

Michael Laccohee Bush



THE FRIENDS AND FOLLOWING OF  
**RICHARD CARLILE**

*A Study of Infidel Republicanism  
in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain*



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of Richard Carlile

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# Introduction

Nowadays, Richard Carlile is largely forgotten; and, if recalled, he often suffers the humiliation of being confused with his namesake, the historian Thomas Carlyle. For the most part, he lacks commemoration. The attempt to erect a monument to his memory upon his death came to nothing; and since then little has been done to preserve his name. His shop, 62 Fleet Street, carries no plaque, and his grave in Kensal Green Cemetery lies unmarked.

Yet in the 1820s, revered and abhorred as a leading radical, he enjoyed similar fame and infamy to Henry Hunt, William Cobbett and Robert Owen. Like them he headed a popular movement, one, however, which historians have mostly ignored. Moreover, those taking notice of it tend to play down the importance of republicanism as Carlile conceived it by claiming that hostility to monarchy related not to the system itself but simply to the behaviour of reigning monarchs. Alternatively, they claim that Britain had its own peculiar brand of republicanism: one that tolerated the existence of monarchy on condition that its powers remained limited.<sup>1</sup> They therefore fail to appreciate the significance of Carlile's principled repudiation of monarchy. A similar muffling treatment has been applied to his principled rejection of religion, with historians inclined to stress that attacks upon the established church came not so much from the irreligious as the religious, the work predominantly of evangelicals, dissenters or radical christians.<sup>2</sup>

While serving a six-year prison sentence for blasphemy in the early 1820s, Richard Carlile attracted a considerable following: one that, although scattered throughout England and Scotland, was notably concentrated in and around Manchester, Leeds and London. Binding this movement together, and serving as its voice and forum, was the weekly periodical the *Republican* which Carlile edited from his cell in Dorchester Gaol and published from his Fleet Street shop. The *Republican* comprised not only editorials and articles written by

Carlile but also an extensive correspondence between him and his supporters, metropolitan and provincial. As a result, contained in the *Republican* is the creed to which his following subscribed. Republican and anti-Christian, it was largely Paineite in provenance. Since the contributions from supporters were frequently signed, addressed and dated declarations of belief, accompanied by lists of donors to the Carlile Fund, the *Republican* provides the material for a detailed study of this following, offering evidence of not only its convictions and their articulation but also its size, social background, geographical distribution, local leadership and communal organisation. After its termination in 1826, the *Republican* was followed by a succession of weekly periodicals (the *Lion*, the *Prompter*, the *Isis*, the *Gauntlet*), all the work of Carlile and serving the same purpose.

Thanks to this evidence, it is possible to identify in great detail a radical movement that fails to comply with the standard view held by historians of British radicalism for this time. Their version emphasises a constitutionalist approach to reform involving a restoration of ancient rights, respect for the existing mixed and balanced polity and an aversion to militant action.<sup>3</sup> True to Thomas Paine, Carlile's followers, in contrast, believed that reform should be determined not by historical precedent but by principles resting upon reason backed up by the ultimate threat of force. Carlile pursued a distinctly different programme of reform from the so-called Radical Reform party of Hunt, Cobbett and Cartwright, whose claim to be radical he dismissed as spurious. Whereas they deliberately tempered their opposition to the establishment by professing to accept key features of the old order – such as the birthright to rule, as embodied in hereditary monarchy and hereditary peerage, patriarchy, as expressed in the reservation of political rights to men, and the Christian religion as an instrument of state – as well as by emphasising that they were seeking, peacefully, to restore traditional liberties rather than to overthrow the existing system, Carlile adopted a much more root and branch approach. Apart from his acceptance of private property, the measures proposed by him were, for the time, radical in the extreme: not just a reformed house of commons but the abolition of monarchy, the house of lords and all honours; not just an electorate of adult males but one that included women; not just a parliament made answerable to the people through the principle of election but all offices of state as well; not just the reform of the church but the rejection of religion;



# Chapter 7

## Carlile at Peterloo

As the Mancunian shoemaker and printer, James Wheeler, put it in April 1821: Carlile was “the phoenix” sprung “from the ashes of Paine”, especially for his part in revealing to the public the power of Paine’s philosophy to bury superstition and bigotry “in the vortex of universal reason”, as well as to liberate “the English nation” from “the most despicable condition of slavery” into which it had fallen following the suppression of Paine’s works over twenty years before. Yet having made this point, Wheeler went on to associate the people’s high regard for Carlile with Peterloo: “the bloody day . . . when you honoured us with your presence”.<sup>141</sup>

Carlile presented himself as a figure of some prominence at the political meeting held in St Peter’s Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819.<sup>142</sup> His attendance came in response to an invitation from the Committee of the Manchester Male Reformers Association. It was conveyed in a letter from John Knight, a veteran reformer and dedicated christian, whom Carlile had first met in 1817 upon Knight’s release from prison: that is, after spending several months locked up without trial in a succession of southern gaols for participating in the March of the Blanketeers, a reform protest which had also met at St Peter’s Field.<sup>143</sup> Suggesting that he was none too familiar with Knight, Carlile sent his letter of acceptance to James Wroe, editor of the *Manchester Observer*, who had visited his Fleet Street shop in December 1818, taking from it, with Carlile’s approval, a large, scarlet flag surmounted by a cap of liberty for use at yet another meeting in St Peter’s Field, the one held on 18 January 1819, which, like the Peterloo meeting, centred upon an address delivered by Orator Hunt to a considerable crowd.<sup>144</sup> Made at Carlile’s expense – it cost him

£10 – the flag and cap were originally created to support Hunt’s unsuccessful parliamentary campaign of 1818 as radical candidate for the constituency of Westminster.<sup>145</sup> Carlile, moreover, had also contributed to its design, adding, on his own initiative, the motto ‘Hunt and Liberty’ to both the obverse of the flag and the border of the cap, whereas Hunt had simply wanted the inscription ‘Universal Suffrage’. Delivered and kept safe by Wroe, the flag, made of silk and striking in size and colour, with mottoes inscribed in gold on a red background, was displayed at both the January and August meetings on St Peter’s Field. Noting that its “remarkably long staff” was topped with the cap of liberty, a conservative Manchester daily newspaper described the flag in January 1819 as “that undoubted and sanguinary emblem of revolution”.<sup>146</sup> The flag’s colour, of course, had implications of spilt blood, even for the peaceable Hunt who, in a dramatic gesture at the Manchester January meeting, had declared that, if he ever deserted the struggle to recover the people’s political rights, “may that colour be my winding sheet”.<sup>147</sup>

Prior to attending the August meeting, Carlile was not unknown in the North-west. For instance, at a meeting on 14 June 1819 in Ashton, a vote of thanks was offered to Sherwin and Carlile; and, at a meeting of Stockport reformers on the same day, Carlile received “unqualified praise . . . for his courage in supporting the liberty of the press”.<sup>148</sup> But how well was he known in that region? He was not a first choice among those receiving individual invitations to the Manchester meeting in August, but was invited latterly, presumably to replace an invitee who had declined to attend.<sup>149</sup> That person, in all likelihood, was Sherwin who was much appreciated in the town both as the publisher of Paine’s political works and because, in the previous two years, his *Register* had reported frequently and supportively on Manchester matters, including the meeting held at St Peter’s Field the previous January.<sup>150</sup> The Mancunian reformers had invited Sherwin to that January meeting, an invitation he turned down. Their high regard for him, however, and the reasons for it, were reflected in the toasts made at a dinner held immediately after the January meeting, with one offered to “the immortal memory of Thomas Paine, the enlightened and honest advocate of the natural and political rights of man”, and its sequel to “W.T. Sherwin Esq. and may the liberty of the press be soon restored”.<sup>151</sup> After the toasts, the letters read out from invited but absent reformers included one from Sherwin, along with others from the genteel

- <sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 18.
- <sup>9</sup> This was implied in *A Scourge*, p. 19 and confirmed in a letter of 11 March 1833 to the Lord Mayor of London. See Carlile Papers, Huntington Library, microfilm reel I.
- <sup>10</sup> See Theophila Campbell, *The Battle of the Press* (1899), pp. 252-3; Joel Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-century Britain* (1983), p. 225.
- <sup>11</sup> To be found in the Carlile Papers, Huntington Library.
- <sup>12</sup> For the likeness to Hibbert, see Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, p. 239, n. 23.
- <sup>13</sup> Carlile to Turton, 22 June 1837 (Carlile Papers, reel I).
- <sup>14</sup> See Carlile to Turton, 3 June 1837; *ibid.*, 8 Dec. 1837 (both Carlile Papers, reel I).
- <sup>15</sup> Carlile to Turton, June 12 1837 (Carlile Papers, reel I).
- <sup>16</sup> Carlile to Turton, 17 July 1839 (Carlile Papers, reel I).
- <sup>17</sup> Carlile to Turton, 3 Aug. 1839 (Carlile Papers, reel III).
- <sup>18</sup> Carlile to Turton, 27 Jan. 1840 (Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>19</sup> Carlile to Turton, 13 June 1841; *ibid.*, 4 March 1842; *ibid.*, 12 July 1842 (all Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>20</sup> Carlile to Turton, 19 Aug. 1842 (Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>21</sup> See J.F.C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World* (1969), pp. 127-30. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, p. 234.
- <sup>22</sup> Campbell, *Battle of the Press*, p. 253.
- <sup>23</sup> Carlile to Turton, 1 November 1842 (Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>24</sup> Carlile to Turton, 1 Dec. 1842 (Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>25</sup> Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, pp. 256 and 263 n. 47.
- <sup>26</sup> *Rep.* I, p. 136.
- <sup>27</sup> *Rep.* II, pp. 369-72.
- <sup>28</sup> *Letters to Radical Reformers*, no. 5, p. 42.
- <sup>29</sup> *Rep.* II, p. 369.
- <sup>30</sup> See Campbell, *Battle of the Press*, p. 57.
- <sup>31</sup> Carlile to Turton, 5 May 1842; *ibid.*, 23 May 1842 (both Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>32</sup> Morrison to Carlile, 21 Nov. 1842 (Carlile Papers, reel III).
- <sup>33</sup> Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, pp. 218, 256.
- <sup>34</sup> *Gauntlet*, pp. 936, 953-4.
- <sup>35</sup> See Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, pp. 210-12. The offence was to show effigies of a bishop and a broker in the upstairs windows of his 62 Fleet Street shop. It was the final move in a feud with St Dunstan's Church over his refusal to pay its church rates. Rather like the 'Print of God', displayed in the downstairs

windows of 135 Fleet Street in late 1825, it drew crowds and led to angry demonstrations.

- <sup>36</sup> The *Phoenix* folded after 5 issues; the *Church*, after 8 issues; *Carlile's Political Register*, after 9 issues; the *Christian Warrior* after 4 issues. The most successful was *A Scourge*, but ran to only 16 issues.
- <sup>37</sup> It was in operation from October 1837 to spring 1838. See Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, p. 227. For Mrs Chichester's role, see Carlile to Turton, 22 Nov. 1837 (Carlile Papers, reel I).
- <sup>38</sup> Campbell, *Battle of the Press*, p. 195. He told Turton that he went there "to recruit my health" (Carlile to Turton, 19 Nov. 1835) having suffered "atmospherial injury in the lungs" that caused him great difficulty in mounting the stairs (*ibid.*, 7 May 1835 (both Carlile Papers, reel I)). The following June, after a regime of tea under the Yew tree, a bit of digging and hoeing, and country walks, he could declare: "I am in excellent health, new and ripe and ready for merriment". See Carlile to Turton, 2 June 1836 (reel I).
- <sup>39</sup> Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, p. 220.
- <sup>40</sup> See Carlile to Turton, 4 March, 1842 (Carlile Papers, reel II).
- <sup>41</sup> There were two seizures by the sheriff, one in 1819, the other in 1822. The purpose was to recoup the fine that Carlile was refusing to pay. The stock taken was valued by Carlile at £1,008. See Carlile Papers, reel III. Lists of items taken, in terms of numbers of sheets, are provided in *Rep.* VII, pp. 613-5. A further seizure occurred in 1834 when the neighbouring church of St Dunstan's in the West confiscated stock in reaction to his refusal to pay its church rates. See Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, p. 210. Then, between 1837 and 1842, the printer Cunningham and his trustees withheld a considerable amount of stock, the result of £500 worth placed in his hands by Carlile to secure the repayment of a debt of £160. It included a large number of all three parts of *Manual of Masonry*, one of the better sellers among Carlile's publications. See Carlile Papers, reel III.
- <sup>42</sup> Carlile to Turton, 10 Dec. 1835 (Carlile Papers, reel I).
- <sup>43</sup> See Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, pp. 221-37.
- <sup>44</sup> See *Prompter*, p. 909.
- <sup>45</sup> For Taylor's infatuation, see Taylor to Carlile, 12 Jan 1832 (Carlile Papers, reel III) and M.L. Bush, *What is Love? Richard Carlile's Philosophy of Sex* (1998), p. 130-1. For Sharples' affection for Taylor, see *Isis*, p. 101.
- <sup>46</sup> This was made evident in a letter from Carlile to Turton, 19 Sept. 1833 (Carlile Papers, reel I). It seems that both men were touring the north, having just been released from prison. Carlile makes the point that "for exciting Sheffield . . . I

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While serving a six-year prison sentence in the early 1820s, Richard Carlile, a former tinsmith and now a radical publisher, attracted a considerable following, mostly from men and women of the same working-class background. Although scattered throughout England and Scotland, this movement was concentrated in and around Manchester, Leeds, Edinburgh and London. Binding it together, identifying its members, and declaring its creed, was Carlile's weekly the *Republican*. Against monarchy and anti-christian, its beliefs were largely drawn from Thomas Paine. The movement was substantially active for well over a decade.

By insisting upon the abolition of monarchy and the house of lords, by offering women the right to vote, by rejecting christianity as an institution and a religion, and prepared to advocate revolutionary overthrow, Carlile pursued a distinctly different reform programme from that of Hunt, Cobbett and Cartwright. How this unusual radical movement originated, survived and eventually disintegrated is the subject of this book.

Formerly a research professor at Manchester Metropolitan University, its author has published a clutch of work on related subjects, including *Richard Carlile's Philosophy of Sex* (Verso Press, 1998) and *The Casualties of Peterloo* (Carnegie Press, 2005).

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