however, is the fact that at least two groups of children clearly visible in the photographs were not reproduced in an engraving taken from the Daguerreotypes and subsequently published in the *Illustrated London News* (illustrations nine and ten).⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Northern Star*, 17 November 1838, p. 5.

⁵⁶ See *Northern Star* (Extraordinary), 16 October 1838, p. 1; 10 November 1838, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁷ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, p. 109.

⁵⁸ F. Dimond and R. Taylor, *Crown & camera: the royal family and photography, 1842-1910* (Harmondsworth, 1987), pp. 27-9; M.K. Henisch and B.A. Henisch, *The photographic experience 1839-1914: images and attitudes* (University Park, 1994), p. 353. I must thank John Davies and Roger Taylor for their advice on Kilburn.

⁵⁹ Illustration 10 is taken from the *Illustrated London News*, 15 April 1848 reprinted in J. Belchem, 'Labour, language and class', *The Historian*, 49 (1996), p. 13. Illustration 10 is

Although the subject of youthful allegiance has been touched upon in Chartist autobiography and in studies of gender and the movement culture, its ramifications for Chartist identity has not yet been explored in any detail.⁶⁰ Children and youths, male and female, were a significant element of the typical outdoor Chartist crowd, and the movement's pretensions to political respectability in 1848 were undoubtedly compromised by the widespread association of Chartist crowds with rampaging, thieving youths and Irish treachery. For this reason the one obvious difference in the content of the Kennington Common images may be of some significance. Whether the absence of the children resulted from a conscious decision of the artist, of course, can only be a matter of speculation. Yet we have already seen how the Kennington Common meeting was perhaps *the* classic example of contention over the size and respectability of the Chartist crowd.⁶¹ 'The largest calculation gives 20,000 to the meeting', derided the *Examiner*, 'and boys made a large portion of that number'.⁶² Within days the integrity of the petition had also come under fierce attack: 'it is a mere heap of rubbish', said the *Times*.⁶³ 'Divide what Mr. Feargus O'Connor says by ten', added the *Examiner*, 'and the quotient will be an approximation of the truth'.⁶⁴

It should also be noted that the open columns of the *Star* also provided the opportunity for young Chartists to outdo their elders in castigating the enemy. Following O'Connor's release from imprisonment in 1841, for example, the youths of

taken from Roberts and Thompson, *Images of Chartism*, p. 90.

⁶⁰ Clark, 'The rhetoric of Chartist domesticity'; Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist movement*; Adams, *Memoirs*; Nicholls, *Chartist Memoirs*. William Booth was said to have taken part in Nottingham Chartism at the age of fourteen. See H. Begbie, *Life of William Booth: the founder of the Salvation Army* (London, 1926), pp. 26-7.

⁶¹ Ward, *Chartism*, pp. 206-7. The *Times*, 11 April 1848, pp. 5-6, 12 April 1848, p. 4 gave various estimates of between 10,000 and 50,000.

⁶² *Examiner*, 15 April 1848, p. 241.

⁶³ *Times*, 13 April 1848, pp. 5, 7. See also 14 April 1848, p. 4; *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 14 (1848), pp. 175-6.

⁶⁴ *Examiner*, 15 April 1848, p. 243.

the Brown street locality in Manchester addressed 'THE YOUTHS OF ENGLAND, IRELAND, SCOTLAND AND WALES': 'It is your duty to unite together in one band of brotherhood determined to stand or fall in the glorious struggle for freedom with the men who have so nobly dared the Whig dungeons, and all the paraphernalia of an arbitrary, despotic, hypocritical, canting, imbecile Government'.⁶⁵ 'No longer does wisdom sit wailing at liberty's grave', added the Dundee Youths' Universal Suffrage Association, 'for now the stone has been rolled away from her sepulchre; she has risen refreshed from the tomb, and wends her way to the celestial abode of these heroes'.⁶⁶ Note the claim to political citizenship implicit in these adolescent addresses, and the way in which transcendent metaphors of flight have been again used to mediate a relatively minor political victory.

One rare visual representation of the kinds of images which appeared on earlier Chartist banners and flags is the coat of arms of the National Charter Association membership card.⁶⁷ This card probably belonged to a Manchester Chartist, as it is counter-signed by James Leach and William Tillman, who were both prominent local organisers and leaders.⁶⁸ Although it would be extremely misleading to equate active Chartist allegiance with formal NCA membership, the card does give us an idea of how some common symbols affixed to banners may have looked.⁶⁹ Larger versions of the coat of arms also were sometimes carried in processions such as

⁶⁵ *Northern Star*, 18 September 1841, p. 6. See also 25 September 1841, p. 5. For speeches given by teenage youths from Chartist platforms during the O'Connor liberation tour see *Northern Star*, 13 November 1841, p. 7; 4 December 1841, p. 6.

⁶⁶ *Northern Star*, 18 September 1841, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Illustration 8 is taken from the front cover of E. Frow and R. Frow, *Manchester and Salford Chartists* (n.p., 1996).

⁶⁸ For brief biographical details of Leach and Tillman see Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, pp. 198, 206-7.

⁶⁹ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, pp. 229-33; Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 124.

the O'Connor liberation demonstration at Huddersfield in late 1841.⁷⁰ The male and female figures are obviously ideal Chartists – working people worthy of political citizenship. The male looks the image of sobriety and respectability. Above his head the unknown artist has placed a skep or bee-hive, denoting industry, thrift and skill. This association was very common in working-class and Chartist political culture. The Peep Green Chartist demonstration of 1838, for example, was envisaged by one promoter as a ‘grand display of the intelligence and zeal of the social bees’.⁷¹ A stress upon the dignity of labour is also evident in the spade held by the male Chartist, a theme extended to the simply attired woman holding a rake (or broom?) and the sheaf of wheat above. These representative Chartists exude a sense of knowledge of their respective ‘natural’ domestic roles. As Anna Clark argues, for ‘working people, domesticity originally meant domestic industry, when families worked together under one roof. It was a nostalgic vision of independence in the era of factory labor, although cottage industry had degenerated into the misery of sweat-shops’.⁷² However, note again the absence of children in the depiction of an ideal Chartist partnership. Nor do any of the more fearsome symbols of Chartist protest such as the death’s head, cross-bones or the viper’s sting appear upon the coat of arms.

At the top of the design is an all-seeing eye surrounded by a star, which in Christian and Masonic iconography symbolises divine omnipresence.⁷³ Below, in the very centre of the representation stands a British Lion roused, breaking the chains of tyranny and stamping upon various insignia of aristocratic and militarist excess. Surrounding this potent symbol of constitutional liberty is a motto ‘THIS IS OUR

⁷⁰ *Northern Star*, 11 December 1841, p. 4.

⁷¹ *Northern Star*, 13 October 1838, p. 4.

⁷² Clark, ‘The rhetoric of Chartist domesticity’, pp. 64-5.

⁷³ H. Biedermann, ed., *Dictionary of symbolism* (New York, 1992), p. 122.

CHARTER’; below is the only other literal inscription, ‘GOD IS OUR GUIDE’. The second axiom is decorated with the rose, shamrock and thistle, popular (as opposed to royal) symbols of national identity within the unity of Britain. Strengthening this association further is the bundle of sticks, or ‘Roman sticks’, another symbol of unity commonly affixed to Chartist banners. The three remaining symbols placed directly above the British Lion, the cap of liberty, a globe and tricolour, illustrate the paradoxical elements of Chartist political culture touched upon in chapter two.

The globe, it must be said, does not appear to have been such a common element of Chartist iconography. Nonetheless, its republican, internationalist (and Masonic) overtones did find expression in mottoes such as ‘Let the Tree of Liberty flourish round the Globe, and every human be a partaker of the fruits’, which flew over the heads of Preston demonstrators in 1838.⁷⁴ James Epstein has stressed how radical icons such as the cap of liberty were not simply decorative trimmings, but went to the heart of radical-democratic political protest from the post-war period onwards.⁷⁵ For the loyalist, the Cap summoned images of Jacobin anarchy and terror. Its display, anywhere in Britain, was an affront to magisterial authority. For example, enraged magistrates at Ashton ordered police and a troop of dragoons to remove a black flag and a cap of liberty hung out of a window during Peterloo commemorations at Charlestown, north-east of Manchester in August 1839. According to a local correspondent, however, ‘the female Radicals fought the police, and defeated them, and kept the cap of liberty’.⁷⁶ For the democrat, the cap of liberty and the tricolour made symbolic claims about the right to meet and exercise free speech. These

⁷⁴ *Northern Star*, 10 November 1838, p. 6.

⁷⁵ Epstein, ‘Understanding the cap of liberty’, p. 77.

⁷⁶ *Northern Star*, 22 August 1840, p. 5.

‘emblems of empowerment’ were complementary elements of a cultural tradition in which Jacobin insignia, natural rights republicanism and radical interpretations of the constitutional heritage stood side-by-side in oral, printed and symbolic forms of political communication.⁷⁷

II

Thus far we have looked at some of the basic visual and aural manifestations of Chartist protest. However, Chartist political culture was characterised by many forms of symbolic practice. As we saw in the introduction, Miles Taylor argues that historians have tended to overlook the ways Chartists attempted to put their programme of democratic constitutional reform into action at the local level.⁷⁸ One symbolic manifestation of the movement culture’s stress upon accountability, for example, was Feargus O’Connor’s public appearances before his Nottingham constituents after his 1847 election victory, in order to explain his actions and offer his resignation. This rite of purification had been regularly practiced by John Fielden at Oldham, and O’Connor had also submitted to an annual test of accountability during his first stint in Parliament as a member for Cork.⁷⁹ In 1848 O’Connor was accompanied by a ‘company of old guards’ to Nottingham’s market-place to address his cultural constituents:

Mr Chairman, and electors, and non-electors of Nottingham – I have come here to-day to discharge a most sacred obligation ... I stand here to give practical effect to two of the six points embodied in the People’s Charter. I stand here – denounced

⁷⁷ Epstein, ‘Understanding the cap of liberty’, p. 113.

⁷⁸ Taylor, ‘Rethinking the Chartists’, p. 493.

⁷⁹ Epstein, *The lion of freedom*, p. 16. See also Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company*, pp. 73-4; For Fielden at Oldham see *Times*, 11 February 1837, p. 6; *Northern Star*, 12 January 1839, p. 3.

by the Press ... I stand here as I stand in the House of Commons – ALONE, to give an account of my stewardship, to tender my resignation, if you are dissatisfied with my services, or to accept a renewal of the trust of those services if they have met with your approbation. (Loud cheers.)⁸⁰

Using characteristic rhetorical ploys, O'Connor stressed his years of service to the people, his honour and his independence. Somewhat mirthfully, he predicted the meeting would be faithfully mis-represented in the non-Chartist press, whose readers would be told that he had made 'a long and rambling speech, without beginning, middle or ending, to three or four hundred tattered ragamuffins – (great laughter) – and that the motley assemblage did not represent any portion of the mind of Nottingham'.⁸¹ After O'Connor also answered a couple of questions from the audience pertaining to his parliamentary performance, James Sweet moved that he 'had faithfully discharged his duties', before O'Connor was re-elected by a briefly empowered constituency of electors unlimited.

Whilst the importance of Methodist experience and organisation forms, and the considerable energies Chartists spent in building their own democratic churches has already been touched upon, the *Northern Star* editor (and Swedenborgian preacher) William Hill effectively vetoed theological disputation in the paper. Explaining why a critical letter regarding the Christian Chartist church at Greenock would not be published, Hill also made a number of revealing comments about the rationale of these proletarian political temples:

*The object of Chartist churches, if we understand them at all, is two fold: first to provide temples in which the Chartist may find those principles of government and society which he believes to be the principles of truth and of the Bible acknowledged by his priest ... and secondly, to form a practical exhibition, as far as our means go, of that system of 'exclusive dealing' which is not less potent when applied to the pews of the parson than when applied to the till of the shopkeeper.*⁸²

⁸⁰ *Northern Star*, 23 September 1848, p. 1. Emphasis in original.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Northern Star*, 20 November 1841, p. 4. Italics in original.

Note the stress upon counter-cultural independence implicit in the analogy of religious exclusive dealing. Hill also emphasised that Chartist churches had to be based upon the broadest '*articles of faith*' – any other policy would have destroyed the commitment to 'members unlimited'.⁸³

As mentioned earlier, attempts at putting 'pre-figural' religious, educational and co-operative ideas into practice during the 1840s culminated in the Land Plan. Malcolm Chase has suggested that the Plan 'was itself a bold non-verbal statement'.⁸⁴ Chase also touches upon the individualistic use of space in the communities, and this aspect of their design can certainly be contrasted with communitarian Owenite counterparts such as Harmony Hall in Hampshire.⁸⁵ On Ann Maree Adams' reading of the architectural design of the Charterville estate (near Witney), its individual small farms and 'Palladian' villas 'reveal conservative aspects of Chartism that illustrate, perhaps more clearly than other documents, the inevitable failure of the movement'.⁸⁶ This argument thus reiterates the traditional view that the Plan 'revealed the inherently reactionary posture of the vision' held by O'Connor.⁸⁷

One of the problems of Adams' interesting but somewhat formalist discussion of the architecture and use of space at Charterville is that she fails to consider the counter-cultural spectacle each of the villages presented to the world. Just as rhetoric cannot be divorced from its historical context, the Land Plan cannot be understood simply by interpreting its archaeological remains in isolation. All the communities were at once living experiments in Chartist independence *and* symbolic incursions

⁸³ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

⁸⁴ Chase, "'We Wish Only to Work for Ourselves'", p. 137.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140. For the most recent research on Harmony Hall see E. Royle, *Robert Owen and the commencement of the millennium* (Manchester, 1998), chs. 3-8.

⁸⁶ Adams, 'Charterville and the landscape of social reform', p. 139.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

onto aristocratic soil. At the ceremonial opening of O'Connorville in 1846, Ernest Jones made a particularly revealing speech regarding the former ideal:

When I left London this morning, I thought I was only going some seventeen or eighteen miles out of town; I now begin to think that I must have made a very long journey indeed, for I have come to a land that at one time I scarcely ever expected to see. I have come from the land of slavery, to the land of liberty – from the land of poverty to the land of plenty – from the land of the Whigs, to the great land of the Charter! This is the promised land, my friends! ... We have come to the first province of a great empire – the Chartist empire. (Loud cheers.) ... I look upon you as being a community by yourselves, with invisible, but mighty barriers all around you; open to all the good, without reference to creed or class, but firmly closed against the ministers of tyranny and monopoly ... Oh! What a strange new land is this, that we have come to.⁸⁸

The rhetoric of deliverance could not be clearer. The simple act of naming villages after O'Connor and the Charter made symbolic territorial claims.⁸⁹ Characteristically, synchronised regional celebrations of the opening of O'Connorville were also held by Chartists at Nottingham, Carlisle, Newcastle and elsewhere – a social function and meeting was even held by Land Plan members working at Navarre in France.⁹⁰

As we shall see in later chapters, Ernest Jones consistently decried the need for emigration into the 1850s. In 1846, moreover, O'Connorville symbolised a millenarian Chartist vision of the future where there was no need for artisans to seek employment in Europe, or to emigrate to more distant shores. However, the opening celebrations also had contestatory symbolic functions. Visitors to the opening of the 'PEOPLE'S FIRST ESTATE' near Rickmansworth, for example, were greeted by a 'huge tricoloured banner floating high above an immense chestnut tree, bearing the inscription "O'Connorville"'.⁹¹ Two 'immense bonfires' were also lit on the hills to the east and west of the settlement:

⁸⁸ *Northern Star*, 22 August 1846, p. 8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the volumes of flame must have been seen distinctly from the neighbouring counties, whilst skyrockets, blue-fire, catharine wheels, roman-candles and all the different description of fireworks brightened the atmosphere till twelve o'clock at night; the cannons still keeping up a continuous peal until the same hour, while the dancing and show booths, and the several places of entertainment, were crowded with the merriest of the merry.⁹²

After the relocation of allottees took place each of the villages took on a distinct radical-democratic identity. The settlers were also plainly aware of their impact upon the existing social fabric of the surrounding areas. Upon hearing of O'Connor's election to the Commons in 1847, for example, O'Connorville residents celebrated by firing a volley of arms.⁹³ Another 'immense bonfire was raised in front of the schoolroom', and during the 'merry dance' which ensued songs such as 'Base Oppressors', 'the Marseillis hymn' and 'Spread the Charter' were sung.⁹⁴ The demonstration was undertaken, a correspondent added, so that the Chartists' aristocratic neighbours would know 'that political liberty was as dear to the cultivator of a few acres of soil as it was to the owner of thousands'.⁹⁵ A sense of glee also accompanied smaller victories over a government which had attempted to derail the building of the villages from the start: 'what will you say when I tell you that one of the allottees is postmaster – that one of our cottages is a postoffice', O'Connor boasted of Charterville in March 1849.⁹⁶

The estates were visited by many observers and widely divergent accounts of the settlements appeared in the *Star* and its adversaries.⁹⁷ Alexander Somerville recalled how the Manchester *Examiner* 'dropped the O'Connor Land Scheme

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Northern Star*, 7 August 1847, p. 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Northern Star*, 31 March 1849, p. 1.

⁹⁷ For defences by pro-Chartist visitors see *Northern Star*, 30 June 1849, p. 5; 14 July 1849, p. 8; 23 March 1850, p. 3.

question, the operative population having combined against the paper, and materially reduced its circulation'.⁹⁸ 'In that troubled ship', Somerville lamented, 'I was the Jonah thrown overboard'.⁹⁹ After hearing one critical account in 1849, Merthyr Land Plan members informed their brethren: 'We consider it to be a crime of the greatest magnitude to let the land become a wilderness, and so many of the members in want of bread'.¹⁰⁰ An emissary, William Jones, was sent to the new settlements of Lowbands and Snig's End to determine the veracity of the reports. Perhaps the Welsh Chartists just wanted some reassurance that the Heaven on earth promulgated in the *Star* really did exist. Arriving at his destination, Jones made a 'very strict inquiry amongst the allottees and the old inhabitants of the neighbourhood. He had been of the opinion, previous to his visit, that a very large portion of the located persons were indolent, but he found them quite the reverse'.¹⁰¹ Jones did note, however, that 'several of the females' at Snig's End were 'rather discontented', less so at Lowbands.¹⁰²

Organised excursions to the experimental home colonies were also commonly undertaken by unlocated Chartists in the late 1840s. Often these were arranged to attend social functions held on the estates. A ball held in April 1849 to commemorate the first anniversary of the opening of Charterville, for example, attracted curious democrats from Oxford and Swindon.¹⁰³ A local curate even attended this celebration of the reclamation of the allottees' 'inherent right' to the land.¹⁰⁴ Cavalcades of nearly

⁹⁸ *Somerville's diligent life*, p. 221.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Northern Star*, 14 July 1849, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ *Northern Star*, 28 July 1849, p. 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Northern Star*, 14 April 1849, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* The Reverend P. W. Bryan later resided and taught for a time at the Chartist schoolhouse, 'despite his speech impediment' and the opposition of 'bull-frog farmers around Charterville'. See *Northern Star*, 2 June 1849, p. 5.

200 vehicles made their way from various counties to the O'Connorville opening demonstration in 1846, the visitors singing songs such as 'The People's First Estate' and 'Those Beautiful Villas' as they went.¹⁰⁵ About the time William Jones set out from Merthyr in 1849, some 'Sons of Freedom' who met at the Whittington and Cat in London also resolved upon an excursion to O'Connorville to judge 'for themselves' the condition of the small farms.¹⁰⁶ The day-trippers found the allottees most hospitable. Their crops were also commended, with the exception of the schoolhouse garden: 'instead of being a "MODEL", it was a DISGRACE to those whose duty it was to cultivate it'.¹⁰⁷ It appears that the schoolmaster appointed the previous year, Daniel Graves, spent much of his time providing refreshments for visitors, rather than teaching or tending his garden.¹⁰⁸ These pilgrimages continued even after the Plan had been formally wound up. When some 'Old Guards' meeting at the Black Horse, Whitechapel, decided to visit O'Connorville in the summer of 1853, their 'four horse vans' started out at six in the morning to ensure time for a thorough inspection.¹⁰⁹

Eileen Yeo has suggested that 'Chartist activity can usefully be seen as a drama of self-representation'.¹¹⁰ Counter-cultural celebrations were often carefully imbued with a rich sense of symbolism and political theatre. Consider a mock-trial held by Chartists at Perth in August 1840. On this occasion the Dundee Democratic Association hired a steam packet and proceeded upon a democratic 'pleasure trip' up the Firth of Tay on a local fair-day. Leaving at midnight, and accompanied by Julian Harney and a band, the democrats arrived at Perth in the early hours of the morning.

¹⁰⁵ *Northern Star*, 22 August 1846, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Northern Star*, 11 August 1849, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* Emphases in original.

¹⁰⁸ See Daniel Graves' indignant reply, *Northern Star*, 25 August 1849, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ *People's Paper*, 30 July 1853, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Yeo, 'Will the real Mary Lovett please stand up?', p. 165.

Here they deliberately disturbed the sleeping populace by ‘ever and anon shouting cheers for the Charter, while the band played “The Campbells are coming, O dear, O dear”’.¹¹¹ The next morning the Chartists marched to a hustings where the day’s festivities culminated in the ‘INDICTMENT, TRIAL, AND CONDEMNATION OF REYNARD MAULE’.

This example of improvised political theatre arraigned Fox Maule, then Under-Secretary of State, for his executive role in the legal offensive launched against Chartism in 1839-40. Replete with a Clerk of the Court, a Judge (Harney), a defence barrister and a Jury (the crowd), the indictment invoked a world turned upside down:

Reynard Maule made his public appearance in the Shire of Perth in the year 1832, as trumpeter-general to a person named John Campbell ... now known under the ‘*alias*’ of ‘Marquis of Bredalbane,’ and that in this capacity he traversed the length and breadth of the said Shire ... with many other evil-disposed persons ... making inflammatory and violent speeches and harangues, and circulating seditious, malicious, and scandalous publications ... And furthermore, when the said John Campbell was transferred from the said House of Corruption ... to the House of Hereditary Brigandism ... the said Reynard Maule did perambulate the said shire of Perth ... with other evil-disposed persons in his pay ... with the intention and design to cajole the lieges into a false belief that he was the very pink and paragon of a Reformer!¹¹²

As these counts of hypocrisy were read by the chair, Harney took centre-stage as Judge. Harney’s explication of ‘the blackness of the villainy of the defendant’ may have proved him a somewhat partial adjudicator, but even a mock-appropriation of the constitutional form of trial by jury demanded that the defendant be heard. However, as this particular prosecution had to be held *ex-parte*, the task of mitigation fell upon George Adams of Dundee:

if the charges of cunning and roguery preferred against his client by his learned friend were really proven, still the Jury would remember that it was the nature of a Fox to be cunning and roguish. He further urged that his client could not be fairly said to have betrayed the people, as he had only betrayed the work-ing classes, who

¹¹¹ *Northern Star*, 5 September 1840, p. 6.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

were not recognised as the people under the existing order of things.¹¹³

Is it any wonder, given a sense of political exile of this order, that O'Connor's romantic quests in search of political and social redemption proved so attractive? And Reynard's fate? The sentence of the court was that 'he be held as unworthy of the confidence of all true Reformers – that he is denounced as an enemy to his country, and given over to the execration of all good men'.¹¹⁴

Whilst O'Connell and his Whig allies were condemned by Chartists in various ways, a pantheon of radical 'patriots' were also remembered in toasts and dramatic rituals. At Failsworth in December 1841, for example, the 'trial of Robert Emmet, Esq., was performed in full costume' by local Chartists – just as their brethren at Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Scotland had done during the trying years of 1839-40.¹¹⁵ After tea had been taken at a democratic festival held at Keighley on Christmas Day 1840:

the trial of Emmet commenced in the orchestra, where the judge, jury, and different characters were placed. Mr. Joseph Firth personated Norbury, Mr. John Constantine, counsel for the Crown, and Mr. John Calvert, crier of the Court ... Emmet's reply to Norbury, and the mock tribunal before which he was arraigned, was delivered with soul-stirring effect by Mr. Knowles, especially when he appealed to the departed spirit of his father; nearly the whole audience melted into tears, as if they had actually seen the original Emmet.¹¹⁶

This kind of politically-inspired entertainment was typical of the family-oriented, indoor cultural activities undertaken in Chartist communities during the 1840s. In south Lancashire ritualised celebrations were also often held to commemorate Peterloo, or alternatively the birthdays of radical heroes such as Henry Hunt and Thomas Paine.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Northern Star*, 24 December 1841, p. 1; Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 118.

¹¹⁶ *Northern Star*, 2 January 1841, p. 1.

James Epstein has explored the significance of radical dinners, including the cultural significance and memories embedded in the toasts which invariably followed the meal.¹¹⁷ These oral performances were complemented by visual representations of patriot heroes who often gazed down on proceedings. One function, commemorating Henry Hunt's birthday, at which O'Connor and 300 locals were present, was held at the Royal Oak Inn, Manchester, in 1838. Got 'up entirely by four or five working men', the room was decorated with the Manchester Political Union flag, and smaller flags carrying the rose, shamrock and thistle, and 'portraits of many well-known patriots – Marvel, Cobbett, Cartwright, Hunt, Feargus and Arthur O'Connor, Stephens, Oastler, and others'.¹¹⁸ At another Hunt birthday commemoration at Samuel Walker's house near Ashton-under-Lyne in 1846, the importance of oral performance within the movement culture also is evident. After the 'table had been removed of its cumbrous weight' a long evening of toasts, eulogies, addresses, songs and recitations ensued. Although the toasts and responses were expressed with much 'solemn purpose', they were also interspersed with songs such as 'The Life and Death of Henry Hunt', 'Liberty Tree', 'Peterloo', 'Henry's Ghost', 'In Wiltshire fair a child was born', 'Frost, Williams and Jones', 'Exile of Erin' and 'The Seer of Ashton Moss'.¹¹⁹ This public performance of song, like the publication of verse, was another symbolic medium in which a creative sense of political agency could be expressed by rank and file Chartists.

¹¹⁷ Epstein, 'Rituals of solidarity'.

¹¹⁸ *Northern Star*, 10 November 1838, p. 8. For accounts of similar celebrations in Manchester in 1841 see *Northern Star*, 20 November 1841, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ *Northern Star*, 4 November 1846, p. 5. Other Hunt birthday functions were also reported at Rochdale and Brighton.

III

The final section of this chapter looks primarily at the invasive and intimidatory elements of the symbolic repertoire which can be broadly (but never strictly) distinguished from counter-cultural praxis. Whilst Chartist churches were effectively bastions of independence, we also saw in chapter one how hegemonic religious practices were subject to various forms of contestation, a cultural phenomenon particularly evident in the collective church visits of 1839. Appeals to the moral authority of the Bible, of course, could be re-directed at the demonstrators themselves. At Ashton, for example, the democratic invaders were sternly admonished by a junior curate: 'my house is a house of prayer but ye have made it a den of thieves'.¹²⁰ In response, the Chartists promptly walked out, although they did return the next week to hear another minister preach from a text they had requested in advance.¹²¹ Perhaps the most fascinating of all these highly symbolic incursions occurred at Cheltenham, where local radicals locked horns with Francis Close, a well-known evangelical and later Dean of Carlisle.

As Owen Ashton has pointed out, Close had a powerful local influence and managed to stop the local races and the railway running on the Sabbath.¹²² Each party knew what to expect in this confrontation and planned accordingly. By the summer of 1839 Cheltenham boasted a strong Female Patriotic (or Chartist) Association, and in the wake of the first protest visit made on 18 August it was decided that women should make up the party for the second visit to St Mary's the following Sunday.¹²³

¹²⁰ Yeo, 'Christianity in Chartist struggle', p. 130; *Times*, 14 August 1839, p. 5.

¹²¹ Yeo, 'Christianity in Chartist struggle', p. 130.

¹²² Ashton, 'Clerical control and radical responses in Cheltenham Spa, 1838-1848', p. 124.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8; *Times*, 23 August 1839, p. 6.

Not to be intimidated, the ‘Pope of Cheltenham’ attacked from the start of his sermon. ‘I received information’, he informed his flock, ‘that a resolution was proposed at a meeting of those deluded men who attended this House of God last Sabbath ... to the effect that another body of persons should attend this House of God in a similar manner on this holy day; and that this body of persons should be women!’.¹²⁴

As Yeo remarks, the female Chartists were then read a ‘theological riot act’.¹²⁵ Close’s text was drawn from Genesis 3. 16: ‘Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee’.¹²⁶ After emphasising the ‘curse’ of childbirth, and the obligations imposed upon women in mitigation of Eve’s role in bringing about the fall, Close invoked the classic Tory tactic of associating radicalism with the first French Revolution: then women ‘became more ferocious fiends than even the men themselves’, ‘glutted themselves with blood, and danced like maniacs amidst the most fearful scenes of the Reign of Terror!’.¹²⁷ Reaching the climax of his argument, Close depicted an England turned upside down:

in these evil days – these foreign days on British soil ... women now become politicians, they leave the distaff and spindle to listen to the teachers of sedition; they forsake their fire-side and home duties for political meetings, they neglect honest industry to read the factious newspapers! and so destitute are they of all sense of female decorum, of female modesty and diffidence, they become themselves political agitators – female dictators – female mobs – female Chartists! Following the example of their deluded husbands and brothers, they invade even the sanctuary of God itself.¹²⁸

Whereas Close professed to reveal the word of God, the Chartists spiritual and political claims were mediated simply by their collective presence. Like the silent

¹²⁴ F. Close, *The female Chartists’ visit to the parish church. A sermon addressed to the female Chartists of Cheltenham ...* (New York, 1986 rep.), p. 2.

¹²⁵ Yeo, ‘Will the real Mary Lovett please stand up?’, p. 168.

¹²⁶ Close, *A sermon addressed the female Chartists of Cheltenham*, p. 2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

protests at Sheffield (which were closely linked to the most prolonged bout of Church demonstrations) verbal argumentation was in this instance usurped by a mute but nonetheless expressive form of symbolic protest.

Most Chartist contestations of hegemonic forums, however, were rather more raucous affairs. As we saw earlier, aural intimidation was a key component of Chartism's mass protests undertaken in urban or civic contexts. One of the few recorded interruptions of sermons during the 1839 church visits occurred at St. Stephens', Norwich when the minister's quotation of St. Paul, 'I have learned, in whatever station of life, therewith to be content', led to remonstrances such as 'You get £200 a year – Come and weave bombazines – Put the gas out!'.¹²⁹ The 'denunciation of rich men' preached at another Norwich church the following week, however, left the Chartists 'well satisfied'.¹³⁰

Dorothy Thompson's research into the geographical diffusion of Chartist activity over time suggests that there were about 300 NCA members at Norwich in 1842.¹³¹ In 1840 at least two female classes had also been formed, and Association rooms taken at a Primitive Christian chapel and a public house 'well known' to local democrats.¹³² In late 1841 the Halifax shoemaker 'Radical Bob' Wilkinson visited the city and lectured upon 'the present plundering system', 'the origin and progress of Chartism in the north of England' and the 'traps and snares set to catch the unguarded'.¹³³ Wilkinson's exhortations upon the latter subject, no doubt, were spurred by the recent violence at the consecration of the new Anglican church at

¹²⁹ Yeo, 'Christianity in Chartist struggle', p. 124; *Times*, 23 August 1839, p. 6.

¹³⁰ *Times*, 2 September 1839, p. 8.

¹³¹ Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 361.

¹³² *Northern Star*, 17 October 1840, p. 1; 24 October 1840, p. 5.

¹³³ *Northern Star*, 6 November 1841, p. 5; 27 November 1841, p. 1; Tiller, 'Late Chartism: Halifax 1847-58', p. 336. Note that Ward, *Chartism*, p. 242 states that Robert Wilkinson was a carpenter.

Catton, just to the north of Norwich.

The original object of this demonstration was to occupy the new building prior to its consecration. However, this aim was effectively hindered by the attendance of a full complement of city and river police. In frustration, the Chartist body attempted to disrupt the ceremony by assailing the bishop (Edward Stanley, a prominent liberal cleric) with ‘a great noise and many bad expressions’ on his arrival.¹³⁴ Continued abuse led to a number of arrests – and some rescue attempts on the part of the increasingly riotous protesters.¹³⁵ As the service was being held a form of rough music was also directed at the respectables cowering inside. ‘While the Bishop was consecrating, Hewett, the Chartist, came up at the head of a band to the church, playing at first “God Save the Queen,” then they made a halt, and played the “Old Hundredth Psalm”’.¹³⁶ This further provocation led to Hewett’s arrest. Later, prosecution witnesses at his trial also recalled that the Chartists affixed their banners (adorned with ‘inscriptions of Bishops’ and others’ salaries’ and ‘more Pigs and less parsons’) to the Church railings, as if contesting Stanley’s authority to preside over the ceremony.¹³⁷

Somewhat ironically, Stanley had witnessed Peterloo and was a crucial radical witness in the legal proceedings which followed.¹³⁸ And as Eileen Yeo has pointed out, not everyone agreed with the intimidatory tactics employed by Thomas Hewett and his comrades. A newly formed Chartist association at Ryde, for example, passed a vote of censure on the ‘Catton Chartists for their ill-advised proceeding at the

¹³⁴ *Northern Star*, 8 January 1842, p. 1.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* For Stanley see O. Chadwick, *The Victorian church* (Part I, London, 1966), pp. 125-6, 335-6, 348.

¹³⁶ See *Times*, 19 November 1841, p. 3; *Northern Star*, 8 January 1842, p. 1; Faulkner, *Chartism and the Churches*, p. 39; Yeo, ‘Christianity in Chartist struggle’, p. 137.

¹³⁷ *Times*, 19 November 1841, p. 3; *Northern Star*, 8 January 1842, p. 1.

¹³⁸ See R. Walmsley, *Peterloo: the case reopened* (Manchester, 1969), pp. 188-92.

consecration of the new church in that town'.¹³⁹ Yet Stanley had already suffered similar indignities at the hands of local democrats. At a county meeting held at St. Andrew's Hall in 1840 to consider the formation of an anti-slavery society, another prominent local Chartist leader named John Dover led some 'sixty or seventy' families into this 'numerous and brilliant assemblage of the *elite*'.¹⁴⁰ As Stanley attempted to explain the aims of the meeting he was greeted by 'loud hisses and groans' from the Chartists, and comments such as 'Why don't you look to the New Poor Law?'.¹⁴¹ Amidst much 'uproar and confusion', Dover attempted speak, only to be interrogated by the High Sheriff as to whether he was an inhabitant or freeholder of the county.¹⁴² Eventually being allowed to continue, the weaver launched into a scathing criticism of Stanley and the established Church, despite being repeatedly interrupted by the High-Sheriff, who demanded that he 'stick to his text. (Great uproar and laughter)'.¹⁴³ Finally, Dover tried to amend Stanley's original resolution (which called for the 'extinction' of African slavery) by decrying the existence of 'despotic slavery at home'.¹⁴⁴

As the Chartist leader retired the democratic challenge faltered somewhat. Dover's seconder was refused the right to speak, because he was neither a freeholder nor an inhabitant of the county. However, Thomas Hewett (dressed in a 'fustian hunting jacket') did manage to pass the Sheriff's test. His furious rejoinder, in the context of its utterance, could hardly have been better calculated to offend:

Priestcraft and kingcraft must be done away with; he was willing to work to support himself, but ... he would not support others. This country now had three Kings and Queens to maintain. There was Queen Victoria, her German husband,

¹³⁹ Yeo, 'Christianity in Chartist struggle', p. 137; *Northern Star*, 4 December 1841, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ *Northern Star*, 28 November 1840, p. 6. Italics in original.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

who cost the people £30,000 a year; there was the King of Belgium and his wife; and lastly there was the bloody king of Hanover and his spouse. (Tremendous yells.) This was a true state of slavery, which could only be abolished by the adoption of the People's Charter. Taxation without representation was tyranny, productive of slavery.¹⁴⁵

Again we see how the monarchy, the state church and the imposition of taxation upon those excluded from political citizenship were perceived as conjoined elements of 'old corruption'. The Chartist amendment was ultimately defeated – an 'announcement productive of increased tumult', and the meeting ended 'in the greatest uproar and confusion'.¹⁴⁶

A number of other instances of the contestation of hegemonic forums could be taken from Norwich in the 1839-41 period: democrats challenged Methodists preaching in the market place and invaded Free Trade meetings convened in the city.¹⁴⁷ In June 1840 John Dover managed to create 'immense confusion' when he interrupted a meeting convened by the Mayor at the Guildhall 'for the purpose of congratulating her Most Gracious Majesty and his Royal Highness, Prince Albert, on their late most happy escape from an atrocious attempt at assassination'.¹⁴⁸ In a courageous gesture, Dover attempted to move a resolution calling upon Victoria to dismiss her ministers and grant free pardons to Feargus O'Connor and the Newport leaders. Dover's attempt to hijack the meeting was curtailed by the Mayor, first on procedural grounds and then under the threat of arrest. Undaunted, Dover demanded to be heard and moved another amendment 'that we can never congratulate the Duchess of Kent on the escape of her daughter, so long as mother and child are

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, *Northern Star*, 12 September 1840, p. 8; 26 September 1840, p. 2; 4 December 1841, p. 7.

¹⁴⁸ *Northern Star*, 27 June 1840, p. 1. For the assassination attempt (by Edward Oxford, just outside Buckingham Palace) see *Times*, 11 June 1840, p. 4; 12 June 1840, p. 6; 14 June 1840, p. 6.

separated under the New Poor Law, in Bastiles. (Cheers from the Chartists)'.¹⁴⁹ Amidst 'great hooting' the county dignitaries soon decided to flee, whereupon 'three cheers for Feargus O'Connor, three cheers for the Welsh patriots, three cheers for Mr. Dover, and three groans for the hypocritical Whigs' were given by the victorious Chartists.¹⁵⁰

Although a detailed account of Norwich Chartism obviously cannot be undertaken here, these episodes show how intimidatory sorties were undertaken by Chartists at the geographical periphery of radical activity. The most common organisational device adopted nation-wide to ward off these vexatious invasions were ticketed meetings, which could be controlled in a much more effective manner than public forums governed primarily by customary expectations of behaviour. As might be expected, James Vernon sees the introduction of admission fees and tickets as classic signals of the exclusionary rationalisation of popular politics.¹⁵¹ Yet these tactics could be circumvented by forgery or sheer force. At Leeds in 1844, for example, a ticketed Free Trade meeting held at the Music Hall was continually interrupted by a body of about 200 democrats who had managed to obtain entry. At one point their leader even 'mounted a form in the midst of the Chartist party' to more effectively obstruct proceedings until he was 'politely patted on the back by a policeman, and removed from the meeting amidst the most hideous yells that the Chartists could raise'.¹⁵² At another meeting in Leicester's New Hall in 1842 (at which the former Chartist missionary Henry Vincent was the League's main attraction) Cooper's followers simply forced their way past police stationed at the

¹⁴⁹ *Northern Star*, 27 June 1840, p. 1

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, especially pp. 225-30.

¹⁵² *League*, 30 March 1844, pp. 435-6.

door ‘amidst blows, kicks, cuffs, yellings and confusion almost indescribable’.¹⁵³

Cooper and another local leader then ‘scaled the platform’, and for half an hour ‘fiery altercations took place’:

Mr. Cooper told them if they had brought Joseph Sturge or Mr. Spencer, they would have been heard with respect, but working men would not hear that little renegade Vincent. Cooper pointed his finger at Vincent while he said this, and Vincent looked daggers in return, but he said nothing. The crowded hall meanwhile, was filled alternately with out-cries against the ‘renegade’ and ‘traitor’, and with the jovial song ‘We’ll rally around him’.¹⁵⁴

Following vows from the Free Traders that they would hold their ground, the ‘Shakspeareans’ ‘amused themselves by singing, shouting, and putting on handkerchiefs in the form of nightcaps, to show their friends that they were as much determined to stay there all night as themselves’.¹⁵⁵ During the ensuing stand-off Cooper and another local leader read aloud from the *Northern Star* in unison (note the need for maximum volume) until Vincent and his allies finally retreated from the stage, and the ‘Shakspeareans’ marched back to their ‘General’s’ house in triumph.¹⁵⁶

The military metaphors scattered through the accounts used in this chapter were quite apt. From the first stages of mobilisation the reader of the Chartist press finds accounts of conquests with headings such as the ‘ROUTE OF THE REPEALERS AT NEWCASTLE’, ‘THE TRIUMPHANT DEFEAT of the Corn Law Humbug’, the ‘COWARDLY CONDUCT OF THE CORN LAW REPEALERS’, and ‘THE TRIUMPH OF UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE, AND THE UTTER AND UNMITIGATED DEFEAT OF THE HALIFAX CORN LAW REPEALERS’.¹⁵⁷ As conflict escalated so did the castigation of the enemy. In late 1841 the *Northern Star*

¹⁵³ *Northern Star*, 30 July 1842, p. 1.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* ‘We’ll rally around him’ was an alternative title for ‘The lion of freedom’.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Northern Star*, 2 February 1839, pp. 5, 8; 16 February 1839, pp. 6, 8.

trumpeted the ‘BLOODTHIRSTY AND BRUTAL CONDUCT OF THE WHIG ANTI-CORN LAW FACTION, AND THEIR TOTAL DEFEAT’ at a Birmingham Free Trade meeting addressed by Richard Cobden.¹⁵⁸ Once again the importance of print as an heroic discursive medium shines through, as does the way in which political contention was easily cast in a militaristic rhetorical idiom.

Whilst noting how a ‘definite technique of attack’ evolved in Leicester under Cooper’s leadership, J.F.C. Harrison has suggested that the collective incursions were ultimately futile acts.¹⁵⁹ Yet the Leicester demonstrations need to be placed in a much broader historical and geographical context, for by 1842 these militant sorties had become a characteristic expression of Chartist grievance. That year Cooper led his followers into Leicester’s Unitarian Hall, where the ‘Shakspeareans’ occupied the mayor’s seat and then blocked the door, begging for money as the alarmed congregation left.¹⁶⁰ In the afternoon another assault was made upon the pews of St. George’s church, where the hosiers ‘joined in the Doxology with a most discordant howl’ whilst the General himself ‘mouthed and grinned at the curate’.¹⁶¹ Once again, the ‘most urgent demands for money’ were made.¹⁶² Although Cooper’s autobiography is a rich historical source, it gives a somewhat sanitised account of these massed forays into alien cultural, political and religious forums.

The street-battles which took place between Manchester’s Chartists and the ‘paramilitary’ Anti-Corn Law League force led by O’Connellite ‘Irish lambs’ such as ‘Big Mick’ McDonough and John ‘prepare-to-meet-your-God’ Finnigan have tended to dominate discussions of the relationship between Chartism and the Free Trade

¹⁵⁸ *Northern Star*, 20 November 1841, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ Harrison, ‘Chartism in Leicester’, p. 109.

¹⁶⁰ *Times*, 11 June 1842, p. 7. See also HO 45/250 for these demonstrations.

¹⁶¹ *Times*, 11 June 1842, p. 7.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

movement.¹⁶³ The traditional emphasis upon Manchester and the orthodox picture of intense antipathy, however, invariably simplifies a complex relationship. John Buckmaster's neglected memoirs of his Free Trade activism whilst an itinerant carpenter are particularly interesting in this context. Not only did the fervent young Leaguer constantly gravitate towards Chartists in various communities where he lived and worked; he also attended Chartist meetings, heard leaders such as O'Connor, Bronterre O'Brien, Taylor, McDouall and Cooper speak, and signed at least one of the national petitions.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Buckmaster's political sympathies lay primarily with Joseph Sturge, and after forming an Anti-Corn Law Association at Tiverton he recalled having 'great difficulties with his friends'.¹⁶⁵

'We were afraid to hold public meetings because they would come down in all their strength and move resolutions in favour of the Charter, protesting that they were as good repealers as we were, but the repeal of the Corn Laws was more of a manufacturers' question than a working man's'.¹⁶⁶ Buckmaster subsequently gives a detailed and colourful account of a protectionist meeting at Tiverton which local Chartists had also decided to attend in force. Whereas the Leaguers had previously resolved to sit quietly near the platform, the Chartists had other ideas:

No sooner were the doors opened than the Chartists swarmed in and took possession. The platform was fenced off, or it would have been occupied by Chartists. Early in the meeting the discordant noises and catcalls and whistling and invitations to 'Flare up, old Josser!' were the premonitory symptoms of a row. The chairman, who was a lord and a considerable landowner, was followed by five Church of England clergymen, two or three fat farmers, lawyers, election agents, and other full-blown Tories and Protectionists. While they were arranging their bodies on the platform the most dismal yell went up, which was increased to a thunder when someone hoisted two loaves upon a pole, one about the size of a

¹⁶³ See Read, 'Chartism in Manchester'; McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League*, pp. 96-103. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, ch. 5.

¹⁶⁴ J.C. Buckley (J.C. Buckmaster), *A village politician* (Horsham, 1982 rep.), especially chs. 6-7.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* For Sturge see A. Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the moral radical party in early Victorian Britain* (London, 1987).

penny roll, the other exaggerated into the size of a lace pillow, which represented the Free Trade loaf. The chairman stood waving his hand and gesticulating, but no one could hear a word ... 'The Reverend Mr. Toby was asked for a song', 'Does your mother know you are out?' ... These and other personal remarks kept the meeting in a lively good-humour, interspersed with refrains from Chartist songs. One after the other made ineffectual attempts to speak. Some ... began to retreat by the door they entered. One gentleman ... shook his fist ... and called out, 'You are a set of damned ruffians and blackguards!' A rush was immediately made for the platform, the railings were torn down, the men swarmed up the sides and, after a brief hand-to-hand fight, took possession and began singing 'Rule Britannia!' When the meeting quietened down a chairman was elected, and resolutions were unanimously passed in favour of the People's Charter.¹⁶⁷

Chartists, of course, did not have a monopoly upon the politics of sight. And as Vernon points out, conservative, radicals and liberals all attempted to interrupt their opponents meetings.¹⁶⁸ Yet observe how the hoisting of the loaves appears to have raised the temperature of the meeting more than anything said. On this occasion the physical assault on the platform was preceded by a concerted and probably pre-meditated commotion which quickly subsided after the enclosed territory had been won. Note too how the Chartists attempted to legitimise their conquest by reverting to the formal constitutional procedures of the public meeting.

Many years ago John and Barbara Hammond wrote: 'The Chartist movement, like Owen's movement, was imagination in action'.¹⁶⁹ As these prescient words imply, Chartist political culture needs to be considered as more than just rhetoric or social activities. We also need to recognise how Chartists contested – and adopted – hegemonic forms of political contestation, and invested their many incursions into foreign cultural realms with a rough but rich sense of political theatre. If activists ultimately failed in constructing their own radical-democratic world, these

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40.

¹⁶⁸ Vernon, *Politics and the people*, p. 229.

¹⁶⁹ J.L. Hammond and B. Hammond, *The age of the Chartists, 1832-1854: a study of discontent* (London, 1930), p. 276.

intimidatory, invasive and often violent protocols of direct action mediated heartfelt claims about political justice, social rights, 'true' religion and so forth. Before exploring the colonial ramifications of this legacy, however, we need to acknowledge another symbolic dimension of Chartist culture – its narratives of political sustenance and hope.