

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE
CHARTIST MOVEMENT
1854 - 1975

A Major Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies for
Department of History
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Peter J. T. Shaw
October 1977

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE
CHARTIST MOVEMENT

1854 - 1975

BY

PETER J.T. SHAW

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS,

© 1978

Permission has been granted to the LIBRARY OF THE UNIVER-
SITY OF MANITOBA to lend or sell copies of this dissertation, to
the NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA to microfilm this
dissertation and to lend or sell copies of the film, and UNIVERSITY
MICROFILMS to publish an abstract of this dissertation.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the
dissertation nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or other-
wise reproduced without the author's written permission.

PREFACE

This thesis seeks to examine the varied and often complex manner in which historians have approached the study of the Chartist Movement from the middle of the nineteenth century until the present. The thesis also aims to examine, in some detail, the basic source materials of Chartism and their use by historians. An assessment is made of how far value judgments and historians' symbiotic relationships with their society affected studies of the Movement.

A major problem with the thesis has been the sheer volume of work on Chartism. The last twenty years have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in interest in Chartism amongst scholars: partly a consequence of the increased development of socialist theory both within the British Labour Party - increasingly an established party of government - and amongst the "New Left", and partly of a general movement in academic circles towards the study of social history so long neglected by historians. A further problem with the thesis has been the difficulty of dividing the chronology of Chartist historiography into necessarily arbitrary sections.

The concluding chapter of the thesis suggests new methods of analysing and studying Chartism using the methodology of sociology and other social sciences in an attempt to solve the extraordinarily difficult problem of determining rank-and-file opinion and the total impact of Chartism on ordinary people.

A final plea is made to consider ordinary Chartists as "men and women of flesh and blood" who, far from being faceless robots, were deeply influenced by Chartist poetry and songs; reacting in a very human, if not entirely logical way, to the social upheavals and traumas of the Chartist period.

A particular debt of gratitude is owed to the staff of the Department of History of the University College of Swansea and Dr. David Jones in particular who initiated my interest in Chartism; to the staff of the Elizabeth Dafoe Library and the Department of History of the University of Manitoba; and finally to Dr. Keith Sandiford without whose invaluable help and guidance the thesis would never have been completed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	<u>THE PLACE OF CHARTISM IN BRITISH HISTORY.....</u>	1
	The Basis of Chartism Problems of Historians of Chartism	
II.	<u>THE CHARTISTS' IMAGE OF THEMSELVES.....</u>	12
	The Importance of Gamage Memoirs of Liberal ex-Chartists The Violent Image of Chartism	
III.	<u>THE VICTORIAN VIEW OF CHARTISM.....</u>	29
	The Complex Reaction of the Ruling Class The Ambiguous Reaction of Bourgeois Sympathisers The View of the Victorian Press The Industrial Novels The Events of 1848	
IV.	<u>THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHARTISM 1900-1939.....</u>	53
	Historiographical Influences on the Period The Importance of Hovell Fabian Historiography The American Interpretation A Marxist View	
V.	<u>THE AGE OF BIOGRAPHY 1938-1958.....</u>	77
	Why the Biographical Method Grew in Importance The Slow Growth of Social History The Importance of Namier A Marxist and an American Approach	
VI.	<u>THE CURRENT STATE OF CHARTIST STUDIES.....</u>	92
	The Pivotal Importance of <u>Chartist Studies</u> The Varied Historiographical Influences of Contributors The Retreat from Namier The Increasing Use of the Social Sciences Neo-Marxists and Neo-Whigs	

TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont.)

CHAPTER

VII. CONCLUSIONS..... 137

The Advances Made in Chartist
Historiography
Questions Unanswered
The Value of the Social Sciences
Future Work in Chartism

CHAPTER IThe Place of Chartism in British History

Chartism has been correctly termed "one of the most complex and difficult subjects in English history".¹ This would not, at first, seem to be the case: it could be argued that Chartism was simply a movement of the emerging working class whose sole aim was to gain a programme of political reform as laid down in the "People's Charter" issued in the spring of 1838. The "Charter" was drawn up by William Lovett, an artisan cabinet-maker and leader of the London Working Men's Association, with the assistance of Francis Place, the London tailor and friend of many influential radicals. The programme would, indeed, appear to be both a logical development of the political reform movements of the eighteenth century led by such diverse men as Thomas Hardy of the London Corresponding Society and Major Cartwright of the Hampden Clubs, and a logical extension of the working man's political ambitions to match his increased economic role in the developing Industrial Revolution.

The traditional treatment of Chartism by historians has emphasised how the famous "six points of the Charter" were all gradually accepted in a typically British spirit of caution and compromise, except for the "obviously futile" idea of annual elections. This acceptance of the five points - universal manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, the secret ballot, abolition

¹R. K. Webb, Modern England (London, 1969), p.248.

of the property qualification for membership of the House of Commons and payment of members - was generally hailed as an illustration of the superiority of the British social and political system over that of the Continent and the basic loyalty and hatred of revolution of the British working class. The latter point was usually viewed as being proved by the avoidance of full-scale violence on a national scale when the Chartist Petition was presented in 1839, 1842 and 1848.

The nineteenth century British traditions of historiography associated with such Victorian historians as J. R. Green, Lord Acton, Samuel Gardiner and William Stubbs, were singularly unsuitable for initiating worthwhile studies of Chartism. The 1860's and 1870's were decades when liberalism and positivism became the basis of British historiographical methodology. Historians followed Ranke's dictum that history should "show how it really was."² Facts in history were equated with scientific facts; thus Acton, Stubbs, Maitland and Gardiner produced vast works full of detail combined with moral judgement. The latter avoided the need to frame general historical laws as Comte had done. Instead historians could follow Acton and "judge, and judge fiercely" as "progress in the direction of organized and assured freedom, is the characteristic fact of Modern History, and its tribute to the theory of Providence." Too often, however, they neglected the other side of Acton which realised that impartiality

² Quoted by Stedman Jones, G., "The Pathology of English History," New Left Review No. 46 (1967), p.29.

was the "only character of legitimate history".³

Victorian historians therefore concentrated on great men and constitutional history; they wrote very little on social, economic and cultural history as sources were often less readily available and facts not empirically verifiable. Chartism was therefore usually ignored completely or, at best, given a short mention as part of the inevitable progress of the English Constitution towards its present peak of civil, religious and political liberty.

The handful of Victorian historians who mentioned Chartism at all - Justin McCarthy, Spencer Walpole and J. H. Rose⁴ - relied exclusively on official, anti-Chartist sources such as Hansard, Annual Register and The Times.

The question of sources and their use is the central problem of Chartist historiography. Unlike constitutional history and the history of great men, the history of Chartism has to be painstakingly pieced together using the memoirs of ex-Chartists; the provincial, national and Chartist press; the Place Papers; the H. O. Papers and papers in the P. R. O.; and more obscure and often ephemeral sources such as pamphlets, broadsides, handbills and posters.

Chartist memoirs, for example, often gave an invaluable first-hand account of the movement, and, almost without exception,

³J. R. Hale (ed.), The Evolution of British Historiography (New York, 1964), p.68.

⁴J. McCarthy, A History of Our Own Times (4 vols.; London, 1880).
S. Walpole, History of England (6 vols.; 1902-1905).
J. H. Rose, The Rise of Democracy (London, 1898).

succeeded in portraying a sense of working class solidarity and pride in the achievements of working people since the Chartist period. Their use requires considerable care, however, if they are not to give a distorted interpretation of Chartism. While all the memoirs remained loyal to the Charter, most were strongly affected by the extremely pervasive Gladstonian Liberalism of the late nineteenth century. Other difficulties arose from lapses of memory, personal vindictiveness and an anxiety to exonerate themselves from association with any Chartist violence. Memoir writers also had a very provincial outlook and reflected the extremely diverse movement of Chartism to a very limited extent. Only the successful and fairly comfortable Chartists such as Adams, Frost, Gammage, Linton and Wilson⁵ could afford the time and money to publish memoirs. Thomas Ainge Devyr's Odd Book of the Nineteenth Century, published privately in New York in 1880, was very much an exception with its emphasis on violent Chartism and unrepentant hostility towards Gladstonian Liberalism.

One of the key sources of Chartism for historians of the twentieth century are the national, provincial and Chartist press. Mark Hovell's work The Chartist Movement, published in 1918, was the first attempt to use the major primary sources of Chartism in a scientific manner. He made extensive use of the Northern Star

⁵B. Wilson, The Struggles of an Old Chartist (Halifax, 1887).
 W.J.Linton, Memories (1894).
 T. Frost, Forty Years Recollections (1880).
 W. E. Adams, Memoirs of a Social Atom (1903).
 R. G. Gammage, History of the Chartist Movement (1894: reprinted 1969).

and other Chartist periodicals, although mostly of the pro-Lovett wing of the movement such as The Charter (1839-40), and The Chartist Circular (Glasgow, 1839-41).

The obvious problem faced by historians using the press as a major source is that of making a representative selection of material. The Northern Star was a genuine national paper and contained reports sent in by local reporters in each region. Its circulation reached a peak of 50,000 in 1839 and only fell to under 5000 per week after 1848. Other Chartist newspapers were more local in character and often put forward the views of particular factions.

The provincial press, during the 1830's, was becoming genuinely local in character with their own staffs of reporters and containing full reports of magistrates' hearings separated from the usually hostile editorials. Some provincial papers, however, employed very few staff; thus it could appear that Chartism was inactive in these regions, but this was not necessarily the case. Gross distortion or a "conspiracy of silence" was common, as was the selection of the Chartist activity preferred by sympathetic papers. In Bristol, for example, the tory Felix Farley's Journal called the Chartists "vagabonds," "the veriest scamps" and the "glorious unwashed", while the radical Bristol Mercury eagerly reported a large procession of temperance Chartists carrying slogans such as: "Better eat it than drink it" under a picture of a large loaf. Doubtless some Bristol Chartists were moderate teetotalers whilst

some were "physical-force" men.⁶

Careful cross-reference is therefore necessary when using local papers as sources. Similarly H. O. papers can be very misleading: often the reports of government agents exaggerated Chartist militancy in order to make their work seem essential; some magistrates were either very zealous or scared and wrote very frequently to the Home Office, while others hardly ever wrote; thus giving the impression of low Chartist activity; and finally most material was sent at times of great disturbance or violence and did not deal with the social and cultural aspects of Chartism. In spite of these difficulties, without these sources "we must long be contented with a little knowledge and a modish agnosticism".⁷

The largest source of unused primary material now remains in the Home Office Papers but these have to be handled with great caution. In addition to the wide range of press sources, greater use is now being made of more ephemeral material such as pamphlets, handbills, broadsides and posters as Chartist historiography has become more sophisticated both in technique and the selection of sources during the past twenty years. Handbills, posters and broadsides are least likely to have survived; often only the most militant having been sent to the Home Secretary. Such small

⁶Bristol Mercury, June 1, 1839.
Felix Farley's Bristol Journal Feb. 22, 1840.

⁷E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (1963) p.932.

examples only refer to very specific areas at certain times,⁸ and cannot be taken as proof of the general nature of Chartism.

The task of twentieth century historians of Chartism has been both to fit the movement into the context of the history of the labour movement and into its contemporary social, economic and political background. The studies written in the period of the first World War by Hovell, West, Rosenblatt, Slosson and Beer reflected the social reformism of the periods associated with the Fabians and stressed the moral-force side of Chartism. These were generally concerned with establishing the movement as a forerunner of the emerging European social democratic parties. A general picture of Chartism emerged - the major sources used being the Northern Star and the newspaper cuttings and letters of the Place Manuscripts and Papers.

The period since 1939 witnessed the growth of the biographical method of making a much closer examination of Chartism. In a sense this was a step backwards into the study of the "great men" of the movement so beloved by Victorian historians, but it was a useful way of simplifying the process of selection of source material and of avoiding coming to grips with the complexity of Chartism.⁹

The work of Namier had a great impact on Chartist historiography.

⁸D. Thompson, The Early Chartists (1971) pp.1, 175.

⁹D. Williams, John Frost: A Study in Chartism (Cardiff, 1939).
G. D. H. Cole, Chartist Portraits (1941).
J. Saville, Ernest Jones: Chartist (1952).
A. R. Schoyen, The Chartist Challenge. A Portrait of G.J.Harney (1958).
D. Read and E. Glasgow, Feargus O'Connor: Irishman and Chartist (1961).

In spite of his conservative irrationalism, his empirical methodology and emphasis on detailed analysis strongly influenced the contributors to Chartist Studies in 1959.¹⁰ This work was of pivotal importance and contained the first attempts of detailed analysis of Chartism in various regions and as a "series of responses". Henceforth Chartist historiography became much more sophisticated, both in technique and use of sources.

This thesis will attempt to trace and explain the evolution of Chartist historiography from the years immediately following the demise of the movement to the present. The influence of the writings of the Chartists themselves will be analysed and their impact on historians will be assessed, as will the ways in which selection of sources restricted historians and discouraged sophisticated analysis of the movement. Chartist historians also have to be placed within the historical context of their political and social environment as well as within the context of the evolution of historiographical methodology.

The most important problem to be faced is how Chartist historiography should develop in the future to enable it to attempt an answer to some of the outstanding problems: the social and economic roots of Chartism; its violence, local diversity, and local impact; its total national impact; its ongoing influence on the later labour movement and - most important and difficult of all - the social composition of the movement and the impact of Chartism on the rank-and-file.

¹⁰Asa Briggs (ed.), Chartist Studies (1959).

The success - or otherwise - of recent historians in answering these and other questions, their techniques in using scattered and often ephemeral sources and developments in historiographical methodology have to be assessed and suggestions made for improvements.

Perhaps the most important historiographical difficulty to be faced by historians of Chartism is the question of cooperation between themselves and social scientists. During the past two decades historians as diverse as C. Hill, H. Trevor-Roper, E. J. Hobsbaum, E. P. Thompson and G. Rudé have made increasing use of the models and analytical framework of sociologists, social anthropologists and social psychologists in order to draw substantial conclusions from incomplete quantitative and qualitative sources. This is particularly relevant for Chartist historiography and its attempts to answer some of the problems outlined above.

Historians such as Hovell, West, Slosson and Beer, as well as Marxists such as Groves and Rothstein,¹¹ made extensive use of the concepts of economics, such as trade cycles, and used them in a rather crude attempt to explain Chartist activity and its fluctuations. Economics was greatly in advance of other social sciences until at least the late 1950's. The social and economic history of the Annales d'Histoire, first published in 1929, laid great emphasis on economic analysis. Social history had remained largely based on Trevelyan's subject matter of customs, manners

¹¹R. Groves, But We Shall Rise Again (1938);
T. Rothstein, From Chartism to Labourism (1929).

and everyday life or "history with the politics left out".¹² At best, historians such as R. H. Tawney, Barbara Hammond and G. D. H. Cole had written genuine, if mainly impressionistic, re-creations of the lives of working people, often linked with histories of social movements and labour. These latter were not usually related to society in general but studied as abstractions.

The emergence of sociology and social psychology as fully developed social sciences on a par with economics has had a considerable impact on social history in general and promises to have a similar effect on Chartist historiography. At the very least sociological models and concepts such as "generalized beliefs"; "social control"; "role analysis" etc.¹³ can provide a coherent system into which the historian can fit his inadequate data. The historian, however, necessarily lacks the statistical material and controlled experimental conditions of the sociologist. Hobsbawm has pointed out (ibid. p.27) that both sociology and social anthropology are usually abstracted from historical change and that neither have enough useful models or analytical frameworks for the study of long-run historical socio-economic change. He further argued that historians of social history would not be able to advance beyond a combination of suggestive hypothesis and

¹²Quoted by E. J. Hobsbawm "From Social History to the History of Society", Daedalus Vol.100 No.1 (Winter 1971), p.21.

¹³N. Smelser, Theory of Collective Behaviour (London, 1962).

anecdotal illustration unless new techniques were found for handling large quantities of historical data.

Chartism has become a favourite subject for social historians as during such widespread social upheavals there is a better possibility of penetrating the "opaque communities" which were the main centres of Chartism . . . "rarely accessible to parson, policeman or magistrate".¹⁴ If social history in general, and Chartism in particular, is to become the history of society as a whole - linked to its economics, ideologies and social relationships - there is need to analyse individuals and small groups in depth. The key problems in Chartist historiography therefore have to be tackled - those of the active and passive beliefs of the rank-and-file Chartists, the degree in which they were influenced by Chartism and their influence on Chartist development - if Chartist historiography is to advance.

Chartist historiography has to be examined both in terms of the socio-economic and cultural milieu of works on Chartism and the often complex influences of the various schools of historiographical philosophy on Chartist historians. Of crucial importance is an examination of the sources of Chartism and their selection and use by historians. Finally the impact and desirability of social scientific techniques and methodology on Chartist historiography must be analysed and suggestions made pertaining to the direction and content of future scholarship.

¹⁴D. Thompson, p.6.

CHAPTER II

The Chartists' Image of Themselves

Chartist memoirs have to be used with great caution by historians for reasons outlined above (pp.3-4). Only occasionally did they provide telling details of an earlier, pre-Liberal society, as when Thomas Frost wrote with passion about his dreams of a utopian community based on the land.¹

Of first importance to subsequent Chartist historiography was R. G. Gammage's History of the Chartist Movement first published in 1854. As E. P. Thompson has pointed out, the book is "both an essential document of the movement and the text from which all other histories must begin".² Gammage only became an active Chartist after 1840, however, and viewed events from his locality in Northampton. Other defects included a consistent hostility towards Harney, Jones and O'Connor, in contrast to his very favourable treatment of Lovett and Vincent, part of the "moral-force" school of Chartists, and Bronterre O'Brien, the "Chartist school-master" and editor of the Poor Man's Guardian. Perhaps his greatest disservice to Chartism was his negative view of the movement, stressing divisions and personal quarrels, rather than the achievements of the first articulate political movement of an industrialised working class.

At heart Gammage was an old-fashioned radical whose ideology emanated from the French Revolution and the writings of O'Brien.

¹Frost, p.22.

²Gammage (1969 edn.) cover.

He was, however, bitterly class conscious and viewed bourgeois radicals such as Attwood, Duncombe and Sharman Crawford, as doubtful allies. His main fire was reserved for the "scheming Whigs" who were trying to attack the middle class to the aristocratic ruling élite.

In spite of his acceptance of O'Brien's arguments against capitalism in the Poor Man's Guardian and O'Brien's contention that in the long run capital and labour had opposing interests, Gammage believed that the landed aristocracy with its land monopoly was at the root of all evils. The theory of "The Norman Yoke" was very strong in all nineteenth century radical movements and provided a strong link between ex-Chartists and Gladstonian Radicals later in the century.³ The aristocracy were the main enemy as it had monopolized the soil since the "celebrated Norman robber chief" landed in 1066. A moral argument was used to condemn the idling aristocracy for its gross immorality and laziness; thus providing another link with the Gladstonians.

Most Chartist memoir-writers, including Gammage, were strongly influenced by the puritan work ethic. Early in his History he argued that if the monarchy were abolished but "the fundamental relations between capital and labour (were left) on their present footing, you will have accomplished virtually nothing".⁴ By 1852,

³C. Hill "The Norman Yoke", in J. Saville (ed.), Democracy and the Labour Movement (1954).

⁴Gammage (1894 edn. reprinted 1969, with an introduction by John Saville) p.25.

however, Gammage stressed that "no one can hold that right (of private property) more sacred than myself" and that the greatest evil in society was the division between "idlers and workers".⁵ The capitalist was included amongst the latter as he produced employment.

Gammage was a member of the Lovett school of Chartism with its strong beliefs in the moral improvement of its class by education and self-help. Both Lovett and Gammage were incensed by Feargus O'Connor's leadership because of his irrational appeals to his vast audiences which smacked of the swaying of the mob by Wilkes and aristocrats at eighteenth century elections. To Gammage, O'Connor was "an eccentric Irish buffoon, imposing his demagoguery upon the deluded masses by a combination of excessive energy and blarney" (p.65). Both Gammage and Lovett had had no experience of the North and the industrial masses and completely failed to realise the necessity for O'Connor's oratory in building a mass movement. Only a tiny artisan minority had the opportunity to practise self-improvement and references to the "deluded masses" helped perpetuate the myth of the "ignorant populace" led astray by "rabble-rousing" demagogues.

Like later memoir writers, Gammage tried to excuse Chartist violence. Like them he was proud of the movement but also wished to justify their past actions to their new Liberal friends. The political and material progress of the intervening years seemed to prove the efficacy of the peaceable method of protest. Even in

⁵Ibid., p.443.

1854, however, Gammage underplayed the violence of Chartism and condemned its advocates - Harney, Jones and O'Connor. Jones, for example, he dismissed (p.400) as "ambitious and mercenary. He must command the movement, or he would reduce it to nothing". He did, however, sympathise with Richard Marsden of Preston, a member of "the extreme school of Harney and Rider", as his great suffering^x and that of his family led Gammage to ask whether "we (should) blame him for this state of feeling." (p.65).

William Lovett was given a central role in all traditional works on Chartism. Not only had he, with Francis Place's help, drawn up the People's Charter in 1837, but also led the "moral-force" wing of the movement. His autobiography,⁶ published in 1876, was a moving account of the desperate struggles of a Chartist leader and a vivid picture of the richness of artisan culture in the pre-Chartist period. Written between 1840 and 1874, it was intended as a tract for the new post-Chartist generation. It left an overall impression of moral smugness, extolling the virtues of self-help, education and liberalism. His aim was also to contradict anti-Chartist feeling and writing by denouncing violence, and stressing pro-Liberal elements within the movement. Like Gammage, and for similar reasons, Lovett hated O'Connor and the "physical-force" men such as Harney, and did not even mention the London Democratic Association.

Born in Cornwall in 1800, Lovett was forced to move to London

⁶W. Lovett, Life and Struggles of William Lovett (1876: Reprinted with a preface by R. H. Tawney, 1967).

as the rope-making trade was being replaced by chain-making. His later adherence to Samuel Smiles' self-help ideas probably stemmed from his advance from great poverty to the exclusive honourable branch of the Cabinet-Makers' Society. His mentor was Place, with whom he was involved in the Owenite Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in 1834. Lovett was also associated with the unstamped press agitation and learnt much of the new socialist philosophy of Hodgskin and Bray at the London Mechanics' Institute.

O'Connor's brand of leadership was essential to give unity and inspiration to a desperate and despairing industrial working class. Yet Lovett considered him (p.245) "the chief marplot of our movement ... a man who, by his personal conduct, joined to his malignant influence in the Northern Star has been the blight of democracy from the first moment he opened his mouth as its professed advocate. Previous to his notorious career there was something pure and intellectual in our agitation."

The last sentence clearly indicated Lovett's social snobbery, often found among the self-taught. He became very close to Bright's view that the masses would have to prove their moral worth to obtain the vote.

Lovett's involvement in violence at the Bull Ring in Birmingham in 1839 showed the complexity of Chartist attitudes towards violence. He did not become embittered, however, but rather the reverse as in 1840 he and his colleague John Collins published a small book⁷ written in prison. This outlined the setting up of a

⁷W. Lovett and J. Collins, Chartism (1840: reprinted 1969).