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COBBETT, HIS CHILDREN AND CHARTISM

Malcolm Chase

William Cobbett was part of the 'mental furniture' of the Chartists, contrary to one biographer's claim that they had 'little in common' with him.¹ James Watson, one of London's leading radical publishers remembered his mother 'being in the habit of reading Cobbett's *Register*'.² Growing up in a Chartist home, W. E. Adams's washerwoman grandmother 'was careful to explain to me that Cobbett and Cobden were two different persons – that Cobbett was the hero, and that Cobden was just a middle-class advocate'.³ The West Riding shoemaker and local Chartist leader Abram Hanson even helped organize one of the few actual productions of Cobbett's play, *Surplus Population and the Poor Law Bill*.⁴ Another local leader, Thomas Livsey of Rochdale (he also chaired Chartism's final National Convention in 1858) received his political education at reading sessions organized by his uncle for local workmen. Cobbett's works were the staple fare, the young Thomas acting as 'candleman' and reader.⁵ Cobbett's writings, observed *Northern Liberator*, 'are now beginning to be *text books*'.⁶ However, want of familiarity with them was 'one of the most serious evils' afflicting Ireland in the opinion of Henry Hetherington (the veteran unstamped pressman who was both a signatory to – and publisher of – the first edition of the People's Charter).⁷

Cobbett needed no apologist, observed William Lovett, author of virtually all the text of the Charter: his works were circulating 'throughout the length and breadth of the land', whilst *Legacy to Labourers* was 'the charter and title-deed' to their rights. Cobbett was a living presence, whose 'exertions in our cause will live triumphantly' after his detractors are forgotten.⁸ Lovett also singled out for praise Cobbett's *History of the Protestant Reformation*, a work that had done much to ameliorate popular anti-Catholicism as well as to broaden criticism of the state church beyond religious

dissenters who were naturally antagonistic.⁹ It was one of several works by Cobbett that shaped Chartist perceptions of the past.¹⁰ Substantial quotations from the *History* (typically accompanied by a toast to 'the 43rd of Elizabeth unimpaired, or the restoration of church property to its original purposes') were commonplace at Chartist socials.¹¹ And when John Frost (later leader of the ill-fated Chartist uprising in South Wales) wrote that 'History teaches ... that the principal object of men has been and still is, to acquire and retain political authority' and that 'the sufferings of the mass of mankind shew us, but too clearly, how the power is exercised', it was the historical corpus of Cobbett's work that he had in mind.¹² That corpus had reached new readerships in the Chartist period through reprints of, and extracts from, the *History of the Protestant Reformation* alongside the serialization of excerpts from his *History of the Regency and Reign of King George the Fourth* in the *English Chartist Circular*.¹³

John Frost dated his conversion to radical politics very precisely to reading Cobbett's 'New Year's Gift to Old George Rose', published in January 1817. His own first venture into print was patently modelled on his 'master'.¹⁴ In 1842 the Dublin Chartist leader Patrick O'Higgins told a reception in his honour at Leicester that he owed his earliest political education to 'the writings of your immortal countryman, the late William Cobbett'.¹⁵ George Julian Harney owned at least eleven volumes of Cobbett's works: this was more than he did of any other single author, apart from the poet Byron; however the publication dates show that most of his Byron volumes were acquired by Harney later in his life. Of the annotated items in Harney's surviving library, one of the earliest to bear a date is his copy of Cobbett's 1830 *Lectures on the French and Belgian Revolutions and English Boroughmongering*.¹⁶ In 1847, when he assumed the full editorship of Chartism's greatest newspaper, *Northern Star*, Harney announced he was launching a new feature,

a column titled 'Public Instructor', in which 'we propose to extract liberally from the works of that great Englishman'.¹⁷

The principles of the Tyneside Chartist newspaper *Northern Liberator* were 'easily defined' according to its editors:

They are, as nearly as possible, those of the late William Cobbett; and of all the men who have ever lived, or who ever will live, no one ever did, or ever can, promulgate principles more plain, direct, all convincing, simple, efficacious and true, than did the illustrious Member for Oldham.¹⁸

On Glasgow Green in May 1838, when a representative of the London Working Men's Association (LWMA) presented the People's Charter for the first time in public, he invoked Blackstone, Jesus Christ and Cobbett in defence of the first of its six points, universal suffrage.¹⁹ An 'immense sized' oil painting of Cobbett hung in the hall where the Chartist National Convention assembled in 1839.²⁰ Like Paine, Cartwright, Hunt and Robert Emmett, Cobbett's name was rarely missing from Chartist toasts to those of 'the illustrious dead' who had contributed to freedom's cause. Cobbett's was one of 'the brightest stars that ever glittered in the intellectual firmament', the LWMA missionary Henry Vincent told the Hull Working Men's Association. His stature was indicated by those Vincent listed alongside him: Volney, Voltaire, Mirabeau, Rousseau, Paine, Bentham, Cartwright, Byron, Shelley and Godwin.²¹ Isaac Ironside, the prominent Sheffield socialist and Chartist even went so far as to credit (implausibly) Cobbett's thought as 'really guiding' the early weeks of the French Revolution of 1848.²²

A digital search for Cobbett in *Northern Star* yields almost 1,300 results. Such searches are of course only a rough analytical tool, but the proportions of different surnames are instructive. Lovett makes only 950 appearances. Francis Burdett, Oliver Cromwell and Wat Tyler (names that might intuitively be expected to occur prominently) each feature only around 300 times. Even

Thomas Paine registers only around 200 more 'hits' than Cobbett. Only Henry Hunt, at just over 2,000, significantly exceeds him, but that is due in large part to the frequency with which Feargus O'Connor, the movement's greatest leader and owner of the paper, invoked Hunt's name as an exemplar. The prominence of Cobbett within the Chartist mind-set has, however, seldom fully registered in historical studies of the movement. Keen to re-enforce Feargus O'Connor's conscious imitation of Henry Hunt (both the latter's medium and his message), historians habitually note the celebration of Hunt's birthday in the Chartist calendar. Yet celebrations of Cobbett's birthday were also part of that calendar.²³ Indeed the scarring attacks by 'the labourer's best friend' on the New Poor Law may have recommended him even more than Hunt to those Chartists who mobilized primarily around opposition to the 1834 reforms.

His outspokenness was revered: 'Oh for a Cobbett to denounce these caitiffs', exclaimed the editor of *Northern Liberator* enraged by 'more Whig trickery'.²⁴ 'Could old Cobbett's spirit rise and write a single Register', the early Chartist paper *London Dispatch* remarked wistfully, 'what a treat it would be'.²⁵ If they would read Cobbett, Jeremy Bentham and Cartwright, Henry Vincent urged a meeting 'of the working classes' in Cheltenham, they could 'go forward armed in their own strength, bidding defiance to the whole world'.²⁶ In the summer of 1838, as Chartism coalesced around pre-existing anti-poor law, trades union and parliamentary and factory reform campaigns, Feargus O'Connor's *Northern Star* had given away engraved portraits of Hunt and Cobbett. It was a gesture intended to boost circulation but also to rivet in its readers' minds that both the paper and O'Connor were figures in an almost apostolic succession from earlier radical luminaries.²⁷ In turn these portraits powerfully influenced the decoration of the walls of Chartists' homes and meeting rooms. The Sheffield Female Radical Association placed

Cobbett alongside – among others – Bentham, Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Frost, William Tell and Volney at an autumn soiree in 1839, whilst the Chartists of Winlaton, County Durham, decorated the pub where they met with portraits of Joseph Rayner Stephens, Frost, O'Connor and the red cap of liberty.²⁸ Whose portraits were preferred over that of Henry Hunt in these examples is interesting. Hunt also wrote little in his lifetime and even the cumulative weight of reports of his platform oratory was slight in comparison to the written output of Cobbett. Furthermore there was no posthumous reprinting of Hunt's work before the 1960s.²⁹ This is in sharp contrast to Cobbett whose *Protestant Reformation* appeared in sixteen different editions (and his English *Grammar* even more) between 1836 and 1914.³⁰ During the two decades after his death, Cobbett's works were constantly brought to a new readership through the efforts of his indefatigable daughter Anne who took over the family's publishing business, issuing her brothers' abridgment of their father's political works soon after he died.³¹ Anne Cobbett advertised widely in the Chartist press, including every issue of *Northern Liberator*. She also kept the name of Cobbett before the public as publisher of other popular works such as *The People's Medical Advisor*, by the Bury surgeon, factory reformer and Chartist Matthew Fletcher,³² and her own *The English Housekeeper: or, Manual of Domestic Management*. The latter first appeared in the year that William died and went through six editions by 1851.³³ The *English Housekeeper* was effective in maintaining a tradition of practical self-help literature that owed much to her father's *Cottage Economy* and grammars. 'English grammar was picked up from Cobbett', the autodidact W. E. Adams's recalled.³⁴ This was a tradition that substantially pre-dated, and was decisively as important in shaping the popular culture of self-improvement as the works of Samuel Smiles.

Historians have emphasized the missionary work of the LWMA and Birmingham Political Union (BPU) in sending advocates of the Charter out into the provinces. However, the influence of the London-based Cobbett Club has been ignored. Its dinners seated provincial reformers like John Frost and J. R. Stephens alongside prominent metropolitan radicals.³⁵ Founded in October 1838, the Club had its origins in the Cobbett Festival of the previous year, where the speakers had included John Fielden, the Oldham MP and Chartist sympathiser, the Revd Dr Arthur Wade (a leading figure in the campaign for the Tolpuddle Martyrs to be pardoned and a LWMA activist) and William Williams, a radical reform MP whose parliamentary election campaigns in 1847 and 1850 would be supported by Chartism's National Central Registration and Elections Committee.³⁶ The Cobbett Club is a neglected axis in the world of metropolitan politics during Chartism's early years. Portraits of prominent Club members hung alongside Cobbett's at Chartism's 1839 National Convention. *Northern Liberator* declared that 'every working man in the kingdom', should read the Club's 1838 petition 'a dozen times over, and he will then be bomb-proof against all deception'.³⁷ As Matthew Roberts points out elsewhere in this volume, of all the Chartist newspapers the *Liberator* was the most reverential to Cobbett.³⁸ The Club for its part was unstinting in its praise for the paper, 'so thoroughly in accordance with the immortal principles of our glorious apostle', in the words of its secretary.³⁹ The Club's treasurer was George Rogers, both a LWMA member and a Convention delegate, and its 1839 parliamentary petition was published in a text uniform with the manifesto of the General Convention by Arthur Dyson, another LWMA member who was also secretary of the Shoreditch Charter Association.⁴⁰ This petition was a celebrated document, on account of its being explicitly rejected by the House of Commons, at the insistence of the Home Secretary and the Attorney General, rather than ordered to lie on the table,

the usual device deployed by Parliament to deal with petitions it found unpalatable. It 'threatened the House with force and resistance', the Home Secretary declared, while 'the tendency of the petition was to excite to a breach of the peace', according to the Attorney General who added, 'if it were not a petition it would be a seditious libel'. The press seized on the Club's description of the Whig Cabinet as 'arrogant boobies and overgrown schoolboys'.⁴¹ Gleefully, Chartist papers compared ministers to Nebuchadnezzar confronted by the writing on the wall.⁴²

However, as we shall see, the influence of the Cobbett Club over Chartism receded quickly from the autumn of 1839. This decline mirrored the ambiguous reputations of Cobbett's sons. His daughter Anne, whom we have already noticed, was the eldest of William Cobbett's seven children who comprised two further daughters and four sons. It cannot have been easy being the son of such a famous and domineering father. 'People talk of teaching the young ... how to shoot', the youngest (Richard) wrote once, 'I wish they would teach children to shoot their fathers'.⁴³ William, the eldest of the four, struggled to make his own way in life and was at one point reduced to passing off his *Legacy to Lords: being six lectures on the history of taxation and debt in England* as the work of his father.⁴⁴ All four brothers vacillated between trading-off their father's illustrious reputation and trying to establish themselves as political actors in their own right. In 1836 Richard, together with his brothers James Paul and John Morgan, founded a radical weekly *Champion*, even though the brothers' attempt to continue their father's *Political Register* had already been a dismal failure.⁴⁵ *Champion* enjoyed little success, especially after Henry Hetherington unmasked its publisher as spying on the unstamped press for the Stamp Office.⁴⁶ Richard resigned as the paper's manager early in its history to build a career as a Manchester solicitor. *Champion* made no profit and had to be bank-rolled by the

radical millowner and anti-poor law campaigner John Fielden. (John Morgan Cobbett would later marry Fielden's daughter.) Finally – and almost symbolically – in May 1840 the paper was merged into the *Northern Liberator*, the only Chartist newspaper to rival *Northern Star*. The Cobbett brothers' input to the combined title, however, was apparently limited to a single letter.⁴⁷ In less than eight months *Northern Liberator & Champion* itself folded and its Tyneside operation was transferred to the freely distributed *Great Northern Advertiser*, 'a journal, unconnected with politics', as its prospectus emphatically proclaimed.⁴⁸

Richard Cobbett did play a small part during the formative stage of the Chartist movement as secretary of the Manchester Political Union in 1838. He occasionally appeared on Chartist platforms that autumn, even affirming the right to carry 'defensive weapons against those who would encroach upon their own rights' at one torch-light meeting.⁴⁹ He was elected to the National Convention as one of the city's three representatives the following year but, in circumstances that were never explained, failed to take his seat. He had never even addressed the great rally on Kersal Moor, outside Manchester, that elected him in September 1838.⁵⁰ His relations with Lancashire Chartists were stormy: 'he has allowed some Tory to cram him with ridiculous falsehoods about the Radicals of this town', the *Bolton Free Press* concluded, while the Bolton Working Men's Association flatly disowned him.⁵¹ He enjoyed some standing among northern Chartists as John Fielden's legal advisor during the latter's campaign against the New Poor Law, and he also appeared occasionally as a defence counsel at Chartist trials.⁵² However his reputation as an advocate hardly compensated for being lumped in with 'those who had deserted' in the columns of the *Northern Star*.⁵³

A second Cobbett brother, James Paul, was also elected to the 1839 Convention as a delegate for the West Riding of Yorkshire and

did actually take his seat. He was, however, the first of fifteen delegates to resign. Those who resigned from the 1839 Convention were mainly associated with the BPU. The reason for these resignations was a profound disagreement about the tactics that the Convention should pursue in the event of Parliament rejecting the movement's first National Petition. The Birmingham position, one that James Paul Cobbett shared, was that the Convention had been elected with the sole purpose of organising the collection of signatures to the Petition followed by its presentation to Westminster. Opposing this was the line of argument taken by the majority of delegates (including all its working-class members) that those who had elected them had done so in the expectation the Convention would continue to direct the movement when the Petition was rejected. The key word here is when and not if, for as the powerloom weaver Richard Marsden observed as early as the Convention's second week, 'none of the industrious classes who signed the petition ... ever thought for a moment that the legislature would grant the Charter. The people expected nothing at the hands of the government – they looked to the determination of this Convention'. James Paul Cobbett, however, was adamant that the Convention had no authority other than to present the Petition and then dissolve: Marsden was incredulous, declaring 'he could not understand what had just fallen' from Cobbett's lips.⁵⁴

When J. P. Cobbett arrived in London to take up his seat in the Convention, he made the rather lukewarm declaration that 'he would support the Charter generally speaking, but he did not think so much about the ballot'.⁵⁵ The latter qualifier was not particularly contentious: at various times prominent Chartists revealed a willingness to trim on this point of the Charter. Thomas Cooper and O'Connor for example, believed the secret ballot was unmanly and 'put a mask on an honest face'.⁵⁶ What was at issue in the early months of 1839, however, was not the Charter *per se* but Chartism.

Was it merely the latest phase of an attritional movement (traceable back to the 1770s) to reform an unrepresentative legislature? Or was it qualitatively different? The previous summer Henry Vincent, touring northern England on behalf of the LWMA, had characterized the new mood that suffused the movement that had yet to be named Chartism. It was not merely, he told his cousin, '*one more attempt* to obtain by peaceful means a full recognition of the Universal Rights of the people' but a 'fixed resolution to appeal to *arms* should this *last* moral effort fail – I regret the prevalence of opinions of a physical nature – but we cannot wonder at them'.⁵⁷ Those whom the 1832 Reform Act enfranchised, like the Cobbetts and the leadership of the BPU, generally rejected even covert discussion of arming. Those that remained un-enfranchised (including all the working-class Convention delegates, even William Lovett who would later craft for himself a 'moral force' reputation) adhered to the commonplace Chartist slogan: 'peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must'. J. P. Cobbett was thus to the fore in creating the moral force/physical force dichotomy that has long dogged textbook treatments of Chartism. There was a paradox here, for even the Cobbett Club was resolute in arguing that government policy had brought the poor to 'the boundary of forbearance ... where *the right of resistance begins!*' The New Poor Law violated Magna Charta because its workhouse test was equivalent to imprisonment without proper trial. It was becoming 'necessary for the people, on the failure of all *legal* means for regaining the possession of their birth-right, to look for relief from these grievous wrongs where, we fear, relief is only to be found – that is in *open and determined resistance*.'⁵⁸ This exposition was most forcibly advanced in an analysis of the Canadian Rebellions of 1837-8, published by the Club even as Convention members were debating how to proceed if petitioning failed. After members of Lower Canada's legislative assembly had

petitioned Westminster 'without any more attention being paid to them than if they had been so many jack-asses', the Canadians had resolved to resort to 'force of arms ... Another means, too, they used to assist in the same cause, namely "*moral force*" (a very good thing if well seconded and backed by physical force, but, without *that*, not of half the value of one *single rifle ball*').⁵⁹

Within the Convention J. P. Cobbett initially led the middle-class reformers who had – almost unwittingly – found themselves among the leadership of the movement. They were there for a variety of reasons, not least because they could afford to travel to and stay in London, and were not risking their jobs while they did so. However in James Paul's case he was also there because he was his father's son, although as one London Chartist paper acerbically commented, 'we have yet to learn that that name confers any hereditary claim upon the gratitude of the people'.⁶⁰ He was elected to the convention *in absentia* by a West Riding meeting on 13 October 1838.⁶¹ At the parliamentary election for Bury the previous year, James Paul Cobbett had taken the hustings vote by acclaim with a barnstorming hour and half speech condemning the New Poor Law.⁶² He had then appeared fairly consistently on radical platforms, but took little effort either to court popularity or disguise his views on issues beyond the 1834 Act. 'When petitions fail, he is a bold man who would pronounce the next word', he had told a Manchester audience in June.⁶³ In the opening days of the Convention, J. P. Cobbett shrouded his opposition to violence under the purely procedural argument that the electorates sending delegates had given them no authority beyond managing the petition. But this met with short shrift: it appeared to Bronterre O'Brien 'that some of the gentlemen feared to say what they meant', while the overwhelming response of delegates was to affirm 'the obedience of the people to the Convention', to quote the Birmingham toolmaker John Collins (later co-author with Lovett of

the so-called 'new move' and moral force text *Chartism: A New Organisation of the People*.) Delegates confirmed their readiness to be gaoled rather than silenced in the discussion of what ulterior measures might be pursued if petitioning failed. William Cardo, a shoemaker, described J. P. Cobbett's resolution as 'a gagging bill'.⁶⁴

Also vocal in condemning him were Charles Neesom (a tailor), beershop keeper and former handloom weaver Peter Bussey, carpenter R. J. Richardson, cotton mill card-room hand John Deeghan, and William Burns (another shoemaker). However, the Convention did not crudely divide along class lines on the issue: among those opposing Cobbett were three shopkeepers (including John Frost), a thimble manufacturer and two doctors.⁶⁵ One of the latter, Matthew Fletcher, agreed that the Convention had assembled as 'a petitioning body', but it was an open secret this was a 'cloak, because the right of petitioning was almost the only Constitutional right they had left'.⁶⁶ J. P. Cobbett resigned immediately, less than two weeks into the Convention. In the words of one anonymous rank and file Chartist, all he had done was 'show the white feather'.⁶⁷ 'We know not whether he has either talent or honesty', the *Chartist* editorialized, and his conduct 'can meet with no defender among those who wish well to the people's cause'.⁶⁸ 'No one need be ashamed at having been associated with them', Fletcher subsequently remarked of the Convention delegates,⁶⁹ but James Paul Cobbett seems to have struck a condescending and even patrician air from the very beginning. Feargus O'Connor would later claim that there were nine 'Cobbettites' in the 1839 Convention, but a majority even of the BPU contingent who later resigned, unnerved by the militancy of its working-class delegates, opposed James Paul.⁷⁰ James Paul was conspicuously absent from a Cobbett Club dinner, attended by most Convention delegates, held less than a month after his resignation. Among the delegates who addressed the Club on this occasion were Bronterre O'Brien, John

Taylor (one of the least-compromising advocates of the right to arm) and Richardson, who proposed both a toast to the Old Poor Law and delivered a eulogy to the *History of the Protestant Reformation*.⁷¹

The Convention was not the first occasion that James's condescension had grated upon an audience of working men. In 1836 at an anti-poor law meeting he had allegedly clashed with Manchester trades unionists who advocated that working men should 'depend entirely upon themselves' rather than 'men of ability and talent such as himself'.⁷² The best that even the *Northern Liberator* could say of him was that he was the 'son of the friend of the people'. When he advised an audience of Newcastle working men not 'to appeal to force' in opposing the New Poor Law, he drew from the Revd Joseph Rayner Stephens the furious and much-quoted response that 'it was because he believed in God, that he refused obedience to that law. If Mr. Cobbett could have shown him that it was law, still he would have unfurled his banner, and said, "by the law of God and the breath of man, for child and wife I'll war to the knife!" (tremendous cheers.)'.⁷³ Apart from reports of a dinner given by Bury Chartists in honour of Matthew Fletcher in October 1839, James Paul Cobbett vanished from the Chartist press.⁷⁴ In 1843 he did appear among the defence counsel for the leading Chartists who were tried for allegedly fomenting the mass strike wave of 1842, but to judge by the trial proceedings made little impact in doing so.⁷⁵ Half a century later, G. J. Harney's conclusion was that James Paul Cobbett could still be expected 'to look askance' at former Chartists.⁷⁶

In a similar way the fourth Cobbett son, John Morgan, had a stormy relationship with the working-class of Oldham, the parliamentary constituency represented by his father (1832-1835). It was then widely assumed that John Morgan would take the seat alongside his father's running mate, Fielden. However, Feargus

O'Connor, recently unseated at Cork for failing to meet the property qualification and effectively excluded from Irish politics because of his toxic relationship with the Irish Home Rule leader Daniel O'Connell, chose the Oldham by-election as the occasion to make his first entry into English politics. The two-member constituency had a highly organized radical caucus, a significant numbers of artisan voters and was a natural platform from which O'Connor might re-launch his political career. There were obvious attractions, too, in seeking to succeed William Cobbett. John Morgan was but a shadow of his father and notably flaky concerning the disestablishment of the Church of England (a core political issue in a strongly dissenting mill town). While the name of Cobbett was enough to secure him more votes than O'Connor, the thirty-five votes the latter obtained split the opposition to the Tory candidate and lost the election for Cobbett.⁷⁷ The Oldham result saddled O'Connor with a reputation in middle-class liberal circles as a political adventurer. As late as 1913, when the Oldham Liberal Party published a denunciation of Labour's role in splitting the progressive vote at a recent by-election, direct comparison was made with O'Connor's behaviour in 1835.⁷⁸

In condemning O'Connor these Edwardian Liberals conveniently overlooked that John Morgan Cobbett had himself stood against the Liberal candidate at Chichester in 1835 and 1837; and more obviously that, having finally been elected Oldham's MP in 1847, he crossed the floor of the House of Commons in 1865. He then represented the borough as a Conservative from 1872 until his death in 1877. It is also a nice point whether he had not been, as at least one old Chartist claimed, 'effectively a Tory' from the early 1850s.⁷⁹ Historians have regarded O'Connor's venture into Oldham as telling us more about the man than about the place. Yet there were deep social fissures in Oldham and among the ways they expressed themselves was through the actions of committees of

working men formed at parliamentary elections to harry the liberal candidates. After the 1835 débâcle an alliance of Nonconformists and artisan voters, backed by working-class non-electors deploying exclusive dealing, ensured John Morgan was not adopted as a Liberal candidate again until 1847. Even then the working men's committee fly-posted the town with bills denouncing the otherwise still popular Fielden for his 'dictation' that J. M. Cobbett should stand alongside him. For Benjamin Grimes, chronicler of Oldham parliamentary elections in the 1880s who had been raised in a solidly Chartist household, John Morgan's 'periodical appearance in this constituency has operated for evil, like the appearance of some terrible plague'.⁸⁰

The Cobbett Club similarly exasperated working-class radicals and was pushed to the margins of Chartism. After its celebrated 1839 petition and the trenchant *Political Tract* published the same year, the Club's publications were few in number and fugitive in character. The *Political Tract* had been intended as the first of a series but there followed only two further publications.⁸¹ *Northern Liberator and Champion* was the only newspaper of any political hue to notice the first of these, a Cobbettite speech on financial reform delivered in the American House of Representatives, which the Cobbett Club issued at the end of 1840.⁸² The second, *Robbers Detected* (1842), the Club never even advertised in the radical press, almost as if it predicted its probable reception. There was a certain irony in its outspoken defence of the people's right to bear arms and use them against a tyrannical government, when J. P. Cobbett had done so much to disrupt the Convention three years before on the issue of ulterior measures. However, it is doubtful if many Chartists noticed. *Robbers Detected* added nothing to existing arguments or polemic against the New Poor Law and it was totally eclipsed by Chartism's second (and largest) National Petition as well as the unprecedented level of industrial disputes in 1842, most of

them part of a coordinated wave of strikes whose resolutions included a declaration to withdraw from labour until the Charter became law.⁸³

The obvious tension between this publication and the rest of the Club's activities suggests the latter lacked coordination or purpose beyond a vague disposition to keep William Cobbett's name alive. At its 1840 annual dinner, John Fielden attacked the Chartists for their 'imprudent' advocacy of ulterior measures (arming and general strike conspicuously among them): they should, he said, be content with petitioning.⁸⁴ A fundamental fissure had opened up between middle-class reformers and Chartism, a movement that specifically claimed to voice working people's collective indignation and political purpose. Feargus O'Connor did more than any other Chartist leader to focus and articulate this claim; in his view the 'individualism of the Cobbettites' was a disabling constraint that the movement had done well to shake off.⁸⁵ Memories of the 1835 Oldham by-election may also have been at work here, for in its *Political Tract No. 1*, the Cobbett Club conspicuously praised *Northern Liberator* and only obliquely mentioned *Northern Star*, sarcastically specifying an unnamed 'unflinching advocate of the just rights of the people' as 'no good' and 'a real injury to the people'.⁸⁶ *Northern Star* reciprocated by declining even to print a report of the 1841 Cobbett Club dinner on the grounds that its columns were 'preoccupied'.⁸⁷

The Club's final petition to Parliament was however presented by Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, *de facto* Chartist MP, in October 1841. However the petition was criticized by the *English Chartist Circular* (the only Chartist paper to notice it) for excluding all reference to the People's Charter.⁸⁸ Daniel O'Connell's presence at its 1842 dinner can hardly have commended the Club to the Chartist press whose columns now studiously ignored it; barely two years earlier even Fielden had opined that to be reconciled to

O'Connell was to be destitute 'of all self-respect' and the respect of others.⁸⁹ Then in July 1842, amid the spiralling crisis from which the strike wave emerged, the Club petitioned the Commons against the New Poor Law.⁹⁰ It was worthy but scarcely topical, especially as the reintroduction of outdoor relief had taken some of the bite out of the 1834 reforms. The Club does not appear to have survived beyond 1842 and, almost symbolically, publishing *Robbers Detected* was its last recorded action. None in the Cobbett Club circle seems to have noticed how much the popular movement for reform had changed over the years since 1837 (when J. P. Cobbett could capture hearts with a ninety minute speech that did nothing other than condemn the New Poor Law). By 1846 O'Connor could plausibly claim that 'the Cobbettites have sunk into a kind of telescopic reverie, from which they can see only, and therefore only contemplate their own importance'.⁹¹

Chartism in its later phases had little need of Cobbett beyond the practice – itself diminishing – of enlisting him among the glorious dead in the cause of liberty. As Matthew Robert shows elsewhere in this volume, Cobbett's financial prescriptions were a dead letter from the mid-1840s. Even at the movement's inception, the inclusivity of vision and range of reference of at least some Chartists outstripped what Cobbett could offer. 'How dear old William Cobbett would have enjoyed this philippic', Bronterre O'Brien commented on a critique of urban corruption written by the French ultra-revolutionary Philippe Buonarroti:

Buonarroti, however, possesses this advantage over Cobbett – he tells the whole truth, while Cobbett tells only a part. The taxes and the tax-eaters were all that seemed to trouble Cobbett. Buonarroti, however, takes a wider and juster view of things.⁹²

Furthermore Cobbett's anti-Semitism grated against the increasingly internationalist outlook of the movement: in O'Brien's

words, speaking at a National Charter Association meeting in 1850, 'Cobbett had written in opposition to the admission of Jews into Parliament, because they were Christ-killers and usurers; but he (Mr O'B.) thought that their Christian brethren were quite as much usurers as the Jews. (Hear, hear).'⁹³ The vitality of the agrarian tradition within popular politics meant that even the Chartist Land Plan owed little to Cobbett's influence.⁹⁴ O'Connor's praise for Cobbett on agricultural matters was qualified: 'He (Mr. O'C.) had done more than any other man in the country on this subject, with the exception, perhaps, of Mr. Cobbett, a man with whose views he generally agreed'; but O'Connor was emphatic that he had 'even more experience of spade husbandry than Mr. Cobbett'.⁹⁵ References to Cobbett in O'Connor's *Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms* are few and of marginal significance.⁹⁶ However, when O'Connor was elected Chartist MP for Nottingham in 1847 he was quick to pay a respectful tribute to Cobbett's memory. He had, said Feargus, 'predicted the present state of affairs'.⁹⁷ Harney, in a speech in London in 1846, spoke to a cheering crowd of 'that noble of nature and glory to the English name, the immortal William Cobbett', one of the few real friends of the people who had ever sat in the House of Commons.⁹⁸ Such remarks underline that for the Chartists William Cobbett was primarily a totemic figure. Though valued for the robust clarity of his political writing, Cobbett was revered first and foremost for what he seemed to represent: a working man. Even in Parliament, where there was a loose caucus often designated the 'friends of the people', only Cobbett seemed unequivocally to have been actually *of the people*. That he was regarded as 'monstrously coarse and vulgar' by 'sham radicals' such as Francis Place and the Westminster Committee was a positive endorsement for most Chartists.⁹⁹ In the words of another Chartist paper he was both 'child and champion of the lower orders'.¹⁰⁰ William Lovett eulogised his 'weekly warfare in the services of the

poor, from whom he sprung, for whom he laboured, and in whose services he died'.¹⁰¹ Cobbett had been the living proof, argued O'Brien, 'that talent was not hereditary'.¹⁰² 'Cobbett was one of themselves' declared a speaker at a Sunderland 'patriotic soiree', 'whose application and genius surmounted every difficulty'.¹⁰³ 'He was no theorist, modern philosopher, cosmopolite, utilitarian economist, socialist, visionary, or self styled rationalist', the *Northern Liberator* observed, 'and we are just as little of them as he was'.¹⁰⁴ The *Scottish Chartist Circular* simply declaimed 'William Cobbett: One of the People'.¹⁰⁵

In the pantheon of portraits assembled by the *Northern Star*, there were very few posthumous subjects: as much as anything the series depicted a parliamentary front bench in waiting; but Cobbett was included. He was a powerful precursor figure, as an editorial marking the tenth anniversary of *Northern Star* in November 1847 explained:

Cobbett's Register must, in many respects, be for ever unequalled; but that immortal publication was but the oracle ... from the death of William Cobbett, and the consequent fall of the *Register* ... the principles of democracy were almost unrepresented in the Press [until] ... the *Northern Star*.¹⁰⁶

We should note also that Cobbett stayed with the Chartists into their old age. Prestwich Chartist William Grimshaw decorated his home with a studio photograph of himself (in the regalia of the Ancient Order of Foresters' friendly society) surrounded by portraits of 'his body guard', Hunt, O'Connor and Cobbett.¹⁰⁷ George Julian Harney's journalism during the decade before his death in 1897 frequently referenced Cobbett, doing so in the warmest of tones.¹⁰⁸ Harney gave pride of place in his home to a letter of Cobbett framed together with his portrait; both were gifts from William's second daughter Eleanor (or Ellen, 1805-1900).¹⁰⁹ She was the last surviving of the Cobbett children and maintained a correspondence

with Harney who, as he grew older, came increasingly to share the Tory radical outlook of her father whom he described as 'that most English of Englishmen'.¹¹⁰ 'I have no set of Cobbett's *Register*', Harney lamented the year before he died, 'I wish I had!'.¹¹¹ Within Chartism, as elsewhere, it is clear that William Cobbett's reputation transcended political barriers. Neither the vacillation of the Cobbett Club, the combined efforts of his sons (largely intent on self-promotion and inheriting none of their father's appetite for controversy), nor the redundancy of his currency prescriptions would extinguish the esteem in which William Cobbett's memory was held by the Chartists.

¹ J. W. Osborne, *William Cobbett: His Thought and his Times* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), p. 253-4.

² W. J. Linton, *James Watson. A Memoir of the Fight for the Free Press in England and of the Agitation for the People's Charter* (Manchester: Heywood, 1880), p. 17.

³ W. E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* (London: Huteson, 1903) vol. 1, p. 163.

⁴ M. Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 26.

⁵ M. J. Brennan, 'Civic and municipal leadership: a study of three northern towns between 1832 and 1867', University of Leeds PhD thesis, 2013, p. 219.

⁶ *Northern Liberator*, 15 February 1840.

⁷ *London Dispatch*, 20 November 1836.

⁸ *English Chartist Circular*, vol. 1, no. 8 [13 March 1841].

⁹ P. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 94-5.

¹⁰ For Chartism's historical perspectives see R. G. Hall, 'Creating a people's history: political identity and history in Chartism', in O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts (eds), *The Chartist Legacy* (Rendlesham: Merlin, 1995), pp. 232-254, and D. Paz, 'The Chartists and the English Reformation', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 90:1 (Spring, 2014), pp. 27-47.

¹¹ E. g. *Charter* 17 March 1839.

¹² *Western Vindicator*, 23 February 1839; Anon., *The Chartist Riots at Newport, November 1839*, 2nd edn, (Newport: Johns, 1889), p. 9; D. J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 57.

¹³ Paz, 'The Chartists and the English Reformation'; 'Sketch of the History of England', *English Chartist Circular*, vol. 2, nos 81-84 [7-28 August 1842].

¹⁴ *Charter*, 10 March 1839; 'A New Year's Gift to Old George Rose', *Political Register* 4 January 1817; D. Williams, *John Frost: A Study in Chartism* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1939), p. 39.

¹⁵ *Northern Star*, 26 February 1842.

¹⁶ M. Hambrick, *A Chartist's Library* (London: Mansell, 1986), p. 72

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- ¹⁷ *Northern Star*, 12 June 1847.
- ¹⁸ *Northern Liberator*, 13 July 1839.
- ¹⁹ *London Dispatch*, 3 June 1838.
- ²⁰ *Chartist*, 2 March 1839.
- ²¹ *London Dispatch*, 17 September 1837.
- ²² *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, 18 March 1848.
- ²³ Shoreham Working Men's Association, Cobbett birthday commemoration report, *Charter*, 24 March 1839; Shaw Cobbett Club, *Northern Liberator*, 14 March 1840; Brighton democratic supper, *Southern Star*, 15 March 1840.
- ²⁴ *Northern Liberator*, 23 December 1837.
- ²⁵ *London Dispatch*, 6 October 1839.
- ²⁶ *Charter*, 3 February 1839.
- ²⁷ M. Chase, 'Building identity, building circulation: engraved portraiture and the *Northern Star*', in J. Allen and O. Ashton (eds), *Papers for the People: A Study of the Chartist Press*, (London: Merlin, 2005), pp. 25-53.
- ²⁸ *Charter*, 27 October 1839; *Northern Liberator*, 2 November 1839, 29 February and 7 March 1840.
- ²⁹ *Memoirs of Henry Hunt, Esq. Written by himself, in His Majesty's jail at Ilchester, in the county of Somerset* (Bath: Cedric Chivers 1967).
- ³⁰ Figures based on a search of the COPAC database of British and Irish research libraries.
- ³¹ *Selections from Cobbett's Political Works, being a complete abridgment of the one hundred volumes which comprise the writings of "Porcupine" and the "Weekly Political Register". With notes, historical and explanatory, by John M Cobbett and James P Cobbett* (London, 1835), six volumes.
- ³² For Fletcher see *Charter*, 31 March 1839 and D. Thompson, *The Early Chartists* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 4, 6, 17-8, 21, 27, 44, 73-81, 137, 191, 197, 200. *The People's Medical Adviser* was reviewed at length in the *Charter*, 21 April 1839.
- ³³ A. Cobbett, *The English Housekeeper: Or, Manual of Domestic Management; containing advice on the conduct of household affairs, and practical information...* (London: Anne Cobbett, 1835); sixth edition (London: Cobbett, 1851). See the compendium of reviews in an advertisement in *Northern Liberator* 8 May 1840.
- ³⁴ Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, vol. 1, p. 112.
- ³⁵ *Northern Star*, 14 March 1840.
- ³⁶ *London Dispatch*, 12 March 1837; M. Chase, ' "Labour's candidates": Chartist challenges at the parliamentary polls, 1839-1860', *Labour History Review* 74/1 (April 2009), pp. 82-3..
- ³⁷ *Northern Star*, 2 November 1839; *Northern Liberator*, 20 October 1838.
- ³⁸ See also J. Hugman, 'A small drop of ink': Tyneside Chartism and the *Northern Liberator*', in Ashton, Fyson and Roberts (eds), *The Chartist Legacy*, pp. 31, 33-4, 37,
- ³⁹ *Northern Liberator*, 13 April 1839.
- ⁴⁰ *Cobbett Club Petition: Presented to and Rejected by the House of Commons, Aug. 12, 1839*, 2nd ed. (London: Dyson, 1839), p. 2. *Charter* 1 September 1839.
- ⁴¹ Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, 12 August 1839, vol. 50, cols 195-6; *The Times*, 13 August 1839; *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 15 August and *Leeds Mercury*, 17 August 1839.
- ⁴² *Northern Liberator*, 17 and 24 August 1839; *Charter*, 18 and 25 August 1839.
- ⁴³ G. Spater, *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 534.
- ⁴⁴ *Cobbett's Legacy to Lords: being six lectures on the history of taxation and debt in England: to which is subjoined a scheme of substitution for taxes : dedicated to the tax-payers of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London: Tresidder, 1863).

⁴⁵ G. J. Harney, *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 23 September 1893, quoted in D. J. Goodway, *The Chartists Were Right: Selections from the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle, 1890-97* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2014), p. 154.

⁴⁶ *London Weekly Dispatch*, 4 and 18 December 1836.

⁴⁷ By William Cobbett, jnr, in *Northern Liberator and Champion*, 10 October 1840.

⁴⁸ *Northern Liberator and Champion*, 19 December 1840.

⁴⁹ *Northern Liberator*, 10 November 1838. His commitment was perfunctory, e.g. *Northern Liberator*, 20 October 1838 – failure to attend Stockport rally with O'Connor.

⁵⁰ *London Dispatch*, 30 September 1839; Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*, pp. 42-3, 230.

⁵¹ Quoted in *London Dispatch*, 7 October 1838; Bolton WMA, *London Dispatch*, 21 October 1838.

⁵² *London Dispatch*, 30 December 1838 and 6 January 1839; *Charter*, 19 May, 16 June, 18 August 1839, 8 March 1840; *The Times*, 12 June 1839; *Northern Liberator*, 10 August 1839, 25 April 1840; S. A. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism, 1832-47* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 211-12.

⁵³ *Northern Star*, 28 April 1839.

⁵⁴ *Northern Star*, 17 February 1839

⁵⁵ *Northern Star*, 9 February and *Charter* 10 February 1839.

⁵⁶ Chase, *Chartism: A New History*, p. 172.

⁵⁷ Labour History Archive & Study Centre, Manchester, Vincent MSS 1/1/10 (Henry Vincent, Huddersfield, 26 August 1838. Vincent continued: 'Ever since the year 1818 – the Yorkshire and Lancashire people have been peacefully struggling for Universal Suffrage. They were the only two counties in which the principle existed to any extent – and the choicest spirits have become almost worn-out by their continuous exertions. However they will nobly do their duty now – they see now, for the first time, a corresponding energy in other parts of the nation'.

⁵⁸ *Robbers Detected*, pp. 70, 74.

⁵⁹ *A Political Tract by the Cobbett Club of London: Addressed to the People of the United Kingdom*. (London, Cleave, 1839), p. 29.

⁶⁰ *Chartist*, 23 February 1839.

⁶¹ *London Dispatch*, 21 October 1838.

⁶² *Manchester Times*, 29 July 1837.

⁶³ *Northern Star*, 9 June 1838.

⁶⁴ *Northern Star*, 16 and 23 February 1839.

⁶⁵ *Northern Star*, 16 February and *Charter*, 17 February 1839.

⁶⁶ *Charter*, 28 April 1839.

⁶⁷ *Charter*, 24 February 1839.

⁶⁸ *Chartist*, 23 February 1839.

⁶⁹ M. Fletcher, *Letters to the Inhabitants of Bury* (1852), no. 4, p. 7.

⁷⁰ *Northern Star*, 19 September 1846.

⁷¹ *Charter*, 17 March 1839.

⁷² J. Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 New Poor Law* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 131.

⁷³ *Northern Liberator*, 6 January 1838.

⁷⁴ *Charter*, 20 October 1839.

⁷⁵ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor, Esquire and 58 other Chartists on a Charge of Seditious Conspiracy* (Manchester: Heywood, 1843), pp. 308, 310-11, 348.

⁷⁶ *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 14 January 1893 (quoted in Goodway, *The Chartists were Right*, p. 38).

⁷⁷ On the election see J. A. Epstein, *Lion of Freedom: Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement, 1832-42* (London, Croom Helm, 1982) pp. 21-4; Weaver, *John Fielden*, pp. 133-5; P. Pickering, *Feargus O'Connor: A Political Life* (Monmouth: Merlin, 2008), pp. 61-3.

- ⁷⁸ A. Marcroft, *Landmarks of Liberalism* (Oldham, privately published, 1913), pp. 90-91.
- ⁷⁹ B. Grime, *Memory Sketches: Part I – Parliamentary Elections* (Oldham: Hirst & Rennie, 1887), p. 29.
- ⁸⁰ Grime, *Memory Sketches*, p. 29; J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Weidenfeld, 1974), p. 207.
- ⁸¹ See its full title: *A Political Tract by the Cobbett Club of London: Addressed to the People of the United Kingdom. No. 1. To be repeated occasionally; Northern Liberator*, 15 June 1839.
- ⁸² Henry Williams, *Speech of Mr. Williams of Massachusetts on the Independent Treasury bill* (1840) reviewed in *Northern Liberator and Champion*, 12 December 1840.
- ⁸³ 'One of the Cobbett Club', *Robbers Detected, or, a consideration of the cause, and probable consequences, of the passing of the 4th and 5th William IV, cap. 76, commonly called the Poor Law Amendment Act* (London: Wilson, 1842); *Morning Chronicle* 20 and 21 September 1842; *The Times* 19 September 1842.
- ⁸⁴ *Northern Star*, 14 March 1840.
- ⁸⁵ *Northern Star*, 19 September 1846.
- ⁸⁶ *Political Tract*, pp. 3-4.
- ⁸⁷ *Northern Star*, 13 March 1841.
- ⁸⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 October 1841; *English Chartist Circular*, vol. 1, no. 42 [8 November 1841], pp. 165-6.
- ⁸⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, 11 March 1842; *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 30 December 1839.
- ⁹⁰ *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 July 1842.
- ⁹¹ *Northern Star*, 19 September 1846.
- ⁹² *Buonarroti's History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality; with the author's reflections on the causes & character of the French Revolution ... translated from the French language, and illustrated by original notes, etc. by Bronterre* (London: Hetherington, 1836), p. 163.
- ⁹³ *Reynolds's Weekly News*, 4 August 1850.
- ⁹⁴ M. Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775-1840*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988; second edition, London: Breviary, 2010).
- ⁹⁵ *Northern Star*, 7 October 1843.
- ⁹⁶ F. O'Connor, *A Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms* (Manchester: Heywood, 1845), 2nd ed., pp. 150-1, 179.
- ⁹⁷ *Northern Star*, 30 October 1847. For an earlier occasion on which O'Connor associated himself with Cobbett see *Northern Liberator*, 22 June 1839.
- ⁹⁸ *Northern Star*, 17 October 1846; David Nicholls, 'Friends of the people: parliamentary supporters of popular radicalism, 1832-1849', *Labour History Review* 62 (1997), pp. 127-46.
- ⁹⁹ *Northern Liberator*, 17 February 1838.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Charter*, 1 March 1840.
- ¹⁰¹ *English Chartist Circular*, vol. 1, no. 8 [13 March 1841].
- ¹⁰² *Southern Star*, 15 March 1840.
- ¹⁰³ *Northern Liberator*, 2 February 1839.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Northern Liberator*, 13 July 1839.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Chartist Circular*, [Scotland] 26 September 1840.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Northern Star*, 13 November 1847.
- ¹⁰⁷ Chase, *Chartism*, p. 342.
- ¹⁰⁸ Goodway, *The Chartists were Right*, p. 25.
- ¹⁰⁹ F. G. Black and R. M. Black (eds), *The Harney Papers* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969), p. 205.

¹¹⁰ G. J. Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1900), vol. 1, p. 221; *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 9 December 1893 (quoted in Goodway, *The Chartists were Right*, p. 147).

¹¹¹ *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 25 January 1896, quoted in Goodway, *The Chartists were Right*, p. 118.