

Oldham Radicalism and the Origins of Popular Liberalism, 1830-52

Author(s): Michael Winstanley

Source: *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sep., 1993), pp. 619-643

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639781>

Accessed: 22/12/2008 08:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historical Journal*.

OLDHAM RADICALISM AND THE ORIGINS OF POPULAR LIBERALISM, 1830–52*

MICHAEL WINSTANLEY

Lancaster University

ABSTRACT. *The emphasis on class, industrial structure and workplace relations proffered by Foster and others as an explanation of the nature and development of popular politics in this period is rejected. Continuities in personnel, values, motivation, policies and strategies suggest that militant grass-roots liberalism of the 1850s, and the culture of self-improvement which pervaded it, were essentially continuations of a radical platform of the 1830s which was preserved, even enhanced, through the Chartist period. Radicals' emphasis on retrenchment, tax reform, democratic accountability and local self-government represented a commitment to a democratic, capitalist environment capable of sustaining material progress and promoting moral and spiritual self-improvement and individual responsibility. They sought, rather than rejected, cooperation with more moderate reformers, seeing no contradiction in combining support for Chartism with more limited campaigns to repeal the corn law or to reform local government. Radicals, however, were also divided amongst themselves. This was particularly evident in Oldham with Cobbettism drawing support from an extensive semi-rural hinterland and a more aggressive petit bourgeois artisan, nonconformist radicalism, associated with respectability and moral reform, based in the town itself. Cobbettism was progressively marginalized from the mid-1830s, however, drifting, for a variety of reasons, into the tory camp. For urban radicals, the liberalism of the 1850s represented a logical extension of their campaign, not a betrayal.*

I

John Foster's analysis of Oldham politics continues to feature prominently in studies of early/mid nineteenth-century working-class radicalism.¹ Even those historians who are sceptical about the revolutionary nature of the movement he described have continued to accept the broader premises on which his view was based: that the late 1840s witnessed a watershed in radical development consisting primarily of a mellowing of its demands, the collapse of broadly based, working-class support for Chartism, and the emergence of middle-class liberal leadership. His exposition of the 'liberalization' of the 1840s, therefore, has created most academic controversy.² Yet, as Stedman Jones has pointed

* I would like to thank Robert Sykes, Peter Taylor and Neville Kirk for constructive and critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper and the British Academy for initial funding for this research. ¹ J. Foster, *Class struggle and the industrial revolution* (London, 1974).

² The literature on this is succinctly discussed in N. Kirk, *The Growth of working-class reformism in mid-Victorian England* (Beckenham, 1985), pp. 1–31. On Lancashire, see especially, P. Joyce, *Work, society and politics: the culture of the factory in later Victorian England* (Brighton, 1980); on

out, the complex nature of Chartist ideology has been unduly neglected in preference for studies of the movement's social composition.³ This reservation can be extended to encompass many studies of popular politics of the 1830s in which the nature of the ideology and the importance of the political context, at both local and parliamentary levels, have been overshadowed by an emphasis on the relationships between industrial development, social formation and support for what is viewed as 'working-class' radicalism.⁴

Those who have studied Oldham itself, while not accepting Foster's arguments for a revolutionary consciousness, have largely accepted his claim that radicals here were exceptionally strong and, above all, united in the 1830s and early 1840s. Much effort has gone into seeking explanations for this, primarily by reference to the structure of the local textile industry. Gadian, for example, has suggested that radical success was derived from an alliance of class interests made possible by the small-scale nature of many firms. Sykes has disputed this, stressing the bitter class conflict which pervaded industrial disputes throughout the period and the fact that most workers were employed by larger firms. Calhoun has offered a populist explanation, untested empirically, which relates changing patterns of support to the size and viability of loosely defined 'communities'.⁵ All these historians have accepted the broader premise that there was a marked discontinuity in the nature of popular politics, both nationally and in Oldham, between the 1830s and 1850s, although none of them extended his analysis beyond the Chartist period.

This study offers a reappraisal of popular radicalism and its legacy. It disputes the accepted chronology of popular politics and argues that the emphasis on industrial structure and workplace relations, certainly in Oldham and possibly elsewhere, is inappropriate. Despite agreement on the need for fundamental fiscal reform, the appropriateness of parliamentary reform as a

Oldham, A. E. Musson, 'Class struggle and the labour aristocracy, 1830-60', and Foster's reply, 'Some comments on class struggle and the labour aristocracy', both in *Social History*, 1, 3 (1976), 335-66.

³ G. Stedman Jones, 'Class struggle and the industrial revolution', *New Left Review*, xc (1975), 35-69; 'The language of Chartism', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist experience* (London, 1982), pp. 3-58 and 'Rethinking Chartism' in *Languages of class: studies in English working-class history, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983). For responses, see N. Kirk, 'In defence of class: a critique of recent revisionist writing upon the nineteenth-century English working class', *International Review of Social History*, xxxii (1987), 2-47 and R. Gray's review of the 1983 volume in *Social History*, xi (1986), 368-73.

⁴ D. S. Gadian, 'Class consciousness in Oldham and other North-West industrial towns, 1830-1850', *Historical Journal*, xxi, 1 (1978), 161-72 and R. Sykes, 'Some aspects of working-class consciousness in Oldham, 1830-1842', *Historical Journal*, xxxiii, 1 (1980), 167-79.

⁵ Gadian, 'Class consciousness'; see also his 'Class formation and class action in north-west industrial towns, 1830-50' in R. J. Morris (ed.), *Class, power and social structure in British nineteenth-century towns* (Leicester, 1986), pp. 24-66 and 'A comparative study of popular movements in north-west industrial towns, 1830-1850' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976), chapters 3 and 4; Sykes, 'Some aspects', pp. 168-72; C. Calhoun, *The question of class struggle: social foundations of popular radicalism during the industrial revolution* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 24-30, 184-200.

vehicle for achieving this and the desire to check the centralizing tendencies of Westminster, in other respects radicals were far from being a distinct or united grouping throughout the 1830s. Not only were many willing and able to ally with middle-class moderates, they were, at the cutting edge, an unstable alliance of distinct factions. In Oldham this division was particularly evident with a populist Cobbettite group, whose support was strongest in Oldham's extensive semi-rural hinterland, ranged against an essentially *petit bourgeois* and artisan grouping concentrated largely in the urban centre itself. Not only did each group have distinctive sources of support, they were motivated by different, largely incompatible sets of values. Cobbettism looked back to the displaced mixed domestic economy of the small landholder and emphasized material expectations; urban radicalism was associated with militant nonconformity, respectability and moral reform. After the parliamentary by-election of 1835, their ideological disagreements were compounded by incompatible personal loyalties to John Morgan Cobbett and Feargus O'Connor. This detached Cobbettism from O'Connorite radicalism and ensured that Oldham Chartism was closely associated with nonconformist, *petit bourgeois* and artisan radicals who placed considerable emphasis on individual moral reform. These people went on to support W. J. Fox in the general election of 1847 and to fuel the militant grass-root liberalism of the 1850s. This progression represented a continuation, not a betrayal of their earlier radical beliefs and causes. What was strikingly different by the 1850s was the broadening urban base of support for liberalism and the marginalization of Cobbettism, not a diminution in radical commitment.

II

Popular radicalism of the 1830s should not be conflated with the bitter, often protracted and violent, industrial class conflict which characterized textiles, hatting and, to a lesser extent, coal mining in the Oldham area. This was concerned with specific grievances related to wages and conditions of employment; none of the strikes had broader political objectives. Many were *ad hoc* affairs limited to specific workplaces. Many were unsuccessful.⁶ During the general stoppage of April 1834, which followed a police raid on a union meeting and the shooting of an operative by a blackleg, there were calls, specifically from the working spinner, James Greaves, to extend the action until an eight-hour day had been achieved, but otherwise connections between local radical leaders and organized labour were tenuous and ambiguous.⁷ Only a few, notably Greaves and a hatter, James Mills, worked in the area's

⁶ Foster admits most labour activity in the 1830s was 'routine unionism', *Class struggle*, p. 51; Sykes, 'Some aspects', pp. 170-1 and for a full treatment of unionism and politics in the region see his 'Popular politics and trade unionism in south-east Lancashire, 1829-42' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1982), pp. 96-344.

⁷ R. Sykes, 'Trade unionism and class consciousness in the "revolutionary" period of General Unionism, 1829-34', in J. Rule (ed.), *British trade unionism, 1780-1850: the formative years* (London, 1988), pp. 188-91; Butterworth manuscripts (reports to the Manchester press), Oldham Local Studies Centre, 21 Apr. 1834.

major industries and both generally emphasized broader political solutions to economic problems. John Knight, the veteran campaigner, clearly sympathized with factory employees, but even he vigorously denied the suggestion that he was secretary to the spinners' union.⁸ Other radicals who got involved did so largely as independent negotiators, striving to bring about peaceful ends to disputes. As their stance during the prolonged spinners' strike of 1836–7 shows, they were not always sympathetic to the employees' cause.⁹ What they did actively defend, as their support for the Dorchester labourers, the union men arrested during the police raid in Oldham in 1834, and the Glasgow spinners three years later shows, was the *right* of workers to combine freely to better their conditions of work. This, however, should be seen primarily as part of the wider campaign against 'whig tyranny' and for the extension of civil, political and religious liberties. They did not venture to judge the individual merits of the disputes themselves, nor did they totally absolve workers from blame for their plight.¹⁰ The conflict between employer and worker was not central to their ideology. Their priorities lay elsewhere.

All radicals continually emphasized the need for fiscal reforms to achieve the conditions under which national and, therefore, individual prosperity could be guaranteed. Their critique portrayed people not as workers engaged in a struggle with capital, but as oppressed local ratepayers, national citizens and consumers, largely excluded from political decision-making but forced to pay 'excessive taxation' levied by unrepresentative, unaccountable, inefficient and oppressive authorities to finance unjustifiable, wasteful expenditure. It was this fiscal mismanagement which caused both the economic problems which led to low, irregular wages and poor conditions of work, as well as the high prices which consumers paid for basic commodities. Church rates, tithes, corn laws, 'taxes on knowledge' and a multitude of indirect taxes and excise duties levied on foodstuffs, basic commodities and raw materials were not only unjust, since they fell disproportionately on the poor, but were economically restrictive, damaging both international trade and reducing consumer purchasing power. Recognizing that reductions in, or abolition of, such taxes could only be permanently achieved by 'retrenchment' they attacked sinecures, pensions, the standing army, the fiscal privileges of the state church, overgrown bureaucracy and the interest burden on the National Debt, swollen by waging a 'Bourbon War' earlier in the century. These issues, above all else, were what they hoped would be addressed in the aftermath of the whig Reform Act of 1832. When action failed to materialize, they saw no option but to renew their campaign for further electoral reform believing that this, by making government more accountable to the people, would effect the necessary reductions in expenditure and taxation.

Oldham's M.P.s and radicals unanimously subscribed to this analysis. 'A

⁸ *Manchester Guardian (M.G.)*, 27 Oct. 1834.

⁹ Butterworth, 30 Dec. 1836; *Manchester and Salford Advertiser (M.S.A.)*, 7 Jan. 1837. A subsequent meeting calling for charitable relief for strikers was almost exclusively attended by spinners; Butterworth, 19 Jan. 1837.

¹⁰ Butterworth, 27 Mar. 1834, 2 Nov. 1837.

Parliament consisting of working men', declared John Fielden at the Kersal Moor demonstration of September 1838, echoing views he had expounded throughout the decade, 'would reduce the tax on excisable articles, would repeal the corn laws, and would institute a tax on property.' 'Excessive taxation,' he declared two years later was 'the chief cause of what was denominated Chartism'.¹¹ His parliamentary running partner in 1837 and 1841, Major General W. A. Johnson, expounded similar views:

The whole evil under which the country was labouring, and what caused the distress of the country, was over taxation; and without that taxation was reduced greatly, he was satisfied no great benefit could result to this country. The working classes of this country paid in taxes – and without knowing it – upon every article they consumed, a sum greatly beyond what they ought to pay. The poor paid, in proportion to their wages, one hundredfold more taxes than the rich men did, for taxation diminished as property increased.¹²

All Oldham's radical leaders publicly argued the same line throughout the period. 'Without the total, or a great reduction of the Debt and the taxes incurred to uphold it', explained James Holladay, a leading dissenting radical, in November 1831, 'reform is of no use – it must lead to this end', adding significantly, 'it is impossible to prosper as Adam Smith and others had demonstrated under a debt of millions and talk of discharging it without reform was absurd'. Even Feargus O'Connor pledged his support for 'free trade in everything' while campaigning in the town in 1835.¹³ This was the universally accepted radical solution to economic depression, the physical distress which it caused, and, in the eyes of self-improvers, the moral degeneracy, hopelessness, despair, heavy drinking and boorish escapism which poverty promoted.

Direct action to achieve reductions in the burden of taxation was possible locally. Employing the democratic processes of the vestry, radicals mustered sufficient popular support to elect churchwardens, constables and overseers sympathetic to economy. Far from exhibiting the 'unique liberality' claimed by Foster, Oldham's select vestry maintained one of the lowest per capita costs in the country.¹⁴ Accountability and cost effectiveness were also the main planks of the radical/liberal challenge to the tory-dominated police commission. The large number of new commissioners who joined in the aftermath of 1832 were confident that they could limit expenditure on sanitary reform, lighting, highways and market improvements and make the police

¹¹ Ibid. 21 July 1837, 31 Aug. 1840; *Champion*, 30 Sept. 1838; *Northern Star (N.S.)*, 29 Sept. 1838. ¹² Butterworth, 21-28 July 1837; quote from *M.S.A.*, 26 June 1841.

¹³ Butterworth, 7 Nov. 1831; June, Sept., Dec. 1832; 26 June 1835. Support for a large reduction in taxation was one of the pledges drawn up in June 1832 and asked of candidates at the election in December.

¹⁴ Oldham's administration was singled out for special praise, see *Royal commission on the poor laws* (Parl. Papers, 1834, xxviii), 921-3; Report from G. Henderson on the County Palatine of Lancaster, reprinted in *Manchester Herald*, 17 Apr. 1834; for the overseer's replies to Henderson's questions see P.P., 1834, xxxv, 71, 345; xxxvi, 71, 345, 619. Contrast with Foster's view, *Class struggle*, pp. 61-4.

more effective in promoting good order.¹⁵ Legislation which threatened to undermine this local accountability and economy, such as the Rural Constabulary Act of 1839 and the Poor Law Amendment Act, was vigorously opposed as unwarranted infringement of the democratic rights of local ratepayers to manage their own affairs economically.¹⁶

As in other towns during this period, however, these attacks on unrepresentative, largely tory local administrations and the subsequent championing of local autonomy were neither exclusively radical nor primarily working-class. Moderate local liberal employers and tradesmen were also involved as chairmen, elected parish officers and members of police commission committees. Responsibility for delaying the introduction of a new county police force into Oldham in 1841 lay not with popular radical campaigners but with the new, locally nominated, liberal J.P.s appointed after 1839.¹⁷ Local concerns, especially the desire to ensure Oldham's inclusion as a parliamentary borough, also account for agreement between reformers of all shades of opinion during the Reform Bill crisis of 1830–2.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, populist radical leaders, recognizing that their major successes were dependent on co-operation with middle-class employers, continually stressed the desirability of extending this, impressing upon their audiences that they should not alienate potential allies by adopting violent tactics. Campaigns which sought popular support, therefore, were always peaceful and constitutional, resorting to mass lobbying, petitioning and the force of argument to support them.

Despite the assumption that democracy was a prerequisite for national reforms, radical campaigns also revealed the persistence of a belief that piecemeal reform, leading to the protection or extension of civil liberties and the reduction of taxation, might be achieved without it. If this were not the case, there would have been little point in campaigning for the removal of restrictions on dissenters, the abolition of slavery in the colonies, the ending of fiscal and political privileges of the established church, factory reform and the repeal of the Poor Law Amendment Act. Significantly, when compromises were offered, as in 1832 or over factory hours, they were not rejected, but accepted as first instalments and welcomed as evidence that sustained pressure might achieve a gradual realization of broader aims. While never abandoning the call for wholesale electoral reform as a feasible means of achieving their ends, therefore, they were, in the words O'Connor later employed in a very

¹⁵ Webbs' Local Government Manuscript Collection, CLIX, 19, 'Lancashire', London School of Economics; for stagnation in spending in the early/mid 1830s see Oldham Police Commission Financial Reports, 1828–50, Oldham Local Studies Centre, PCO 2/1.

¹⁶ The interests and rights of ratepayers always featured more prominently in lists of resolutions passed at public meetings, see for example, Butterworth, 26 Jan., 10 Feb., 27 Mar., 25 Dec. 1837. Hostility to the rural police was not exclusively radical: *ibid.* 2 Jan. 1840.

¹⁷ Elijah Hibbert, April 1839, Abraham Clegg & Jonathan Mellor, June 1841: Butterworth manuscripts.

¹⁸ Butterworth, Feb.–July 1831. Disagreements over tactics and the extent of reform needed and the choice of candidates subsequently led to divisions, 14 Nov. 1831, June 1832.

different context, 'instalment men',¹⁹ adopting a pragmatic approach to strategy and a willingness to ally with more moderate liberals at local level.

As the above implies, however, reformers and radicals were ranged along a political continuum rather than representing mutually incompatible viewpoints. The meticulous vocabulary employed by the diarist and press correspondent, Edwin Butterworth, makes this clear: 'Liberals of all grades', 'Radicals, Whigs and Moderates', 'Radicals and Chartists', 'Cobbettites', 'moderate Radicals or Reformers' and 'Ultra-Radicals', associated variously with Hunt, Hetherington and O'Connor.²⁰ What united them was essentially opposition to local tory control and varying degrees of dissatisfaction with whig legislation. Beyond this, however, there was scope for dissension. Despite the fact that both William Cobbett and John Fielden supported retrenchment and tax reform, their overwhelming electoral victory in the borough's first parliamentary election in December 1832 should not be taken to imply universal approbation of all their policies. As Sykes has shown, the margin of their victory was largely a reflection of the weakness of the other candidates.²¹ There was also considerable, but initially muted, dissatisfaction with Cobbett's candidature from within the radical coalition itself, reflecting fundamentally different underlying values, motivations and priorities of its components. The 1830s were marked, not by radical unity, but by discord with two main factions dominating political discourse and activity. Although both sought popular backing for their policies, it would be wrong to view either of them as essentially working-class in their leadership or social composition and neither subscribed to the anti-capitalist ideology which Foster identifies with the area.

One group was particularly associated with the personalities and causes of the Cobbett family and, through this, with the Cobbetts' close friend and later relative, John Fielden. Alex Taylor, a grocer and provision dealer, was the most active of these locally, supported by William Fitton, a self-styled surgeon from Royton, James Mills an operative, John Halliwell, a shopkeeper and small master cotton spinner, and Joshua Milne and William Taylor, large manufacturers from Crompton who were friendly with Fielden. Butterworth increasingly referred to these men as 'moderates' to distinguish them from those whose dissatisfaction with Cobbett led them to break away in 1834 and, in conjunction with loyal supporters of Hunt, to seek a candidate more committed to wide-ranging political, and in particular, religious reform on which Cobbett was decidedly lukewarm.

Cobbettites were strongest in the outlying rural parts of the sprawling Oldham township and in the neighbouring townships of Royton, Chadderton and, especially, Crompton which had been included in the new parliamentary borough despite the recommendations of the boundary commissioners. While

¹⁹ *N.S.*, 15 May 1841.

²⁰ Edwin Butterworth was the only resident press correspondent in the town. He supplied reports for all of the Manchester newspapers in this period, see M. Winstanley, 'News from Oldham: Edwin Butterworth and the Manchester press, 1829-1848', *Manchester Region History Review*, iv, 1 (Spring, 1990), 3-10. The manuscript accounts were often fuller than the press reports. ²¹ Sykes, 'Some aspects', pp. 174-8; Butterworth, July 1832, 12 Dec. 1832.

industrial growth was centred in Oldham itself, and to a lesser extent the settlements of Greenacres Moor and Waterhead Mill to the east, these out-townships were stagnating as domestic outwork declined. Not surprisingly poll book analysis shows that Cobbett's recourse to rural imagery, his condemnation of urban life and his public association with the virtues of cottage economy and domestic production appealed most strongly to these communities whose viability had been affected by the concentration of industry into factories and neighbouring Oldham.²² Fielden, the champion of the distressed handloom weavers, critic of the factory system and advocate of its reform also enjoyed staunch support in these areas as well as from first-generation, but largely unenfranchised factory workers.

William Cobbett's campaign speeches dwelt on the physical comforts which would ensue from political reform. 'The reform you want', he told an audience in Royton in September 1832, 'is to make you better off, to mend your wages, to improve your masters, to give you good clothing instead of rags and to send you beer and meat instead of miserable potatoes.' While he supported the eventual abolition of all 'taxes on necessities', he called for the immediate lifting of duties on hops and malt because they raised the cost of beer. All this, he insisted, was more significant than abstract talk of rights: 'The first thing to do is not to ramble on about civil and religious liberty but to stop robbers from taking our dinners'.²³ His public language was redolent with rural imagery. Both he and Fielden expressed considerable concern about the distress which characterized agriculture in the 1830s, Fielden going so far as to stress that the repeal of the corn laws should be conditional upon aid being given to farmers.²⁴ Alex Taylor, Fielden's campaign manager, welcomed Johnson's election as his running partner in 1837 because he was a 'big farmer'. Johnson himself considered his election had restored the Cobbettite tradition of electing a 'representative of the interests of agricultural labour'.²⁵ The emphasis which these candidates, and Cobbett in particular, placed upon the repeal of the malt tax appealed not just to the farming community where home-brewing was still common, but to the substantial body of electors involved in Oldham's extensive and expanding drink trade and their largely unenfranchised customers. Cobbettites like James Mills championed the beer sellers' cause, arguing that 'charges against beershops came from men of property' who own pubs in the town. Another, John Hague, dared to engage the temperance society in debate, arguing for 'strong ale as productive of strength'.²⁶

²² For the best description of these townships' fortunes see M. A. Smith, 'Religion in industrial society: the case of Oldham and Saddleworth, 1780-1865' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1987), ch. 1. J. M. Cobbett's share of the vote in 1835 in the urbanized Oldham Below Town was only 18%; in the largely rural Oldham Above Town, 55%; Chadderton 49%; Crompton 58%; Royton 79%. The boundary commissioners recommended that the townships be excluded from the urban borough (Parl. Papers, 1831-2, xxxix), pp. 68-70. The boundaries were only extended after petitions from the out-townships, Butterworth, 10 June 1831.

²³ Butterworth, 15 Sept., 10 Nov. 1832. ²⁴ *Ibid.* 15 Sept., 11 Dec. 1832; 3 Jan. 1840.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 28 July 1837.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 18 July 1833; 30 Jan. 1835.

Another group of radicals, however, always uneasy with Cobbett's candidature, broke with him in 1834 and, linking with the Huntites, sought a candidate more committed to wide-ranging political and religious reform. Unlike the Cobbettites, their leaders were all nonconformists: James Holladay, a millwright and small, but expanding master cotton spinner; William Knott, a Wesleyan hat manufacturer and dealer; Jesse Ainsworth, an eccentric Quaker landowner, colliery proprietor and millowner; and a larger number of shopkeepers and craftsmen, especially shoemakers, several of them local lay preachers.²⁷ These men were the most visible champions of a wider movement, originating in Oldham's urban core and centred on the chapel and the temperance society, which was dedicated, not just to radical political reform, but to creating an environment conducive to moral improvement through the promotion of rational recreations and pursuits. It was this group which wrested the radical initiative from the Cobbettites in the years after 1832 as Oldham was enveloped in the wave of nonconformist agitation and concern with moral reform which swept the country. The early 1830s saw a massive expansion in the number of Sunday Schools and chapels in the town.²⁸ This was coupled with vigorous political campaigns for religious and political freedoms and a crusade against public immorality and drinking launched by the Oldham Temperance Society and the nonconformist police commissioners who sought to use their newly won control of town government to implement stricter police supervision of beerhouses, pubs and public places.²⁹

Dissenting radicals' confidence was boosted by a successful challenge to the church rates levied by the unelected, unaccountable trustees responsible for the rebuilding of St Mary's church, the cost of which had escalated dramatically since original estimates had been approved.³⁰ At a well-attended public meeting in February 1834 they memorialized their M.P.s on their religious grievances. By April an Anti-State Church Association had been formed which stressed the indissoluble link between political and religious freedom and called for the abolition of tithes, church rates and the right of bishops to sit in the house of lords.³¹ The debate and indignation which accompanied the expulsion from the Wesleyan movement of lay preachers, like William Knott, who supported J. R. Stephens's stance on disestablishment echoed the radical political campaigns against arbitrary aristocratic government of the time.³² Apart from Wesleyans, nonconformist ministers often

²⁷ *Ibid.* 22 Dec. 1834.

²⁸ C. E. Ward, 'Education as social control: Sunday schools in Oldham, 1780-1850' (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Lancaster, 1975), pp. 16-18.

²⁹ Butterworth, Oct. 1833-1836 *passim*. For policing generally see M. Winstanley, "'Preventive policing" in Oldham, 1826-56', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXXXVI (1990), 16-35.

³⁰ Butterworth, Feb. 1834, for detailed background to the opposition to church rates. Vestry elections were particularly hard fought between April 1833, when the Cobbettite John Halliwell was elected as people's churchwarden, and April 1835 when dissenters successfully voted through their own list.

³¹ *M.S.A.*, 15 Feb., 5 Apr. 1834; Butterworth, 26 Mar., 1 Apr., June 1834.

³² *M.S.A.*, 24 May 1834.

spoke in favour of the extension of political, civil and religious rights. While they sometimes refused Oastler and Cobbett access to their premises, chapel trustees generally made them available for political meetings and mutually improving societies.³³ Religious fervour and scriptural allusions imbued radical political campaigning with a crusading spirit, many speakers drawing on biblical justifications to support their condemnation of usurers and unjust taxation. Not surprisingly, they fiercely criticized Carlile when he expounded his essentially atheist views at public meetings in the town.³⁴ Far from detracting from each other's causes, as Foster and others have argued, militant nonconformity and political radicalism enjoyed a symbiotic relationship.

The foundation of the Oldham Temperance Society in September 1833 is further evidence both of this upsurge of concern with mental, moral and spiritual regeneration and its connection with radical politics. This teetotal society had no links with an earlier body promoted by the Anglican clergy which had advocated moderation. Dominated by the self-employed and the workers, it was never a vehicle of middle-class control as Foster suggests although both it, and the short-lived Eclectic Temperance Society founded by Jesse Ainsworth for his mining workers, welcomed members regardless of background.³⁵ Weekly meetings and debates regularly attracted audiences of 200–300 with considerably more attending advertised events. It boasted more paid-up members than any political organization in the town with over 700 abstainers by 1836 and 1550 by 1841, a figure well in excess of that enjoyed by the National Charter Association at its peak.³⁶ Like societies elsewhere, it provided mutual reassurance and a supporting counter-culture for self-improvers in a town renowned for its heavy drinking by promoting tea parties, feasts with recitations, plays, dancing, singing, processions and outings as alternative attractions to the traditional festivities associated with the Wakes, bonfire night and the Christmas season.³⁷ A temperance sick and burial club was formed as early as June 1834; by the end of the decade provision of this 'rational recreation' as Butterworth, a lifelong teetotaler, proudly dubbed it, had extended to temperance Sunday Schools, a reading room, band and youth section.³⁸

Although the society was officially politically neutral, many of its prominent members were prominent radicals. The society's founding father, John Nield, a hatter, had been involved in the Oldham Political Union two years earlier and was still a 'thorough-going Radical' twenty years later. Benjamin

³³ Butterworth, 4 Jan. 1832, 14 Mar. 1835; *M.S.A. & M.G.*, 24, 31 May 1834.

³⁴ See for example, Butterworth, 4 Feb. 1833 (Holladay); *Champion* 30 Sept. 1838 (Fielden on Nehemiah). On Carlile's visits, Butterworth, Oct. 1833, Oct./Nov. 1836.

³⁵ Butterworth, July 1832; 14 Aug., 17, 30 Oct. 1833. The aims and social composition of society were discussed in *M.S.A.*, 19 Aug. 1848. The nature and timing of Oldham's development reflected national trends, see B. H. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians* (London, 1971), pp. 107–47; L. Shiman, *The crusade against drink in Victorian England* (London, 1988), pp. 9–42.

³⁶ Butterworth, 21 Apr., 1 Sept. 1835; 9 Feb. 1836; 2 Jan., 21 Apr. 1837; July 1839; 9, 10, 30 Nov. 1840. For Eclectic Society see, 17 Oct. 1833; 15 June 1839.

³⁷ Butterworth, 5 Sept. 1833; 2 Sept. 1834; 8 Aug. 1836; 7 Jan. 1839; 4 Sept. 1841.

³⁸ *M.S.A.*, 14 June 1834; Butterworth, 1 Apr. 1839; 8–16 Nov. 1840; 23 Jan. 1841.

Wolstencraft and Abraham Crompton, the latter pledging the Oldham society's support for the United Kingdom Alliance in 1854, were also lifelong radicals.³⁹ Other radicals included Henry Stepney, a grocer, auctioneer and Primitive Methodist preacher, the barber, James Wild, A. F. Taylor of Royton and Thomas Haslam, schoolmaster of the Temperance Society's schoolroom at Lower Moor, who spoke publicly in support of Fielden and Johnson in 1838.⁴⁰ Thomas Micklethwaite, a regular participant in debates with advocates of moderate drinking, was agent for the *Northern Star* in Shaw; James Bardsley was active both in the agitation for the reform bill and in Chartism.⁴¹ Ainsworth and an attorney, Mr Hawkshead, promoters of the short-lived Eclectic Society, also boasted radical credentials, Ainsworth accompanying O'Connor on his first visit to the town in 1835 and taking an active interest in both Chartism and the Land Plan.⁴² Campaigns for moral, religious and political reform were far from being mutually exclusive but enjoyed overlapping memberships.

The values of these radicals associated with moral and religious reform, however, were very different from those of the Cobbettites. From its inception the temperance society was critical of the 'general conduct and inconsistency' of those radicals who partook of alcohol. This dichotomy of approach to questions of personal morality was clearly expressed by Jesse Ainsworth in October 1833:

He advised them not to talk of their Cobbett or their Fielden or their Radical reform until they had Radically Reformed themselves... It was an old and a true saying that Reform began at home, or ought to do so.⁴³

The debates which accompanied the campaign for factory reform in 1832-3 reveal fundamentally different conceptions of its purpose. Initially this was an operative spinners' movement which attracted the support of individual radicals, most notably John Knight. It was only in February 1833 that the Oldham Political Union took up William Knott's suggestion that a public meeting be called.⁴⁴ The views expressed at this, as at other meetings, were far from uniform. John Knight harked back to a halcyon age of domestic industry before the factory. He, like Alex Taylor and other Cobbettites, apparently confident that foreign competition was not a serious threat, stressed material benefits and argued vigorously for an interventionist approach by central government, maintaining that shorter hours would not lower wages since textile prices would rise to compensate for the lower production. The dissenters, however, embraced factory reform primarily because it would

³⁹ Butterworth, 7 Nov. 1831; 10 Oct. 1833; 13 Mar. 1835. *Manchester Examiner (M.E.)*, 31 July 1852; *Oldham Chronicle (O.C.)*, 23 Sept. 1854.

⁴⁰ Butterworth, 26 Feb., 4 Mar. 1837; 11 Sept. 1838; 1 Apr. 1839. *M.S.A.*, 25 Apr. 1840, 30 Sept., 16 Dec. 1843, 30 Mar. 1844.

⁴¹ Butterworth, 9 Feb. 1831; 23 Dec. 1834; 21 Apr. 1835; 9 Feb., 12 Apr. 1836; 30 Nov. 1840; 1 Jan. 1841. *N.S.*, 9 Feb. 1839.

⁴² Butterworth, Mar. 1831; May, Sept., Oct., 1832; 3 July 1835. *M.G.*, 4 July 1835; *N.S.*, 3 July 1847; *O.C.*, 28 Oct. 1854, 9 Jan. 1855. ⁴³ Butterworth, 27 Sept., 17 Oct., 1833.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Jan., Oct. 1832; 28 Feb. 1833.

extend the time during which workers would be free to seek moral and intellectual enlightenment and to appreciate the futility of indulging in the rough, pub-based culture which dominated the town and which was, in itself, an obstacle to the realization of true political power and spiritual redemption. William Knott, therefore, could ostensibly offer support to the movement while openly rebuking those involved in it:

As machinery had widened its scope and operations, moral improvement had gradually declined within a smaller sphere... Men talked of giving instruction to factory hands in their present situation, but was it likely that they could possess any inclination for improvement when they worked such a number of hours? The factory operative has no time for moral instruction under the present state of things and, of course, he is wanting in behaviour, conduct and virtue... The victims of this horrible system were too debased, too blunted, too unhealthy and too ignorant to hearken unto religion.⁴⁵

His views were echoed by all the other dissenting radicals who spoke on the issue, both then and throughout the 1830s and 1840s. The chief benefits of factory reform would be an increase in 'sobriety and intelligence' and a check to the improvident 'early marriages contracted by factory hands'.⁴⁶ They tended, however, to view the issue as of secondary importance, offering at best the prospect of minor gains, since the chief cause of distress, of which long hours were but a symptom, lay in the fiscal oppression and mismanagement of central government. Knott's insistence that, 'It was taxation which was the bane of everything and the ruin of industry', was expanded by Holladay:

Until the accursed funding system was destroyed, the working man would never be properly paid for his labour... This bill might be passed but we should still be pressed down to earth by taxes... Whenever a state was overburdened with debt, there would be poverty and misery, and all the ten hours' bills would be worthless till the people were much better paid and then the long hours in factories would be rendered unnecessary.⁴⁷

In view of the contrasting backgrounds and standpoints of the major radical groupings in the town, it is not surprising that Cobbett's candidature was far from uncomplicated. Nonconformists' reservations about his views on education and their religious grievances surfaced even before his election. Whilst offering his general support, Holladay observed that Cobbett was 'ignorant of theological knowledge', although he excused 'what he had wrote against particular sects' as being written in the 'heat and imprudence of his passionate moments'.⁴⁸ Their anxiety was shared by a small group of Huntites in the town. When Hunt visited Oldham a week after the election, his exclusion from the celebrations 'already caused a split among the party'. By the autumn of the following year, Butterworth was reporting that open dissatisfaction with Cobbett's conduct was now widespread. In November he

⁴⁵ Ibid. 12 Mar. 1833.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 14 Mar. 1835; 12 February 1837; For Sutcliffe's (the speaker's) radical credentials, see 18 Feb. 1836, *Champion*, 26 Feb. 1837.

⁴⁷ Butterworth, 12 Mar. 1833.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Nov. 1832.

was questioned closely on his parliamentary record, about which he was characteristically vague and arrogant. Hunt's next visit was accompanied by Cobbett's effigy carried upside down through the town. In early February 1834 Cobbett judiciously pleaded pressure of family commitments to excuse his failure to accompany Fielden on his visit to the constituency. At a well-attended public meeting later that month, dissenters memorialized the M.P.s on their grievances and received an uncompromisingly hostile reply from Cobbett.⁴⁹ When, in March 1834, he openly refused to support the nonconformists' grievances, dissenters deserted his camp to a man.⁵⁰ By the end of the year they were actively canvassing for an alternative candidate and trading insults with Cobbettites who infiltrated their meetings. With both factions resorting to 'terms of abuse and vulgar slang not worthy of the cockpit', there was, observed Butterworth ruefully at Christmas 1834, an 'extreme division' in the radical ranks.⁵¹

An escalation of the struggle was only averted because the snap general election of January 1835 left insufficient time to mount a rival challenge to Cobbett. Over the next few months, however, the dissenters were strengthened by the increasingly open support of those who supported Hunt's cause.⁵² When Fielden subsequently insisted that John Morgan Cobbett must be his running partner in the by-election caused by William's death he precipitated a major crisis. As well as criticism that this was 'hereditary succession', there was dissatisfaction with J. M. Cobbett's equivocal support for radical measures and his insistence that 'he was not a man to be literally drowned in pledges'.⁵³ When Feargus O'Connor arrived in the town to challenge Cobbett, Cobbettites viewed him as a traitor, Fielden insisting that he had sent him to Oldham as his envoy to support, not challenge, Cobbett, who was making arrangements for his father's funeral.⁵⁴ O'Connor's unqualified acceptance of all the radicals' demands won over not just all the dissenters but also John Knight and James Greaves – individuals who had been attached firmly to neither faction and whose initial instinct had been to resist splitting the radical vote – and a considerable number of non-electors, especially among the artisan trades.⁵⁵ When he polled just enough votes before retiring to allow the local Tory candidate, J. F. Lees, to claim victory over Cobbett by a small margin, O'Connor earned the eternal damnation of the Cobbettites.⁵⁶

An uneasy truce on the issue of parliamentary representation was finally patched up in December 1836 on the understanding that J. M. Cobbett would never again be invited to stand as a candidate. Johnson's pledges on religious

⁴⁹ *M.S.A.*, 15 Feb., 29 Mar. 1834; Butterworth, 22 Feb. 1834.

⁵⁰ Butterworth, 20 Dec. 1832; Sept., Nov. 1833; 25 Mar. 1834.

⁵¹ Butterworth, 22, 24, 26, 29 Dec. 1834.

⁵² *Ibid.* 11 Feb. 1835.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 26 June–8 July 1835; *M.G.*, 27 June, 4, 11 July 1835.

⁵⁴ For Fielden's perspective on this see S. A. Weaver, *John Fielden and the politics of popular radicalism, 1832–1847* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 132–5.

⁵⁵ Butterworth, 6 July, 24 Aug., 25 Dec. 1835.

⁵⁶ Oldham Local Studies Centre, Poll book, 1835. O'Connor polled 34 votes; Lees' majority was 13.

issues the following year were sufficient to retain the electoral support of the dissenters. However, despite this, and co-operation in the fight against the introduction of the New Poor Law and during the initial stages of Chartism, the division remained. O'Connor's supporters no longer attended the annual dinners to commemorate Cobbett's birthday. Cobbettites distanced themselves from any of O'Connor's initiatives or visits.⁵⁷ Not only did the two major groups have different priorities and motivations, their respective loyalties to national figures who were to become uncompromising rivals ensured that this split would endure and that it would dictate the pattern of popular politics during Chartism and the decade which followed it.

III

Chartism in Oldham was characterized by a continuation rather than a displacement of this pattern of radical activity. Its methods were essentially constitutional and non-violent. Many of its supporters did not rule out the acceptance of gradual piecemeal reforms, or open alliances with their advocates. Although a class-based analysis of workers' distress was briefly advanced by a minority in the movement, it did not displace the emphasis on government's fiscal mismanagement which had dominated previous decades. Far from uniting radicals, however, O'Connorite Chartism reinforced existing divisions in Oldham since it rapidly became inextricably associated with the radical dissenters who advocated political reform in tandem with moral and spiritual rejuvenation.

Initially the factions appeared to be united. At the first Kersal Moor meeting in September 1838, chaired by John Fielden, both dissenters and Cobbettites were represented on the platform, and Holladay and Fitton repeated their shared belief that taxation was the root cause of the country's problems.⁵⁸ At a local meeting in November it was the Cobbettites who appeared to make most of the running, dominating the speeches and electing James Mills to the National Convention.⁵⁹ Butterworth first used the word 'Chartists' to describe those at a meeting chaired by Alex Taylor in February 1839.⁶⁰ As O'Connor's influence increased, however, the legacy of 1835 determined which radical groups remained loyal to the movement. By Whitsun, after Fielden and the *Champion* had expressed the view that town meetings and local petitions were preferable to mass demonstrations and a national petition, Oldham Cobbettites mounted a rival meeting to O'Connor's Kersal Moor meeting, protesting, however, that the clash was due to confusion over the latter's date.⁶¹ By this time J. M. Cobbett had already resigned from the National Convention and the trading of insults between O'Connor's *Northern Star* and the Cobbetts' *Champion* had begun. James Mills resigned from

⁵⁷ Butterworth, Jan., 15 Aug., Dec. 1836; 4 Mar. 1837.

⁵⁸ *M.S.A.*, 29 Sept. 1838; *Champion*, 30 Sept. 1838.

⁵⁹ Butterworth, 8 Nov. 1838; *M.S.A.*, 10 Nov. 1838; *Champion*, 18 Nov. 1838.

⁶⁰ Butterworth, 25 Feb. 1839.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 25 May 1839; *N.S.*, 1 June 1839; *Champion*, 2 June 1839.

the Convention in September.⁶² In November, O'Connor spoke to what was then an exclusively O'Connorite Oldham Political Association which then obligingly passed a resolution condemning the *Champion*.⁶³ Although Cobbettites maintained a significant presence in local politics and other reform movements, especially factory reform, into the 1840s, neither the *Northern Star* nor the Manchester press make any subsequent reference to their involvement in Oldham Chartism.

Radical dissenters who had supported O'Connor in 1835 dominated the movement from mid-1839. Knott gave generously, despite apparent financial difficulties, to John Frost's defence fund and continued to address public meetings.⁶⁴ Holladay supported Chartist delegates to the Birmingham conference called by the Complete Suffrage Union and appeared as a defence witness and character referee for O'Connor during his trial at Lancaster Assizes in March 1843.⁶⁵ He and Ainsworth invariably accompanied O'Connor on his public visits to Oldham, chairing meetings and providing hospitality, and they were instrumental in promoting the Working Men's Hall, the foundation stone of which was laid by O'Connor in March 1844 and opened by him a year later.⁶⁶ Both subsequently showed a particular interest in the Land Plan, visiting settlements in Worcestershire in 1847.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, when Holladay considered standing for parliament in 1847, the *Northern Star* hailed him as a 'Chartist candidate'.⁶⁸

As in the 1830s they were joined by self-improvers of lower social status who carried much of the burden of routine administration. Typical of such men were Richard Haslam (operative reedmaker), Leonard Haslop (hatter and proprietor of a temperance coffee house), 'schoolmasters' William Hamer and J. L. Quarmby, and Samuel Yardley, a cordwainer/shoemaker. All except Quarmby represented the Oldham branch of the National Charter Association at the South Lancashire delegate meetings in Manchester, sometimes taking the chair. Haslop's coffee house was also used for local delegate meetings.⁶⁹ Haslop was treasurer of the branch, Hamer its secretary and subsequently treasurer of the local Chartist Co-operative Land Society.⁷⁰ Yardley was among those who obtained a licence for the Chartist meeting rooms in 1840. Haslam was chairman of the Working Men's Hall committee and helped organize annual dinners in memory of Henry Hunt.⁷¹ All were active supporters of political prisoners and helped to organize, and even chair, public

⁶² *N.S.*, 16 & 23 Feb., 21 Sept., 19 Oct. 1839; *Champion*, 17 & 24 Feb., 10 & 17 Mar., 22 Sept., 20 Oct., 10, 17 & 24 Nov. 1839.

⁶³ *N.S.*, 23 Nov. 1839.

⁶⁴ *N.S.*, 18 Jan. 1840; *M.S.A.*, 1 Feb. 1840; *Jubilee Celebration of the Charter of Incorporation, 1840-99*, (County Borough of Oldham, 1899), p. 34.

⁶⁵ *N.S.* & *M.S.A.*, 24 Dec. 1842, 11 Mar. 1843.

⁶⁶ *N.S.*, 2 Sept. 1843; 13 Mar. 1844; 29 Mar. 1845.

⁶⁷ *N.S.*, 3 July 1847.

⁶⁸ *N.S.*, 24 July 1847.

⁶⁹ *N.S.*, 10 Apr. 1841: Haslam - 24 Apr., 20 Nov. 1841, 29 Oct. 1842, 28 Jan., 25 July 1843, 31 May 1845; Haslop - 20 Nov., 4 Dec. 1841: Hamer - 19 Aug. 1843, 14 June, 4 Oct., 1 Nov. 1845; Yardley - 30 Oct. 1841, 24 Sept., 10 Dec. 1843, 10 Mar. 1844; *M.S.A.*, 2 Dec. 1843.

⁷⁰ *N.S.*, 24 Oct. 1840, 16 Dec. 1843, 30 Mar. 1844, 19 July 1845, 4 Sept. 1847.

⁷¹ *N.S.*, 24 & 31 Oct. 1840, 2 July 1842, 8 May 1843, 16 & 30 Mar. 1844, 7 & 19 June 1845.

addresses by outsiders like O'Connor, MacDouall and Vincent.⁷² Yardley attended a national N.C.A. delegate meeting in Manchester in 1844 and the National Land Conference the following year.⁷³ With Haslop and several other local activists, he was arrested for addressing crowds during the disturbances of 1842 although he, like the others, was reported as urging a return to work and the maintenance of the peace. Symbolically, on his release he, and a young operative, Ambrose Hirst, who spoke regularly at local Chartist meetings and improvement societies, attended a celebratory tea party in the Town Hall.⁷⁴

Under men like these Oldham Chartism continued to reflect the characteristics of the improving dissenting culture of the 1830s. Oldham signatories to the national Chartist resolution in early 1841 advocating teetotalism as a means to moral improvement and political knowledge outnumbered those of any other town.⁷⁵ It was usual practice at weekly Sunday meetings to begin with a hymn and a reading from the scriptures before hearing the 'sermon'. Along with other south Lancashire branches, Oldham adopted 'the system of classes found so successful in religious bodies', meeting once a week for 'mutual instruction'. Open-air camp meetings, usually on Oldham Edge during holiday weekends, had all the attributes of those organized by the Primitive Methodists. Many of their meetings continued to be held on nonconformist premises. In common with the Oldham Temperance Society, Chartists eschewed participation in popular celebrations like the Wakes, organizing rival tea parties, formal processions and outings.⁷⁶ The building of the Working Men's Hall in 1844-5 represented the most successful physical expression of their value system. Initiated by Holladay, Ainsworth and Knott but with Richard Haslam as committee chairman, this was mainly financed from workers' share subscriptions. Speaking at the tea party held to celebrate the laying of the foundation stone in April 1844 by O'Connor and the miners' leader, W. P. Roberts, Ainsworth congratulated the audience. 'Today', he told them, 'you have exhibited a practical proof of the improvement of your age - you have met and acted like men who have risen above the habits of dissipation that at one time disgraced your order in England.' Similar sentiments were expressed by all the speakers when O'Connor returned to open it eleven months later. Although it was 'principally a Chartist Hall', he remarked, 'its application to other perfectly legitimate purposes promises a safe and profitable investment' as well.⁷⁷

⁷² *N.S.*, 22 Aug. 1840, 4 Dec. 1841, 13 May 1843.

⁷³ *N.S.*, 20 Apr. 1844, 20 & 27 Dec. 1845.

⁷⁴ Butterworth, Aug. 1842; *N.S.*, 27 Aug., 3 & 24 Sept., 22 Oct. 1842, 22 Apr., 18 Aug. 1843; *M.S.A.*, 27 Aug. 1842, 15 Oct. 1842.

⁷⁵ *N.S.*, 13 Mar., 10 Apr. 1841; *The English Chartist Circular and Temperance Record for England and Wales*, nos. 9 & 10, Mar./Apr. 1841.

⁷⁶ *N.S.*, 5 & 17 Oct. 1840, 24 Sept., 26 Nov. 1842, 30 Aug. 1845. Chartist counter-attractions to the popular festivities associated with the Wakes overlapped with those of churches, schools and temperance societies; R. J. R. Poole, 'Wakes, holidays and pleasure fairs in the Lancashire cotton district, c 1790-1890' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1985), pp. 144-55 and 'Oldham Wakes', in J. K. Walton and J. R. Walvin (eds.), *Leisure in Britain, 1780-1939* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 71-98. ⁷⁷ *N.S.*, 12 Aug. 1843, 13 Apr. 1844, 29 Mar. 1845.

Chartism was but one manifestation of these men's concern with self-improvement and respectability. It did not absorb all their energies and they continued to pursue sobriety and intelligence through other organizations. These, however, were not simply colonies in a Chartist empire. Rather they complemented, even promoted, an interest in Chartism, rather than vice-versa. The unsectarian Sunday Schools run by Chartist sympathizer, John Heap, for example, predated Chartism. They owed their origins to the Anglicans' ban on the teaching of writing in their schools in 1836 and they received financial support from some nonconformist sects. Heap was also responsible for establishing the Athenaeum at Greenacres Moor in 1840, another institution which appealed to Chartists but was never formally part of the movement, and a day school at Greenacres Moor.⁷⁸ This, like the school at Lower Moor run by the radical Thomas Haslam, had previous links with the temperance society.⁷⁹ The nonconformist bookseller and schoolmaster J. L. Quarmbly, and the operative, Ambrose Hirst, were others who combined Chartism with the broader promotion of moral and mental improvement, the former lecturing at mechanics' institutes in the area, the latter reciting poetry and delivering public addresses on the evils of drink at the Athenaeum and at the weekly meetings of the Chartists and the temperance society.⁸⁰

These men eschewed violence as a means of achieving their aims, continuing to put their faith in parliamentary petitioning and the power of argument and personal example.⁸¹ Outsiders like J. R. Stephens and John Deegan who called for the taking up of arms enjoyed a frosty reception and the Oldham Political Association vigorously rebutted charges at the Birmingham conference that they supported violence: 'We are not incendiaries... We wish not to destroy property... We are not anarchists. We wish not to engage in civil strife... We are not bloodthirsty agitators'.⁸² Despite rumours of drilling in the area in 1839, Oldham maintained a reputation for peaceful agitation, showing

⁷⁸ Butterworth, 19 June 1836; 30 Nov. 1840. *M.S.A.*, 23 Apr. 1842. *M.E.*, 7 Aug. 1850.

⁷⁹ Butterworth, 1 Apr., 8 May 1839.

⁸⁰ Quarmbly was politically active from 1837 to the 1850s: see *N.S.*, 31 Dec. 1837, 21 Apr. 1838; *M.S.A.*, 29 Nov. 1845, 21 Feb. 1846 (anti-poor law); *N.S.*, 7 July, 10 Nov. 1838, *M.E.*, 3 Dec. 1851 (suffrage and retrenchment); *M.S.A.*, 14 Mar. 1840, *M.E.*, 3 Mar. 1852 (Anti-Corn Law League); *N.S.*, 14 Oct. 1840, 2 Sept. 1843 (Hunt and O'Connor supporter); *M.S.A.*, 1 Feb. 1840 (aid to political prisoners); *M.S.A.*, 20 May 1843, 24 Jan. 1846, 11 Dec. 1846 (factory reform); *M.S.A.*, 13 Mar. 1847 (education); *N.S.*, 29 Mar. 1845 (working men's hall); *M.S.A.*, 12 June 1847 (Holladay's election committee); *Freeholder*, 1 May 1850, *M.E.*, 8 Feb. 1851 (Freehold Land Movement); *M.S.A.*, 2 Mar. 1844, *O.C.*, 4 Nov. 1854 (local talks to improving societies). For Hirst see, Butterworth, 29 Jan. 1842, *M.S.A.*, 30 Apr. 1842, 5 & 12 Aug. 1843, 30 Mar. 1844, 5 Sept. 1846 (poetry recitals and temperance); *N.S.*, 4 May, 13 July, 31 Aug. 1844, 28 June, 29 Nov. 1845 (lectures to Chartists); *N.S.*, 20 Aug., 24 Sept., 22 Oct. 1842 (arrest); *N.S.*, 14 June 1845 (S. Lancs. delegate); *M.S.A.*, 16 Mar. 1844, 5 July 1845 (Anti-Corn Law League); *M.S.A.*, 24 Jan., 19 Dec. 1846, 16 Jan. 1847 (factory reform); *N.S.*, 29 Nov. 1845 (anti-poor law); *Manchester Times (M.T.)*, 20 May 1848 (calls for Charter). He, Quarmbly and many other Radicals also supported the cross-party campaign for a public park, in Oldham, *M.T.*, 11 Dec. 1846.

⁸¹ *N.S.*, 19 Oct. 1839; Butterworth, Aug. 1840.

⁸² Butterworth, 8 Nov. 1838; *M.S.A.*, 10 Nov. 1838; *N.S.*, 29 Dec. 1838. *N.S.*, 10 Nov. 1838 and *Champion*, 18 Nov. 1838, however, both report that Deegan was greeted with 'deafening cheers'.

'not the least inclination to riot' at public meetings and remaining aloof from the National Strike in August.⁸³ Local activists continually stressed the need to preserve the peace and placards advertising meetings specifically banned the carrying of firearms; crowds were urged 'above all things to be orderly and sober and they would become intelligent'.⁸⁴ The arrest and subsequent conviction of John Swire for attending a meeting in Manchester on 6 May 1839 united the entire town. Public officials collectively pleaded for his release on the grounds that he had always spoken against violence and that Oldham was the only large place in south Lancashire 'where no military were applied for during the period of excitement'.⁸⁵ Similar sentiments supporting peaceful agitation continued to be expressed throughout the 1840s. Oldham was only involved in the strikes of 1842 after workers from Ashton had brought out some of the mills; local Chartists urged the necessity for calm, some even enrolling as special constables.⁸⁶

Given their background, it is also not surprising to find that these men continued to emphasize the earlier radical belief that unrepresentative, oppressive, aristocratic government, not industrial capitalism, was the main cause of economic and social distress. This left open the door for continuing co-operation with some of the town's employers. Although the latter continued to be wary of wholesale political reform, an increasing number re-evaluated their attitude towards fiscal and trade policy in the wake of the economic depression which set in after 1837. The primary manifestation of this shift in middle-class economic radicalism was support for the repeal of the corn laws. Despite O'Connor's insistence that the Anti-Corn Law League was a dangerous, irrelevant diversion, most Chartist leaders in Oldham perceived no contradiction or inconsistency in principle in combining support for the two movements. In Oldham, observed Edwin Butterworth approvingly in February 1839, 'the Whigs and the Radicals cordially unite with the utmost good will and earnestness in exertions to obtain an abolition of these laws'.⁸⁷ His report of Paulton's lectures in January bears this out, the speaker being joined on the platform by prominent members of both of the town's radical groups. Echoing sentiments he had expressed throughout the 1830s, Fitton explained that:

It would be well to consider as to the propriety of the working and middle classes uniting cordially to obtain a speedy repeal of the Corn Laws, and then if the middle

⁸³ Butterworth, Mar.-Apr., 1839, 25 May 1839; *M.S.A.*, 17 Aug. 1839. Oldham was unusual in not participating in the National Holiday; see R. Sykes, 'Physical-force Chartism: the cotton district and the Chartist crisis of 1839', *International Review of Social History*, xxx, 2 (1985), 207-36, esp. 230.

⁸⁴ Butterworth, 25 May 1839.

⁸⁵ Memorial in favour of John Swire to John Fielden for the Home Secretary from the Constables, Churchwardens and Overseers, 11 Feb. 1840, P.R.O., HO/44/36. Names attached included men of all political persuasions. See also Alex Taylor's defence of Swire, *M.S.A.*, 12 Oct. 1839.

⁸⁶ *M.S.A.*, 24 Apr. 1840, 13 Oct. 1842; *N.S.*, 13 & 20 Oct. 1842, Butterworth, Aug. 1842. There is evidence to suggest that radicals enrolled as special constables to police meetings: PRO, HO/44/36 for May 1839; Yardley was acting as special constable when he was arrested in 1842, *M.S.A.* 28 Aug. 1842.

⁸⁷ Butterworth, Feb. 1839.

classes did not succeed they would be convinced that universal suffrage was essential to their success.⁸⁸

Chairing a meeting in March 1840, Holladay reiterated the argument he had put throughout the 1830s: 'The depressed state of trade was in great measure attributable to the operation of the corn laws, in limiting the sale of goods and preventing their exchange for the corn of foreign countries.'⁸⁹ Six years later he had not changed his views; he was 'pleased at the end of monopoly of any sort [and] decried the protectionist argument that repeal was only wanted to lower wages'.⁹⁰

Corn law repeal did not just attract middle-class Chartists like Holladay and Knott. James Greaves, the textile operative, was sacked as Chartist lecturer for 'assisting the middle class in their bit-by-bit reform' after supporting the cause at a League meeting at Waterhead Mill in May 1841.⁹¹ Condemned by the *Northern Star* he remained defiant:

I am as much a Chartist as ever... Why should people who were once united under the banners of Universal Suffrage and no Corn Laws in the memorable days of Hunt, now be divided and split into factious oppositions upon a question, or questions, which to them are of greatest importance... it now appears that that which Mr Hunt thought was right in 1815, 16, 17, 18 and 19, those who call themselves Reformers in 1841, think wrong.⁹²

Greaves continued to speak in favour of Chartist principles, even at League meetings, but his national humiliation meant that he was forced to turn to the Complete Suffrage Union for local organizational support, attending the Birmingham conference in December 1842 and January 1843 as an Oldham delegate.⁹³ As an official Chartist lecturer for the south Lancashire district who had chaired national delegate meetings in Manchester and spoken as far afield as Leeds, Greaves could not be left unpunished.⁹⁴ But he was far from atypical in his views. Although the *Northern Star* obviously declined to publish their involvement, Butterworth's manuscripts and reports in the Manchester press clearly show that many other prominent local Chartists including Quarmby, Haslam, Swire, and Hirst, adopted a similar position.⁹⁵

It would be wrong to imply that this stance did not go unchallenged. League meetings, as all the reports make clear, were contentious affairs. What can only be appreciated with detailed knowledge of the participants, however, is that the acrimonious debate and disorder which characterized the meetings

⁸⁸ Ibid. 24 Jan. 1839. Alex Taylor, James Greaves and James Holladay were also on the platform. ⁸⁹ *M.S.A.*, 14 Mar. 1840. ⁹⁰ *M.T.*, 24 Jan. 1846.

⁹¹ *N.S.*, 8 May 1841. He was still described as a carder at this time, *ibid.* 10 Apr. 1841. cf. Gadian, 'Class formation', p. 31. ⁹² *N.S.*, 15 May 1841.

⁹³ Ibid. 5 Feb. 1842, 14 Jan. 1843; *M.S.A.*, 24 Dec. 1842. The other C.S.U. delegate was a Cobbettite, but Greaves did not go on to support Cobbett in 1847.

⁹⁴ *N.S.*, 23 Jan., 25 July, 15 Aug. 1840; 27 Feb. 1841.

⁹⁵ Butterworth, 10 Jan. 1842, 25 Jan. 1843; *Anti-Bread Tax Circular*, 21 Apr. 1841; *M.T.*, 24 Jan. 1846; *M.S.A.*, 7, 14 Mar. 1840, 12 Feb., 5 Mar., 7 Dec. 1842, 16 Mar. 1844, 11 Jan. 1845. For orthodox view, L. Brown, 'The Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League' in A. Briggs, *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), pp. 342-71.

reflected not just a working-class Chartist attack on middle-class repealers, but an internal dispute within the Chartist ranks themselves. Although partisan press reports cannot be used as reliable indicators of the relative strength of different factions, they all show clearly that it was only official Chartist circuit lecturers who opposed League resolutions. Since chairmen often successfully prevented outsiders speaking from the floor on the grounds that meetings were intended to ascertain local opinion, the challengers were also Oldham men. Only two are recorded as having spoken regularly: a hatter, Henry Smethurst, and a painter from Waterhead Mill, John Crowther (or Crowder), both lecturers on the south Lancashire circuit.⁹⁶ Their profiles resemble the archetypal single-minded Chartist eulogized by O'Connor and often assumed in many studies to be representative of the movement as a whole in expressing an overtly anti-capitalist ideology. Smethurst was sometime secretary of the Oldham Political Association/National Charter Association. Both men spoke regularly at its weekly meetings and those of other branches in the area, represented Oldham at monthly delegate meetings in Manchester and provided support for political prisoners. Both were arrested in the aftermath of the industrial troubles of August 1842. This prematurely curtailed Smethurst's political career but Crowther, acquitted, went on to represent Oldham Chartists at the conference organized by the Complete Suffrage Union in Birmingham in the winter of 1842–3, supporting motions to retain 'Charter' in the title of any subsequent organization. After this his involvement in local radical politics also declined, reappearing only in 1848 with Ernest Jones and again in 1852 in a vain attempt to heal divisions in the radical camp.⁹⁷ Both of these men's profiles are distinctively different from those of all other prominent local Chartists. Neither showed an interest in any other voluntary associations or political campaigns in the town. Equally significantly, their species of radical politics also bloomed and faded within a short period of time. They were alien to Oldham's enduring radical tradition.

Chartist leaders also combined their support for repeal of the corn laws and the promotion of individual moral reform with other causes. Holladay continued to support the peace movement throughout the 1840s.⁹⁸ He, Ainsworth and Knott re-affirmed their earlier anti-slavery commitments in

⁹⁶ For excluded speakers see *N.S.*, 16 Apr. 1841 (Leach and Robinson), 10 Feb. 1842 (West), 12 Feb. 1842 (Bell, Clarke and Griffin). Smethurst was appointed circuit lecturer at the same time as Greaves – *N.S.*, 15 Aug. 1840; Crowther, also from Greaves's home village of Waterhead Mill, was appointed just before the latter's sacking, *N.S.*, 21 Mar. 1841.

⁹⁷ Smethurst's career – *N.S.*, 23 Nov. 1839, 24 Oct. 1840 (N.C.A. secretary); 12 Oct. 1839, 18 Jan., 25 Jan., 4 July 1840, 23 Oct. 1841 (support for political prisoners); 27 June, 14 Oct., 5 Dec. 1840, 2 Jan., 30 Jan., 6 Feb., 17 Apr. 1841, 27 Aug. 1842 (lecturer); 17 Oct. 1840 (delegate meeting); *M.S.A.*, 5 Nov. 1842 (arrest). Smethurst was elected to the select vestry in 1841 but unseated by the J.P.s after a challenge from the Cobbettite assistant overseer; Butterworth, 1 Apr. 1841. For Crowther see *N.S.*, 20 Nov., 24 Dec. 1841, 28 Oct. 1843 (S. Lancs delegate); 24 Dec. 1842, 14 Jan. 1843 (delegate to Birmingham conference); 27 Aug., 22 Oct. 1842 (arrest and acquittal); 27 Jan. 1844 (lectures); *M.T.*, 12 Feb. 1848 (with Ernest Jones); *M.E.*, 21 Apr. 1852 (calls for radical unity). For speeches at Anti-Corn Law League see note 95 above.

⁹⁸ *M.T.*, 11 Feb. 1843, *M.E.*, 4, 7 July 1849.

1846. They were involved in the promotion of the Lyceum.⁹⁹ Many other prominent dissenting radicals joined them to oppose the government legislative proposals of 1844 which would have increased Anglican control over education, arguing that voluntary provision was preferable. They renewed earlier opposition to the privileges of the established church through the resuscitation of the Anti-State Church society in 1848.¹⁰⁰ Encouraged by the corn law repeal in 1846 they expanded their campaign for free trade by calling for the full opening of ports.¹⁰¹ Their support for Hume's Financial Reform Association in 1848, pledged to use democratic measures to curb government expenditure, was entirely consistent with the stand they had maintained since the 1830s, as was the renewal of their fight in the mid-1840s to resist the introduction of the New Poor Law in the area.¹⁰²

The campaign for the Charter, therefore, was essentially just one part of a broader battle strategy; it did not represent a total war waged to the exclusion of all else. Its abandonment did not necessarily represent a defeat or a declining commitment to radical electoral reform and the causes which it was intended to promote; rather it was an acknowledgement that it was no longer an appropriate rallying cry. Radical philosophy and strategy in the 1840s were not significantly different from those of the 1830s.

IV

When W. J. Fox accepted the invitation of the majority of Oldham activists to stand in the general election of 1847, he was confident that his pledges were in line with local radical opinion. Like Holladay, who nominated him after standing down himself to avoid splitting the radical vote, he had the support of campaigners with long political pedigrees.¹⁰³ His platform was essentially that which these men had supported for at least a decade and a half: free trade, retrenchment, the reduction or abolition of many taxes, the curtailing of Anglican privileges, the expansion of civil and religious liberties, the enhancement of mental, moral and intellectual improvement through education for all and electoral reform.¹⁰⁴

What perplexed Fox, unacquainted as he was with the ambiguities and tensions within Oldham radicalism, was the bitterness with which some professed 'radicals', led by Alex Taylor, opposed him. Historians have mistakenly assumed that this division was relatively recent and that it reflected a broader disintegration of militant radicalism in the wake of economic restructuring and middle-class concessions of the post-Chartism era. In view of Fielden's radical reputation and Alex Taylor's close connection with his cause, Fox has also usually been regarded as the representative of middle-class

⁹⁹ *M.S.A.*, 28 Nov. 1846; A. Tait, *History of the Oldham Lyceum, 1839-1897* (Oldham, 1897), pp. 97, 102-3.

¹⁰⁰ *M.S.A.*, 15, 22 Apr. 1843, 19 Oct. 1844, 13 Mar. 1847, 19 Feb. 1848.

¹⁰¹ *M.T.*, 6 Nov. 1846.

¹⁰² *M.S.A.*, 19 Oct. 1844, 29 Nov. 1845, 17 June 1848.

¹⁰³ *M.S.A.*, 5, 12, 19 June, 31 July 1847.

¹⁰⁴ B. Grime, *Memory sketches* (Oldham, 1887), pp. 58-9 reproduces Fox's election address; for later affirmation of principles, *M.E.*, 29 Oct. 1851.

liberalism, Fielden and Cobbett as the true inheritors of the radical tradition.¹⁰⁵ Such views are mistaken. Not only can the split be traced back directly to the disputes over policy, priorities and personalities in the 1830s when Fielden had also insisted that John Morgan Cobbett should be his running partner, but it was Fox who most accurately reflected the militant religious and political radical tradition in the town. None of Fielden's and Cobbett's election committee were ex-Chartists; all of Fox's were.¹⁰⁶

Despite some co-operation at local level, primarily in the vestry and, until 1846, in the Anti-Poor Law Movement and the campaign for the Ten Hours Act, the two radical groupings had retained their separate identities and the mutual distrust which characterized the 1830s. This is clearly evident in the factory reform movement which the Cobbettites, divorced from mainstream O'Connorite radicalism in the early and mid-1840s, had returned to, ensuring them a popular following among Oldham's largely unenfranchised young textile operatives. Although nonconformist ministers and dissenting radicals continued to join them on the platform, the attractions which shorter hours had for them still differed greatly from those of the Cobbettites. Holladay, for example, continued to expound the same argument about the desirability of mental and spiritual rejuvenation which he had expressed in 1833.¹⁰⁷ With the acrimonious electoral split in 1847, however, these men withdrew from the campaign. This left the Cobbettites free to claim all the credit for the Ten Hours Act and to commemorate its passing at annual dinners.¹⁰⁸ Although the hapless Fox never tired of reminding his audiences of his support for the measure, he and his supporters were damned as traitors to the textile workers' cause.

Other aspects of the Cobbettites' platform and the nature of their popular support reveal an increasing detachment from mainstream radicalism. The anti-semitism, which had characterized Cobbett's writings, and even surfaced occasionally in Fielden's speeches, was clearly visible in their attack on Fox's support for the extension of civil and political liberties to the Jews.¹⁰⁹ The repeal of the malt tax, another Cobbettite hobby-horse, had by this time become primarily associated with the rump of the parliamentary tory party and it had been taken up locally by a brewing trade now highly antagonistic to the powerful temperance/radical alliance. By 1849 Alex Taylor was joining Cobbett and Oldham's leading tories at the licensed victuallers' association's annual dinners.¹¹⁰ The rural base of Cobbettite electoral support had also

¹⁰⁵ Foster, *Class struggle*, pp. 207–8; Sykes, 'Some aspects', p. 176.

¹⁰⁶ Fox's campaign team included Haslam, Hirst, Quarumby, Yardley, Haslop, Heap, A. F. Taylor; *M.S.A.*, 21 Mar. 1846, 5, 12, 19 June 1847. Fielden's and Cobbett's; Joshua Milne, Wm. Taylor, Alex Taylor, Richard Fletcher, Jonathan Mellor.

¹⁰⁷ *M.S.A.*, 20 Apr. 1844, 24 Jan., 14 Mar. 1846, 16 Jan. 1847.

¹⁰⁸ *M.S.A.*, 4 Sept. 1847, *M.T.*, 10 June 1848, *M.E.*, 2 Sept. 1848, 29 Aug. 1849.

¹⁰⁹ *M.E.*, 2 Sept. 1848 (Cobbett and Mellor); for Fielden's distrust of Jews see *M.S.A.*, 26 June 1841; for full discussion of this aspect of Cobbettite radicalism, W. D. Rubinstein, 'British radicalism and the "Dark Side" of populism' in his *Elites and the wealthy in modern British history* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 339–73.

¹¹⁰ *M.E.*, 13 Oct. 1849; Fox was less committed to malt tax repeal, *ibid.* 20 Oct. 1851.

become even more obvious than it had been in the 1830s. Within Oldham township itself, it was the rural hinterland which remained Cobbettite. Farmers, the only substantial group of Cobbettites on the police commission, allied with tories in 1848 to oppose incorporation championed by radicals and liberals in the wake of the introduction of the rural police by the local J.P.s, the latter now preponderantly tory as a result of a spate of appointments during Peel's premiership. After incorporation the Cobbettite rump on the council led by Alex Taylor co-operated closely with the tories.¹¹¹ After 1847 liberals won clear electoral majorities in both Oldham and Royton, the latter now experiencing renewed industrial growth, while the ageing electorate in the less dynamic Chadderton and Crompton remained overwhelmingly Cobbettite and subsequently tory into the 1860s. In the general election of July 1852 Cobbettites overwhelmingly doubled with the local manufacturer, John Duncuft; in the bitterly fought by-election in December which followed Duncuft's sudden death they plumped for the tory James Heald.¹¹² Thereafter they effectively ceased to have a separate existence. Cobbettism had become an anachronism without roots in the urban society which was developing in central Oldham and which had spawned militant nonconformist liberalism.

Both Alex Taylor, and his rival leader of the radical dissenters, James Holladay, died within six months of each other in the winter of 1852-3. The very different circumstances surrounding their deaths symbolize the respective fates of the groups they led: the tragic contradiction of the former and the optimism and consistency of the latter. Ridiculed in local broadsheets by those with whom he had once worked and pushed into an unsavoury alliance with the tories whom he had once despised, Taylor had become 'troubled and distressed'. One morning in March 1853 he climbed into the loft of a neighbour's house and cut his throat.¹¹³ No such crisis of conscience had troubled Holladay. He collapsed and died in September 1852 on the platform of the Working Men's Hall he had helped to design and erect after delivering a speech in support of Fox's candidature during which he had urged upon his audience the desirability of attaining 'knowledge in science, literature and the development of mechanical ingenuity' and the need to 'elevate your minds and characters' instead of frequenting 'midnight orgies' in beerhouses.¹¹⁴ He and his associates in the newly formed Oldham Reform League, dedicated to the continued pursuit of electoral reform, cheap government and the expansion of civil and religious liberties, had no doubt that they had remained firm to

¹¹¹ Police Commission minutes, 13 Dec. 1848, Oldham Local Studies Centre, PCO/1/2, J. F. Lees (1842), William Jones (1846), Nathan Worthington (1846) and Andrew Schofield, were the tory J.P.s appointed in the 1840s.

¹¹² Poll books in Oldham Local Studies Centre: 1847, July 1852, Dec. 1852, 1857, 1859, 1865. Crompton voted 4-1 for Cobbettite/tory candidates. Fox recognized this spatial variation in voting behaviour, *M.E.*, 10 July 1852. See also M. A. Manai, 'Electoral politics in mid 19th-century Lancashire' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1991), ch. 4.

¹¹³ *M.E.*, 4 Dec. 1852, 26 Mar. 1853; *The Rising Sun, Oldham Illuminator, Free Trader, Reformer, Oldham Independence*, Liberal election broadsheets, Oldham Local Studies Centre. For detailed description of elections, see B. Grime, *Memory sketches*, pp. 91-293.

¹¹⁴ *M.E.*, 25 Sept., 2 Oct. 1852.

the public commitments they had voiced over two decades earlier. Although they chose to refer to themselves as liberals or reformers, to distinguish themselves from earlier associations with the Cobbett camp which continued to claim the radical heritage, the change of nomenclature did not imply a weakening of their commitment to beliefs, policies and strategies which can be traced back unbroken to the early 1830s.

V

It should be clear that Foster's portrayal of the nature, strength and fate of Oldham radicalism is seriously misleading. But this reappraisal has wider implications since it questions the broader validity of assumptions about the chronological and ideological development of popular politics in the period, related in particular to the significance of Chartism as a class-based movement and the importance of the 1840s as the crucial decade in which the working class was 'liberalized'.

Although the personal involvement of Cobbett and O'Connor helped to polarize opinion in Oldham more clearly, the splits in radical ranks reflected disputes which occurred at national level. Factions agreed on the inequities and consequences of the tax burden and on the need for electoral reform, but they always had contrasting views on strategy, priorities and, most fundamentally, on the ideal type of society and the dominant value system which would, or should, emerge after the removal of grievances. What the period as a whole witnessed was the eclipsing of populist movements like Cobbettism and growing support for what was essentially militant non-conformist liberalism. Although this took place against a backdrop of bitter industrial disputes, these failed to develop either a leadership or a class-based ideology capable of challenging the latter. The continuities in personnel, values, motivation, policies and strategies from the 1830s to the 1850s suggest that radicals were not so much incorporated into liberal 'reformism' and the culture of self-improvement which pervaded it, as largely responsible for creating it. The crusading zeal of militant grass-roots liberalism, with its campaigns for economy, fiscal reform, disestablishment, temperance and a free press, its emphasis on moral justifications for legislative activity and its concern with civil and religious as well as political rights, was essentially a continuation of the radical platform of the 1830s which was preserved through the Chartist period.¹¹⁵

This continuity is most clearly reflected in radicals' emphasis on retrenchment and tax reform as universal panaceas for economic depression, social distress and individual degeneracy. Only briefly and ineffectually was this analysis challenged during the Chartist period. The dominant view conceived of individuals not as workers involved in a class struggle with employers, but as taxpayers, ratepayers and consumers oppressed by excessive,

¹¹⁵ J. Vincent, *The formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857-68* (London, 1966), ch. 2; T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, opinion and political idioms in reformed England, 1832-74* (Brighton, 1975), ch. 9 on similarities in social support over the period for radical/liberal candidates.

regressive, inequitable taxation levied by an unrepresentative and, therefore, unaccountable government. Viewed in this light, the accommodation of the state to their demands is very different from that suggested by Stedman Jones who laid emphasis primarily on factory reform. It was essentially a fiscal revolution. Although most action was taken by the whig/liberal coalitions after 1852, it was Peel who initially recognized the centrality of this, responding with a series of measures, most notably his budget of 1842 and the repeal of the corn laws four years later, which stunned radical opinion and, as numerous statues erected in his memory testify, elevated him to the rank of popular hero throughout textile Lancashire.¹¹⁶ By the early 1850s, his disciple Gladstone, and even his rival Disraeli, appreciated that the budget was not just a weapon of economic policy, but the primary means of eliminating deep-seated, popular grievances about the inequities of the tax burden. It was his tax reforms which made Gladstone a popular hero, and his belief that advances in wages and improvements in living conditions could only flow from economic prosperity created by the removal of restrictions on trade and consumption, not from the direct intervention of central government, echoed opinions voiced by radical liberal opinion since at least the 1830s. Concern over taxes, local and national, provides the key to understanding popular politics throughout the nineteenth century.¹¹⁷

This analysis relegates the anti-capitalist elements of Chartism to a brief, unsuccessful digression in the development of Oldham's radical politics which attracted only minority support. Those who remained loyal to the official line propounded by O'Connor in the *Northern Star*, and who steadfastly opposed piecemeal reform and alliances with the middle classes were the exception, not the rule. Most supported reforms like the repeal of the corn laws while remaining loyal to the basic democratic principles of the Charter and to O'Connor himself. In coming to this accommodation they were not betraying the cause but continuing the political strategy they had adopted throughout the 1830s and which they were to sustain into the 1850s. Their radicalism reflected a long-term campaign to create a democratic but essentially capitalist environment capable not just of sustaining material progress but of promoting moral and spiritual self-improvement and individual responsibility. The re-adjustment of the post-Chartist period may have boosted confidence that this ambition could be achieved but its roots lay in the radical platform of the 1830s, even within Chartism itself.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ D. Read, *Peel and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 287-312. For an indication of radicals' delight yet confusion over the 1842 budget, see editorial in *M.S.A.*, 19 Mar. 1842.

¹¹⁷ H. C. G. Matthew, 'Disraeli, Gladstone and the politics of mid-Victorian budgets', *Historical Journal*, xxii (1979), 615-43. I have developed this argument in M. Winstanley, *Gladstone and the Liberal party* (London, 1990), pp. 33-6, 40-6 and *The shopkeeper's world, 1830-1914* (Manchester, 1983), ch. 2. For local concern over taxation, see J. Garrard, *Leadership and power in Victorian industrial towns* (Manchester, 1983), passim; E. P. Hennock, 'Finance and politics in urban local government, 1835-1900', *Historical Journal*, v (1963), 212-25.

¹¹⁸ B. H. Harrison and P. Hollis, 'Chartism, Liberalism and Robert Lowery', *English Historical Review*, lxxxii (1967), 503-35; B. H. Harrison, 'Teetotal Chartism', *History*, lviii (1973), 193-217.