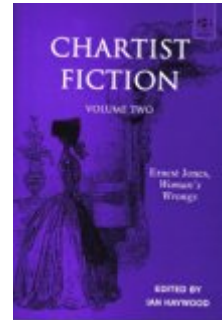




Ian Haywood, ed.. *Chartist Fiction. Volume 2: Ernest Jones, Woman's Wrongs.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. liii + 177 pp. £42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-0303-0.



Reviewed by Elisabeth Jay

Published on H-Albion (November, 2001)

Being sentenced in 1848 to a two year prison sentence, much of it spent in the silence of solitary confinement, was a particularly cruel blow for Ernest Jones (1819-69), poet, barrister and Chartist orator. He emerged, a celebrated martyr, with a pent-up need to use his rhetorical skills to explore and excoriate injustice.

Jones's own life-story, had it been depicted by Gaskell or Dickens, would seem implausibly melodramatic, and, incidentally, goes far to explain the frequent fictional portraits of agents provocateurs from a higher social class manipulating ignorant working people into rebellion. Born and educated in Hanoverian court circles in Germany, Jones arrived in England in 1838, married a Cumberland landowner's daughter and adopted the gentleman's profession of barrister, which seemed compatible with the aspiration of making a living as a poet and living in style in Kearnsey Abbey in Kent. By the mid-1840s he was bankrupt. The period he spent as a railway clerk, trying to address his debts, had notably different results from Branwell Brontë's shortlived experiment in the same role: Jones was converted to

the Chartist cause, joined the editorial team of the *Northern Star*, stood for Parliament and interested himself in pan-European republican movements where he encountered Marx and Engels. His prison sentence completed his radicalisation. Spurning a rich uncle's attempt to bribe him away from political activism, he devoted himself to furthering the Chartist cause in the pages of his papers, *Notes to the People* (1851-52) and its successor, the *People's Paper* (1852-58). The shaky finances on which they were based became apparent when Jones sued G. M. Reynolds, a rival radical newspaper proprietor, for defamation of character. Jones emerged with his reputation intact, but his business destroyed. He then moved north, remarried, revived his legal practice, pleading for radical causes and became a popular figure in the world of Manchester politics. His funeral attracted huge crowds.

The quarrel with Reynolds was as much ideological as personal. Jones, the editor tells us, was an idealist, bent on educating his audience and resisting the vulgarisation of popular culture, while Reynolds was happy to incorporate the sensation-

alism belonging to penny fiction in his radical publications. It might have been helpful to have included an example of Jones's poetry or non-fictional journalism as a demonstration of this distinction which is in danger of getting lost in the melodramatic rhetoric of these tales. It is in one sense unsurprising that *Woman's Wrongs*, the collective title Jones gave to the five stories reprinted here, should have focused upon women as the symbolic bearers of the 'the rankling wrongs--that fret, fester, that destroy', lurking, 'Down, down beneath the cold surface of society'. Women and the working classes were susceptible to being bracketed as two groups whose sufferings should be listened to precisely because, unattended and uneducated, their festering ills might erupt to destroy the social order. Jones's tales thus both overtly challenge while offering intrinsic support to the criticism long-leveled at Marxist analysis that, in concentrating upon class, it pays too little attention to gender. The women he portrays, of whatever class, lack subjectivities. Moreover, the subtext of more than one of these tales might be read as claiming that women's viperous jealousies are far more destructive than any other form of social oppression. Patriarchy's part in this is little analysed, other than by reducing the relations between the genders to the terms of sexual or financial tyranny.

The five stories depict women's fates in a social hierarchy extending from the wife of a bricklayer's labourer turned burglar, through the lives of working-class women such as needlewomen and milliners, the trials of a tradesman's daughter and finally in the lives of the pampered aristocracy. None of these tales, it is fair to say, would have survived on literary merit alone, since they abound in clichés of style, characterisation and plotting. However it is the way in which they both exhibit and sport with the prejudices of their time that serves to reveal the cultural faultlines of a hitherto upper and middle-class genre that Jones was seeking to democratise.

Jones's own class origins are only too apparent in many of the assumptions: the labourer's wife 'was his superior, having lived in service for many years' where, remote from 'oaths of rage and cries of drunkenness' some refinement had rubbed off on her (p. 5). Drink, being the curse of the working classes, drives them to vice, whereas young toffs, in later stories, can more easily shake off both the moral and physical effects of over-indulgence. Working-class women, ill-educated in 'literature, politics, and the arts', cannot hope for enduring relationships with men from a higher social class, though their efforts 'to soothe--to amuse' might 'deserve the worship of angels' (p. 60). Politically too the message is profoundly middle-class: the Introduction culminates, not as one might have anticipated in a call to legislative action, but in an appeal to individual reformation; 'such is the world you help to make--go! try to alter it, and BEGIN AT HOME.' (p. 1). Against these one might set Jones's self-conscious parodies of the life he was born to lead. Moustache and cane-twirling lawyers and self-centred literary dilettantes, comment upon the depraved tastes of the uneducated, without feeling driven to direct their energies to improving them. The most extended of these sketches of a would-be fine writer, finally betrayed into poverty and death when a plagiarising publisher steals the one tale that spoke to his own experience, raises the question as to how far these were private jokes. Haywood's Prefatory essay is disappointingly silent on such subjects as the mode of production: his decision to read Jones in relation to the subculture of 'didactic, socially-aware fiction and journalism written for the respectable working-class or lower middle-class reader' seems consonant with the literary models and vocabulary Jones deploys, but side-steps any serious discussion about how the price of his publications, for instance, might have indicated Jones's intended or actual audience. His acknowledgement that "The Girl With the Red Hands" was added as a fifth story when *Woman's Wrongs* was republished in 1855 in penny issue form is an ap-

parent exception, but he offers no argument to support his view that 'this inferior piece' was included by Jones 'probably against his better judgement' to cash in on a popular literary mode (p. xxxiv).

The place that religion enjoys within these tales would also have been worthy of some comment: 'Christ crucified' is alluded to approvingly at one point as 'a Man of the People', representing 'in himself, the history of Humanity' (p. 46) whilst elsewhere institutionalised religion is denounced as a social control mechanism to be deployed by the patriarchy over women and the working classes (p. 76).

It is useful to have these tales in accessible form, partly to give the lie to poetry being perceived as the dominant literary form for radical commentary and fiction as a vulgar populist genre essential to sales. The volume will chiefly be of use to graduate students, though undergraduates engaging in dissertations concerned with early Victorian literature representing the working classes and radical social issues would be well advised to consult it; a comparison of Jones and Gaskell's appropriation of the working class woman's voice would be a rewarding topic. However the introductory essay might require some unpacking for undergraduates. Such sentences as 'One of Jones's achievements in *Woman's Wrongs* is his use of the republican aesthetics of exposure and disclosure, tropes which are concretized in the signifying body' (p. xxi) are couched in unnecessarily oblique critical jargon. A higher standard of proof-reading might also have been anticipated in an edition of this nature.

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Citation: Elisabeth Jay. Review of Haywood, Ian, ed. *Chartist Fiction. Volume 2: Ernest Jones, Woman's Wrongs*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

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