
Reviewed by Rohan McWilliam (Department of History, Anglia Ruskin University)  
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The Most Chartist of All the Factory Towns

In June 2008, I was privileged to speak at the annual Chartism Day conference at the University of Wales, Newport. During the course of the event, there were four papers followed by a walking tour of some of the nearby locations most associated with Chartism. We were taken to see where John Frost and the Chartists had gathered prior to the Newport rising in November 1839 and then proceeded to the Westgate Hotel where the catastrophic confrontation with the military took place. One of the most encouraging aspects of the day was the large number of people (not all of them academics) for whom Chartism still matters. There was a passion and an excitement for people’s history that reminded me of the old History Workshop conferences.

Chartist studies continue to flourish in a quite remarkable way. The volume under review is part of the Merlin Press Chartist Studies series (seven titles published so far). The Chartist Ancestors Web site has proven to be extremely popular (www.chartists.net). The Chartist newspaper, *The Northern Star,* is now available in a searchable, digital form. Not long ago, Malcolm Chase produced his narrative history of the movement, *Chartism: A New History* (2007), which is clearly going to be a standard work. This is not bad for a movement that often has been written off as a failure.

The first historians of Chartism were, of course, Chartists themselves. Robert G. Gammage wrote his history of the movement as early as 1854, *History of the Chartist Movement, 1837-1854.* However, despite the work of such figures as Mark Hovell and G. D. H. Cole in the first half of the twentieth century, the modern wave of research really dates from the publication of *Chartist Studies* in 1959 where Asa Briggs brought together the work of a group of scholars who had been delving into the history of the movement in different localities. Briggs’s edited collection became a founding text of modern labor history and Chartism was seen as one of the key episodes that defined the particular nature of Victorian politics and society. Broadly speaking, Chartism was used to explore issues of class and locality in the 1960s and 1970s. This mutated into a focus on Chartism as an attempt to create a new way of life and to generate forms of democratic participation that went beyond the right to vote. It says something about the significance of Chartism that, in the 1980s, the critique of traditional labor history (much of it generated by the Left) was partly expressed through discussions of the movement. Examining the peculiarities of its language and political arguments, Gareth Stedman Jones’s rethinking of Chartism queried the Marxist analysis that saw the movement as a product of industrial-capitalist society.[1] Since Stedman Jones, Chartism has been interpreted in terms of gender and national identities, while there has also been a greater focus on Chartist fiction, literature, and poetry, once routinely ignored. A lot of research (evident in the Merlin Press series) has gone into uncovering more about Chartist lives and considering the movement in terms of the development of the press and mass communications.
This is the context within which we should read Robert G. Hall’s new book on the movement. The title is presumably meant to allude to Patrick Joyce’s *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (1991), one of the key revisionist works on Victorian political culture. *Voices of the People* is also a contribution to what is increasingly being called “Post-Chartist Studies.” Unlike the generation of the 1960s who were interested in radicalism up to the early 1850s, Hall insists that we need to look at how Chartism related to different forms of radicalism and liberalism in the mid-Victorian period. This yoking together of the Chartist and post-Chartist periods has been one of the most distinctive shifts in the history of radicalism over the last twenty years.

At one level, the book is a study of the politics of Ashton-under-Lyne from 1830 to 1870. In itself, this is long overdue. Dorothy Thompson, doyen of Chartist historians, argues that Ashton was “the most radical and Chartist of all the factory towns” (quoted on p. 2). Hall commences the book by noting that there were fourteen thousand signatures from Ashton on the 1842 Chartist petition, which amounted to 62 percent of the town’s population. However, the reader would be wrong to assume that Hall is simply going back to the kind of approach found in Briggs’s *Chartist Studies* with its discreet accounts of the movement’s history in a range of different localities. Hall is interested in Ashton as an example of the smaller, medium-sized factory town, which, he argues, was more characteristic of the movement than the large cities studied in the Briggs collection. Moreover, he is concerned to develop a perspective that explores Chartism through the relationship between the culture of the national movement and one of its most important centers. The book is not a study of Ashton Chartism or Chartism as a whole but of the complex interplay between the two. The pitfall with this approach (which the book does not always avoid) is the danger of falling between two stools. Hall insists he is not offering a micro-history of the Ashton community, but the book sometimes lacks a sense of place, which would have been useful to the argument. However, at its best, the book offers a productive way of thinking about local history in a sophisticated and complex way. What matters to Hall are issues of identity, democracy, and political strategy.

The book begins with an examination of mule spinning in Ashton, which grounds the interpretation in a material base. The chapter is intended not just to alert the reader to a part of the economic history of Ashton but also to raise issues about gender and skill. This focus on the labor process and the politics of work seems curiously cut off from the rest of the book as workplace issues only reappear from time to time. Hall goes on to examine the kinds of political arguments that Ashton Chartists deployed. For example, they developed their own view of British history, which refused elite constructions of the past in favor of a narrative that stressed the ongoing struggle for liberty. Democracy was not some foreign innovation but an essential part of what it meant to be British. Radical banquets toasted the memories of Tom Paine and Wat Tyler. The spirit of radical patriotism ran through Ashton Chartists, although I was delighted to read about the Chartists who put on a reportedly popular play at various local venues about the Irish revolutionary Robert Emmet. There was later a union between Chartist and Irish Confederates in 1848. At these moments, Hall really captures the texture of early Victorian popular politics.

Ashton Chartists did not have things all their own way. Hall recognizes the existence of the local Operative Conservative Association and indeed the appeal of Tory radicalism. I was surprised that Joseph Rayner Stephens, a significant local figure (sometimes described as a radical Tory), did not feature in the book quite as much as one might have expected. The extent to which Stephens was an actual Chartist is, of course, arguable, but he was one of the prominent individuals associated with the movement in its early years.

Following the work of Anna Clark (*The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* [1995]) and Jutta Schwarzkopf (*Women in the Chartist Movement* [1991]), there has been a tendency to view Chartism as shaped by a form of gender politics that prioritized a masculine frame of reference and increasingly excluded women (the decision to support universal manhood suffrage was only one part of this). Hall registers the force of this analysis, although his study stresses the diversity of opinion on the issue of female suffrage. His view of Chartism is also different from that of Stedman Jones who refocused attention on the People’s Charter, analyzing it as a continuation of previous democratic and purely political demands. For Hall’s radicals, the People’s Charter was always meant to be a stepping stone toward further reforms that aimed for material improvements in working-class life.

The key passage that defines Hall’s approach comes when he argues that Ashton Chartism “broke through to a broader and more revolutionary sense of itself as a class movement” but that “this vision was fleeting and
elusive.” He goes on to argue that “there was a constant tension in Chartist politics between class antagonism and a longing for class conciliation” (p. 55). I have always been persuaded about the militancy of the Ashton situation (and indeed Hall is right to argue that Ashton was by no means untypical), but the “revolutionary” character of the local situation is perhaps open to question. There was mass arming and there were attempts at a general strike in 1842, but that is not quite the same as arguing that a revolutionary situation existed as opposed to a moment of serious civil disorder. Hall sees this militancy as the product of a particular convergence of political and economic crises in the later 1830s. Social reform and economic improvement thereafter “undermined the movement’s sense of identity and mission,” although Hall does argue that economic improvements in mid-Victorian Ashton were patchy (p. 109). In general, Hall is at his best when he talks about the ambiguities of Chartist radicalism and the competing and often contradictory forces that shaped strategy.

Hall is concerned about the relationship of national leaders and supporters in Ashton. Here, he emphasizes the role of literacy and “cultural sophistication” in shaping how leaders were perceived (p. 86). This allows Hall to discuss local traditions of autodidacticism, a familiar issue when we think about radical politics. Hall finds little evidence of this culture of learning involving the adoption of bourgeois norms of culture and politics. It did, however, create problems of identity. Local Chartists spoke about a united people with whom they identified, but Hall shows that the kind of worker-intellectuals who supported Chartist recognized the extent of apathy and disunity among the working class. Working-class radicals have often developed an insider/outsider status when it comes to proletarian life.

Taking the narrative into the mid-Victorian years allows Hall to explore the ways Ashton Liberals and Tories had to accommodate workers with a Chartist past. By the early 1860s, about half of the electorate were part of the working class leading to a greater focus on class conciliation and the mutual interests of capital and labor in local political rhetoric. Many Chartists gravitated toward the Liberals but workers also looked to the Tories who capitalized on anti-Irish sentiment. The militancy of the period 1838-42 was no more.

The real hero of the book is the Chartist William Aitken who features throughout and is the subject of the final and best chapter in the book. Aitken represents the shift from Chartist militancy to Liberalism. He began life as an Ashton cotton piecer and (later) mule spinner but used his passion for self-education to become a school teacher. In 1840, he was sent to prison for sedition after he became a prominent Ashton Chartist. He was later arrested for sedition in 1848 although the charges were dropped. In the 1850s, however, he found himself supporting the Liberals, making him emblematic of the course of Ashton Chartist. This final chapter is rather different from the rest of the book (it is described as a conclusion, which it really is not). Shortly before he died (he committed suicide in 1869), Aitken published his autobiography in a local newspaper. Hall, who has published an edition of this autobiography, employs it as an opportunity to reflect on working-class life writing, the formation of identity and the ways in which Chartist was remembered in the mid-Victorian period. Unlike some historians who have emphasized the similarities between Chartist and radical Liberalism, Hall’s reading of the autobiography brings out the real differences between the two traditions. Even though he wrote his autobiography from his Liberal perspective of the 1860s, Aitken still emphasized the distinctiveness of Chartist. The chapter provides one of the thoughtful analyses of an individual Chartist that we have.

Chartism used to be interpreted as an ancestor of the Labour Party. More recently, there has been a tendency to see it as one source of the Gladstonian Liberal Party. The new wave of Chartist studies (like Hall’s), by contrast, brings out the peculiarities of the movement. We are going to be arguing about it for some time to come.

Note

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