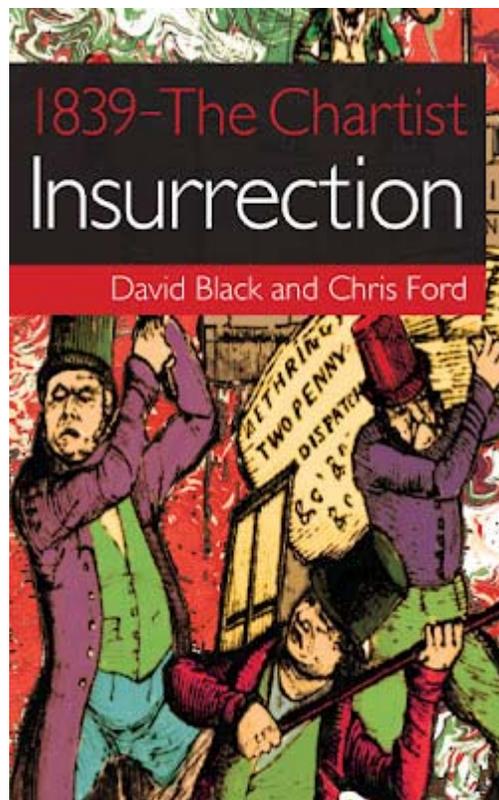


A review of Dave Black & Chris Ford, *1839: The Chartist Insurrection*, London: Unkant, 978-0-9568176-6-2, 268pp.

Sharon Borthwick, "The Chartist Insurrection," Association of Musical Marxists, June 26, 2012
<http://www.unkant.com/2012/06/sharon-borthwick-chartist-insurrection.html>

Tuesday, 26 June 2012

"Time was when every Englishman had a musket in his cottage, and along with it hung a fitch of bacon; now there was no fitch of bacon for there was no musket; let the musket be restored and the fitch of bacon would soon follow." George Julian Harney



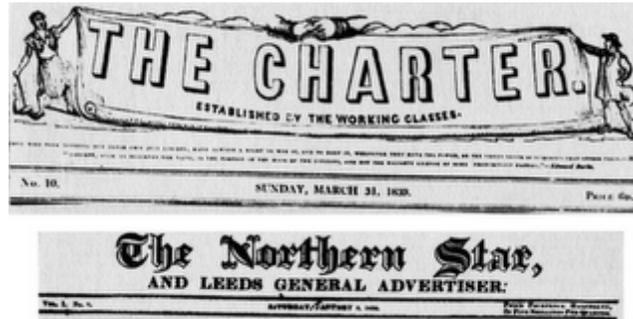
The Chartist's cause was not merely the insistence on universal suffrage (and sadly not even that as women were ultimately excluded from mention in documents such as, [Rules](#)

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[of The National Union of the Working Classes](#)). Yet in spite of that great lapse the Chartists documented great lists of demands in the name of justice and equality: the right to education, the right to freely assemble and express their views, the right to produce pamphlets and tracts to disseminate those views, the worker's right to "*the full enjoyment of the produce of his labours*", the right of those from the "*productive and useful classes of society*" to sit in the Commons, not owning property to no longer bar them from making legislation and overarching all these demands, the right to happiness. A list of demands we still adhere to as we face current attacks on our right to protest and parliament is sickeningly full to brimming with the propertied classes chucking everything at the workers, the unemployed, the sick, the old, the young. How sad it would have made the Chartist activist to witness our right to vote made risible as parliament acts out solely the demands of extreme Capitalism, claims of Red Toryism and Blue Labourism concocting a murky shade of shit that fools still swallow. And how happy would the Chartist be to see the lines of resistance. Would our time traveller be at an Occupy party now or glad they couldn't get there because the bus drivers are on strike?

But our 173 year old heroine would mostly be kicking herself. On seeing the weaponry our police states now have directed at the people she would plead for a swift return to 1839, when the Chartists having lost their fight by peaceable means have armed themselves with pikes, knives and caltrops (to bring down the cavalry), the iron workers even producing cannon and grenades in their factories. This was an exciting time. This was a chance, though violence doesn't come easily to the productive classes, wouldn't the Chartist return to say, arm every man, woman and child, you should see what the bastards have got levelled at us in the future. Dave Black and Chris Ford bring this time alive with this thoroughly researched book which includes many first hand accounts of meetings, battles and the colourful protagonists, many of who fully supported 'ulterior measures' in other words arming themselves, should parliament reject the petition for universal male suffrage which really they knew was a foregone conclusion. This is a book for the school curriculum – less Henry the VIII and his wives, more The Chartists and The Paris Commune!

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By 1832 with the Reform Act adding the middle classes to those qualified to vote, 700,000 men could vote in a population of 25 million. Property counted for everything, real contributors for nothing. In 1834 the poor law was passed, now there was no parish relief for the unemployed. The workhouse beckoned. But a communist message was spreading amongst the starving agricultural labourers, the sweated labourers in the factories, the coal miners of Wales... “Everything is being produced for the rich by the labour of the poor”. The powers that be are fully aware of the danger and fear that troops billeted in manufacturing towns may be “vulnerable to the arguments of the radicals”. In the North and the Midlands Workhouses are burned and poor law commissioners threatened. Co-operatives and trade unions are formed campaigning for the ten hour day but they are suppressed, the Tolpuddle martyrs transported. How could the people not rise, every move towards a fair and just world crushed? In South Wales, Dr William Price encourages action, “oppression, injustice and the grinding poverty which burdens our lives must be abolished for all time...It is far better that we should die fighting for freedom than live as slaves of greed and opulent wealth.” Muskets are fired into the air ceremoniously.



Julian Harney

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This is a period soaked both in romance and horror and our heroes are both romantic and practical. The young George Julian Harney is just 21 when he joins the National Union of the Working Classes. He has been schooled on *The Pilgrims Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Castle of Otranto* and the *Sorrows of Young Werther*. He sports a Jacobean red cap, which he likes to pass onto the heads of pretty young women who favour him with their singing binnies. He was a dogged agitator who travelled extensively to spread the Chartist message. He also worked hard for the Unstamped Fight, the fight against the tax on knowledge when there was a fourpenny stamp duty on every newspaper. While he was in prison for his efforts the fourpenny tax was abolished. This was the first battle the Chartists won, as it was many of the same people who produced and distributed the unstamped press who became part of the Chartist movement. Included in appendices here is George Julian Harney's 'The Tremendous Uprising', his own account of the time including his arduous December travel atop a coach to the North, "*The torture of cold feet was something indescribable. The traveller felt his legs were encased in ice, and his pedal sufferings gave him a deadly-lively appreciation, though not much comfort from the philosophy, of 'Locke on the Understanding'.*"

This book gives a full account of the meetings, the speeches, the kinds of arguments within the movement, those who are for arming, those against, those that want a general strike and those that fear that the people would starve if such a method was entertained. The momentum is all towards the final battles of 1839 when thousands are amassing in Wales and the North. Harney is finally furious with London as in the North strikes had begun, Manchester succeeding in closing 12 mills, the colliers of Northumberland downing tools. In Newport 6,000 men marched on Westgate but their leader has fled. Some have lost their lives and many are imprisoned. Dr William Price escapes to Paris where he hangs out with the poet Heinrich Heine. We get glimpses of other characters. We don't know much about him but that there was a £100 reward on his head, but we are glad that Dai, the tinker has escaped.

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John Taylor

Such adventures would not be complete without mention of the villains the Chartists were up against. There was Thomas Malthus, instigator of the poor law who Shelley called a eunuch and a tyrant and Marx described as principle enemy of the people, “*What Malthus saw as a problem of pressure of means of production was in fact pressure of means of production on population.*” Malthus declared pauperism as merely a product of population growth and advocated sexual abstinence, William Lovett rightly countering with, “*Surplus labour is at the mercy of surplus wealth.*” Then there was Andrew Ure and his *Philosophy of Manufacturing* (1835) where he describes the factory as “*a vast automaton, composed of various mechanical and intellectual organs, acting in uninterrupted concert for the production of a common object, all of them being subordinated to a self-regulated moving force.*” This charmer wanted the bosses saving money by substituting the labour of women and children for that of men and unskilled labourers in place of trained artisans. By the 1830s there was an horrendous sum of wasted labour, “*the cheapened workforce in cotton manufacturing ... turning out more products than the owners could sell.*” And from here, of course, the prices fall and the worker is assigned to the scrapheap. The ultimate enemy were the propertied classes. The couple of families who owned all the mines in South Wales, who extracted the workers meagre wages with their company stores charging 30% above market prices. The lives of the workers were short, if they made it to adulthood they were beset by typhus, scarlet fever or cholera due to their horrendous living conditions. 100 lives a month were lost in mining accidents.

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Lets cleanse ourselves of these vile excuses for humanity by giving the last words to the Chartists. There were the women very much involved in the movement who well realised that their exclusion from the bill was a grave mistake; *“We have been told that the field of politics is to be left to the men; this we deny; the nature of things renders it impossible and the conduct of those who give advise is at variance with the principles they assert.”*; and the words of the handsome and dashing Doctor John Taylor who dressed like a Byronic hero with his wide-brimmed hat and high boots: *“I would part with my sabre only with my life and when all else have forgotten me my own hand will write my epitaph upon a tyrant’s brow, in characters of blood with a pen of steel”*. If only he could make good his promise and carve out his message on that high brow of Cameron’s ugly pasty face.

Sharon Borthwick, June 2012