From 'People's Champions' to 'Tribunes of the People': popular politicians in Parliament, c. 1810 to 1867.

Introduction:

My recent monograph, *Celebrities, Heroes and Champions: Popular Politicians in the Age of Reform, 1810-1867* (Manchester University Press, 2021), offers a reinterpretation of popular politics through a comparative study of leading figures drawn from a range of extra-parliamentary campaigns.[1] These include movements for political reform before 1832, Catholic Emancipation, the Anti-Corn Law League, Chartism and the anti-Slavery movement. By employing categories such as 'hero' and 'celebrity', the study attempts to understand its subjects not just as political leaders, but also as cultural phenomena. For the same reason, it also encompasses the extraordinary public receptions accorded to the exotic continental revolutionaries Lajos Kossuth and Giuseppe Garibaldi, and the often bitter contest for control over access to these figures between middle-class liberals and (largely) working-class ultra-radicals. The book's focus is therefore not primarily on parliament but on a wider political culture, broadly defined.

However, Parliament in the nineteenth-century was the Mount Parnassus of the UK political landscape: shrouded in myth and arcana, yet dominating and unavoidable. To begin with, as the seat of legitimate power it was the only body that could pass the reforms radicals desired. As Norman McCord put it in his path-finding study of the Anti-Corn Law League, it was 'the decisive theatre' of that campaign.[2] Even the Chartists, 'caged by the state' in Michael Mann's resonant phrase, aimed primarily to access not destroy it.[3] The

[1] I have borrowed liberally from this work in the following paper.
[2] Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League*, chapter VIII
[3] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power Volume II*.

very terms with which we denote these movements – 'extra-parliamentary', 'out-of-doors', 'pressure from without' – take Parliament as their reference point.

In this paper, therefore, in keeping with the theme of the seminar series, I have focused on the role of popular leaders once they were elected to Parliament itself. In the process, I have tried to say a little more about the transition I identified in the book's conclusion from the era of the 'People's Champion' as the predominant trope of the popular politician, to that of the 'Tribune of the People' – the first drawing their power from the people 'out of doors' and the second dependent on the ability to command respect both inside and outside of Parliament. This transition is part of a broader story with which many of you will be familiar. It is connected very much to the growth and decline of large-scale mass movements for political reform in the period from the Napoleonic Wars to 1848. These often identified themselves as in opposition to a Parliament portrayed as corrupt and dominated by an unrepresentative aristocratic elite. This was true even for movements such as Chartism, whose primary demands centred around representation within it. The demise of these mass movements saw the increasing absorption of those radical impulses by Parliament itself over the next twenty years or so, a process hastened by the Reform Act of 1867.

It is my contention that this development was also marked by a change in the way that popular politicians were described and conceptualised, with the first phase being dominated by the trope of the 'People's Champion', and the second by that of the trope of the 'Tribune of the People'. The 'People's Champion', as the term suggests, drew strength and legitimacy from his popular following. Sometimes individuals so designated succeeded in election to parliament, even on the relatively restricted franchises of the pre- and post-

1832 eras, and sometimes there were attempts to elevate sitting MPs to that status. However, a parliamentary seat was by no means essential for such a figure, who often relied primarily on a charismatic hold over a popular movement, backed up and institutionalised through networks of local organisations, and mediated through sympathetic organs of the press. The 'Tribune of the People' however was an individual who, like their Classical antecedents, was explicitly associated with the assembly in which they sat. Their ostensible (and often self-promoted) role was that of a conduit who could represent the 'voice' of the people directly to the ears of those in power, while at the same time being able to moderate that voice and present it in rational terms. Such an individual needed to have plausible channels of communication open to the 'People' out of doors, but unlike the 'people's champion' they were not synonymous with a particular popular movement and therefore were able to retain a degree of distance from the more zealous elements of such movements. Crucially, they needed the respect of parliament itself: something which the 'People's Champions' of earlier generations had often struggled to obtain without risking forfeiture of their position out of doors.

The Emergence of the People's Champion

The first half of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly the heroic age of British popular politics. As the public sphere began to recover from the paranoias of 'Pitt's Terror', Church-and-King mobs and invasion scares, the emergence of the mass platform and the explosive spread of newspapers were both encouraged by and helped to drive demands for political reforms, ranging from the abolition of slavery and the Corn Laws to the reform of Parliament itself. It was a time when the idea of 'public opinion' was becoming more influential and even though Parliament was elected on the slenderest of franchises, great

rewards awaited those who could mould or direct it. The slow and uneven emergence of a fixed party system and the absence of national party machinery, or even a truly national press, posed enormous challenges for popular movements. To mobilise public opinion and bring it to bear on Parliament therefore required a new type of public figure: the popular politician.

The radical reform movements of the early nineteenth century frequently depended for their cohesion on the activism of one or more charismatic leaders or personalities. While often criticised even by historians of the left as inherently unstable and anti-democratic, this was a rational strategy. In a world where political communication was still very often face-to-face, and where, in the absence of formal political parties (and sometimes as a result of government legislation against political societies), it was difficult to create stable institutional structures through which to focus the aspirations and demands of significant numbers of people. Instead, charismatic individuals strove to make an individual compact with those whom they led and compensate, at least in part, for a relative lack of formal organisation.

Many, though by no means all, of these individuals were drawn from the tradition of the 'gentleman radical', who had supposedly 'stooped' from his superior social position to take up the cause of the masses. Such individuals were assumed to possess independent fortunes, rendering them less susceptible to bribery and able to bear the expenses of campaigning. As John Belchem and James Epstein demonstrated in their biographies of Henry Hunt and Feargus O'Connor, and in the article they co-wrote on the subject for *Social History*, the gentleman radical needed to constantly re-affirm their compact with those

whom they led. [4] This required frequent exposure to audiences through political meetings, where they often spent considerable time re-establishing their credentials by outlining their personal sacrifices for the cause.

However, while some gentleman radicals were certainly men of rank, standing and wealth - Sir Francis Burdett springs to mind - others were in truth on the fringes of the gentry class.[5] O'Connell was of gentry stock, but his Catholicism rendered him socially marginal beyond his native Kerry, while he remained financially dependent on his income as a barrister until after Catholic Emancipation. Henry Hunt had been ostracised by Wiltshire society for cohabiting with the wife of a friend, a fact which may have pushed him towards political radicalism.[6] Feargus O'Connor may have been a Protestant Irish gentleman, but his uncle Arthur's involvement in United Irish politics and European revolutionary activity, and the unsuccessful prosecution of his father Roger for robbing the Galway mail coach, made him socially suspect.[7] As Miles Taylor has shown, Ernest Jones, perhaps the last of the genre, exaggerated his aristocratic pedigree the better to establish his claims to O'Connor's mantle.[8]

As Oliver MacDonagh identified in his biography of Daniel O'Connell, 'Championing' was a political strategy as much as a rhetorical trope. In an era when the concept of 'democracy' was still laden with revolutionary resonance, popular champions deliberately

[4] John Belchem and James Epstein, 'The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited', *Social History* 22:2 (1997), 174-93; James Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom: Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement, 1832-1842* (London & Canberra, 1982); John Belchem, *'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (Oxford, 1985).

[5] Arguably Burdett is the exception who proves the rule: coming out of the Foxite tradition, initially sitting for the pocket-borough of Boroughbridge before developing a popular following in the 'radical' constituency of Westminster. He was ill at ease with the mass platform developed by Hunt, and eventually came out as a Tory in the 1830s.

[6] Belchem, '*Orator' Hunt*, pp. 16-24

[7] Pickering, *Feargus O'Connor*, pp. 5-16

[8] Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones*, chap. 1.

opened themselves to the risk of persecution from a suspicious and sometimes vindictive government. The term 'champion' suggests that the individual so designated had been delegated by the people to fight on their behalf, and the notion of combat, usually but not always figurative, was never far away. Popular politicians liked to portray themselves as involved in personal strife with the functionaries of an oppressive state, often at risk of prosecution for the elastic crime of seditious libel, or even, in extreme cases, treason. For this reason, their political discourse was often aimed at personalities in the government or judiciary, especially those perceived as particularly reactionary such as Castlereagh, Peel, the Duke of Wellington or the Duke of Richmond. In most cases the 'combat' was merely figurative, though there were exceptions. Daniel O'Connell, for example, fought a fatal duel with John D'Esterre of the Dublin Corporation in 1815, and attempted on two occasions to take on the Chief Secretary of Ireland himself, Sir Robert Peel. These conflicts emerged directly from O'Connell's propensity to subject government functionaries and institutions to sustained and colourful verbal assaults. In MacDonagh's words, this strategy was 'calculated to reduce his political enemies to a level with Catholics, Irish or any other category of inferior beings . . . designed to counteract the instinctive cringe of the oppressed, and to force the proud and disdainful to engage with them upon equal terms.'[9] The public visibility of popular champions may be contrasted with the comfortable existence of most MPs, who rarely exposed themselves to their constituents outside election times.

[9] Oliver MacDonagh, *Hereditary Bondsman*, p. 98.

'Championing' in Parliament: Hunt, O'Connell and O'Connor

Of course, charisma alone could not sustain popular movements over significant periods of time. Huge effort went into developing networks of local associations, such as the Hampden Clubs founded by Major Cartwright in the years before Peterloo and the various Chartist groups of the 1830s and 1840s. These were kept enthused by periodic lectures, meetings, processions, petitioning campaigns and visits from regional or national leaders. Chartism even attempted, through its various national Conventions, to create an alternative forum to Parliament where popular grievances could be heard. Nevertheless, for reasons suggested in the introduction, the prestige of a parliamentary seat was a magnetic draw for many popular politicians. Parliament was one of the few national institutions of note, and (thanks to reforms brought about by John Wilkes the previous century) the only one whose members' words were routinely printed in the daily press. Parliament therefore provided the popular politician with the ultimate platform, and one which reached well beyond their core constituency.

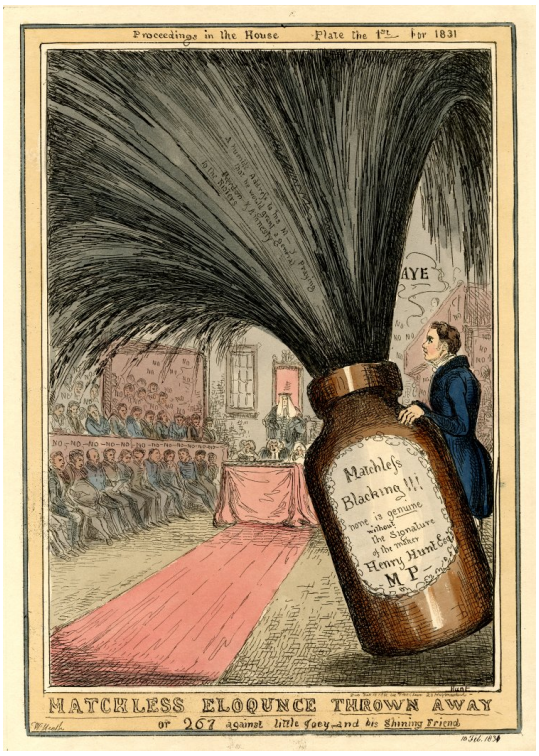
Making the transition from platform orator to parliamentary operator was notoriously difficult. Much of the business of the House of Commons was procedural and the opportunities for making barnstorming speeches relatively few. Moreover, the audience was nowhere near as receptive as most had been useful and was indeed often actively hostile both to the message that popular politicians were trying to push and also to the messenger himself. Henry Hunt and Feargus O'Connor both found it difficult to adapt to this new audience. Elected for Preston in 1830, Hunt was frequently isolated, and Members of all stamps routinely tried to 'cough' him down. William Heath's caricature *Matchless eloquence thrown away, or 267 against little Joey and his shining friend* sums up Hunt's position. Here Hunt is portrayed as a giant bottle of his own famous brand of shoe blacking,

splurging uselessly over the House as he and Joseph Hume (the 'little Joey' of the title) plead in vain for the pardon of those involved in the recent agricultural disturbances. Ironically the reference to 'Matchless eloquence', as well as the obvious pun on Hunt's advertising slogan, was something of a back-handed compliment, as his speech on this occasion has been seen as probably Hunt's best Parliamentary effort.[10] However, as John Osborne showed in the 1970s, this was not the whole story.[11] Hunt was seldom off his feet in the House, with *Historic Hansard* listing a total of 836 contributions during his eighteen-month stint as an MP. As Hunt's entry for the *History of Parliament* 1820-1832 attests, these interventions were on an equally astonishing range of topics, but what linked them was the desire to represent the voices of the disenfranchised masses to an institution dominated by the wealthy classes.

While Hunt was later lauded by the Chartists for his maintenance of Universal Suffrage principles during debates over the various versions of the Reform Bill, the truth is somewhat more complex. In the House, Hunt actually veered between universal suffrage militancy and reluctant acquiescence in a more limited measure. To some degree this encapsulates the dilemma of the 'people's champion' in parliament: caught between maintaining the absolute positions which his popular constituency demanded, and the accommodations and compromises legislative responsibility required. A visit to Lancashire following the defeat of the first Bill saw him return to London with renewed zeal; but another prolonged exposure to the Commons saw him finally cast his vote for Lord Grey's measure. Ironically Hunt was defeated at the first election after the Reform Act (a further irony was that the Act itself reduced Preston's electorate, which had been near universal

[10] John W. Osborne, 'Henry Hunt's Career in Parliament', *The Historian*, 39:1 (1976), 24-39, p. 33.
[11] John W. Osborne, 'Henry Hunt's Career in Parliament', *The Historian*, 39:1 (1976), 24-39.

before the introduction of the universal £10 property qualification for borough constituencies), with his opponents repeatedly attacking Hunt over his inattention to constituency business – another side-effect of presenting himself as the representative of the 'people' as a whole.[12] When he died in 1835 a hostile obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* summed up what became the general opinion of his brief parliamentary career: 'Like other noisy demagogues, he soon found his level [in the Commons], and became harmless and insignificant, except in his votes'.[13]



William Heath, *Matchless Eloquence Thrown Away* (London, 1831), British Museum BM 1902,1011.6200.

Most commentators past and present agree that Hunt's delivery and manner were far better suited to public meetings than the Commons chamber. At this point, however, it is worth remembering the role that newspaper reporting could play in helping or hampering the establishment of a parliamentary orator's reputation. The memoirs of George Jacob

[12] Margaret Escott, 'Preston', *History of Parliament 1820-1832*.
[13] Quoted in Margaret Escott, 'Henry Hunt (1773-1835), *History of Parliament 1820-1832.*

Holyoake include an instructive chapter on 'reporting speeches never made', which explained how reported speeches were often 'improved' for readers by Parliamentary reporters. Journalists could therefore damage the reputations of speakers simply by withholding this courtesy, and Holyoake alleged just such treatment for Hunt: 'When *The Times* sought to destroy the popularity of Orator Hunt of a former day, it reported his speeches verbatim. There are many speakers in Parliament who would suffer in public estimation if their repetitions and eccentricities of expression were recorded'.[14] It should also be remembered that around the same time O'Connell also complained of *The Times* butchering his speeches or even refusing to print them at all, leading to a brief feud with the press when the Irishman retaliated by having reporters barred from the gallery of the House.[15]

As with Hunt, Feargus O'Connor was returned to parliament late in his career as an extra-parliamentary leader, having first come in for Cork in 1832-35 as one of O'Connell's 'tail'. He was next elected for Nottingham in 1847, during the revival in his popularity among Chartists due to the opening of the first estates purchased under the Chartist Land Plan. This popularity had been under threat since the failure of the second Chartist petition in 1842 due to government repression and subsequent public controversies with other Chartist leaders such as James 'Bronterre' O'Brien and Thomas Cooper. As Stephen Roberts has shown, O'Connor's parliamentary career began with great hope, and O'Connor made a point of implementing Chartist principles by offering himself for re-election in Nottingham market-place every subsequent year.[16] However, O'Connor's election was followed closely

[14] George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, ii. 159.
[15] Angus Macintyre, *The Liberator: Daniel O'Connell and the Irish Party, 1830-1847* (London, 1965), pp. 155-6.
[16] Stephen Roberts, 'Feargus O'Connor in the House of Commons, 1847-1852', in Ashton, Fyson and Roberts (eds.), *The Chartist Legacy*, 102-118.

by what was widely portrayed as the debacle of the Kennington Common meeting in April 1848, the unravelling of the Chartist Land Company amid accusations of fraud (not proven) and incompetence (abundantly proven), and O'Connor's erratic and ineffective defence of the third Chartist petition which was beset with accusations of exaggeration and outright forgery.

Like Hunt, O'Connor was isolated in the House, and as his mass movement out-of-doors melted away he even attempted a tacit alliance with Cobden and Joseph Hume in support of their 'Little Charter' – a compromise with the 'millocracy' that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. However, O'Connor turned on Hume in the House, accusing him of a sham effort to unite middle and working-class reformers and prompting Cobden to launch what has been described as a 'devastating attack on O'Connor's own claims to speak for the working-classes'.[17] The laughter that greeted the Speaker's announcement to the House of Commons in February 1852 that O'Connor had been arrested and imprisoned for assaulting a police constable reveals the contempt in which he was held, and a few months later he was forcibly detained and removed from the House and sent to Tuke's asylum where he eventually died.[18]

There were of course some extra-parliamentary campaigners who *did* make the transition to becoming effective and respected parliamentarians. O'Connell is probably the best example of the leader of a mass movement who made this leap. He had become an MP almost by accident, as no other suitable candidate could be found to contest the Co. Clare election for the Catholic Committee in 1828. The fact that O'Connell as a Catholic was unable to take the oath of loyalty to the Protestant constitution expected of MPs meant

[17] Anthony Howe (ed.), *The Letters of Richard Cobden Volume II, 1848-1853* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 42 n. 4; *Hansard*, xcviii. 1307-11.
[18] Roberts, 'Feargus O'Connor in the House of Commons', pp. 102-3.

that he was officially unable to take his seat, precipitating the constitutional crisis which led to the concession of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Even then, the vindictiveness of his opponents saw to it that O'Connell was forced to stand for re-election under the new rules before he was able to take his seat in 1830.

O'Connell certainly felt the pressure when it came to giving his first major parliamentary speech, on the Reform Bill. Having prevaricated on previous occasions, he revealed his worries in a letter to his wife Mary:

> I am, darling, a foolish blockhead. Only think of my being so absurd as to feel nervous in the rascally House. Yet so it is. I must however speak out this day and I mean, with the help of God whose holy name be glorified, to speak out distinctly ... My own darling heart, my fame as a parliamentary orator depends on this day and I am speaking to an exhausted subject.[19]

The Commons could be an intimidating setting and was rife with snobbery towards outsiders, as the Irishman's concerns about speaking 'distinctly' hint. In 1841 Richard Cobden was mocked for his lack of classical learning, while Disraeli was famously shouted down during his maiden speech.[20] But the rewards for overcoming these obstacles could be great: O'Connell's speech was a triumph, his fame as a parliamentary orator secured by this and future performances.[21]

O'Connell was able to make the transition to effective parliamentarian partly because of his own versatility. Used to adapting himself to the very different constituencies

[19] O'Connell to Mary O'Connell, 8 March 1831, in O'Connell (ed.), *Correspondence,* iv. 287-8.
[20] Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 26 Sept. 1841, BL Add. MS 50750, fos. 58-63, reprinted in Morley, *Cobden*, i. 184-5 (misdated 27 Sept.); Blake, *Disraeli*, pp. 148-9.
[21] O'Connell to Mary, 10 March 1831, O'Connell (ed.), *Correspondence*, iv. 289-90; Macdonagh, *Emancipist*, pp. 31-2.

of the court room and the mass platform, he quickly found the right tone for the House of Commons. As Holyoake later put it:

> O'Connell had three manners: a didactic tone in the Courts – dignified argument in the House of Commons – raciness on the platform, where he abandoned himself to himself, on the Yankee principle, 'Fill yourself full of your subject as though you were a barrel, take out the bung, and let human nature caper'.[22]

Of course, this was not the whole story. O'Connell had the cachet of success, his campaign for Catholic Emancipation having achieved its objective; he also had the great benefit of a substantial following in the House of Commons itself, as Catholic Emancipation and the reform of parliament brought in other Irish MPs many of whom owed their election directly to O'Connell's influence and patronage. Self-constituted as the 'Irish Party', they were often more derisively referred to as O'Connell's 'tail'.[23] For this reason as much as his powers in debate he was courted by the Whigs, their alliance sealed by the Lichfield House Compact of 1834.

However, O'Connell continued to rely to a great extent on his following out of doors, and this limited his room for manoeuvre in the House. His followers' biggest hold on him was financial. The Catholic Emancipation campaign had been funded by the 'Catholic Rent', a national system of small contributions often collected by local Catholic priests. After Emancipation had been achieved, this morphed into the annual O'Connell Tribute, administered by O'Connell's confidante, P. V. Fitzpatrick. The success of this effectively wiped out O'Connell's debts, allowing him finally to give up his legal practice and dedicate

[22] George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, 2 vols. (London, 1906), i. p. 37.
[23] See Macintyre, *The Liberator*.

himself to politics full-time. However, this also brought huge risks for O'Connell in being identified to closely with the party that he himself had designated the 'base, brutal and bloody Whigs'. The Lichfield Compact, while allowing O'Connell to claim successes in promoting reform of Irish tithes and of Irish corporations, drew him into dangerously close connection with a party which became increasingly unpopular due to its reforms of the poor laws, its opposition to the ten-hour working day in factories, and the deteriorating economic position from 1837. O'Connell was wise enough to resist attempts to buy him off with minor office, but by 1839 he was privately confessing his despair to Fitzpatrick as receipts from the 'Tribute' collapsed, and contemplating retreat to the Catholic Monastery at Clongowes to live out his years in peaceful reflection. O'Connell's hostility to Chartism also cost him the support of English radicals.[24] His position in Ireland was restored by the defeat of the Whigs in 1841 and the advent of Sir Robert Peel's second ministry. With the removal of the popular Lord Morpeth from the office of Lord Lieutenant, the path was cleared for O'Connell's second great extra-parliamentary movement, that for Repeal of the union with Ireland.

Richard Cobden as 'failed' people's champion?

Another other notable success in making the journey from platform to parliament was Richard Cobden and John Bright. Cobden was a very different case to O'Connell. To begin with, the movement with which he was associated, the Anti-Corn Law League, was never a 'mass movement' in the sense that Chartism was and Catholic Emancipation became in its latter stages. This was not for the want of trying, at least in the League's earlier phases

[24] Matthew Roberts, 'Daniel O'Connell, Repeal, and Chartism in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions', *Journal of Modern History*, 90:1 (2018), 1-39.

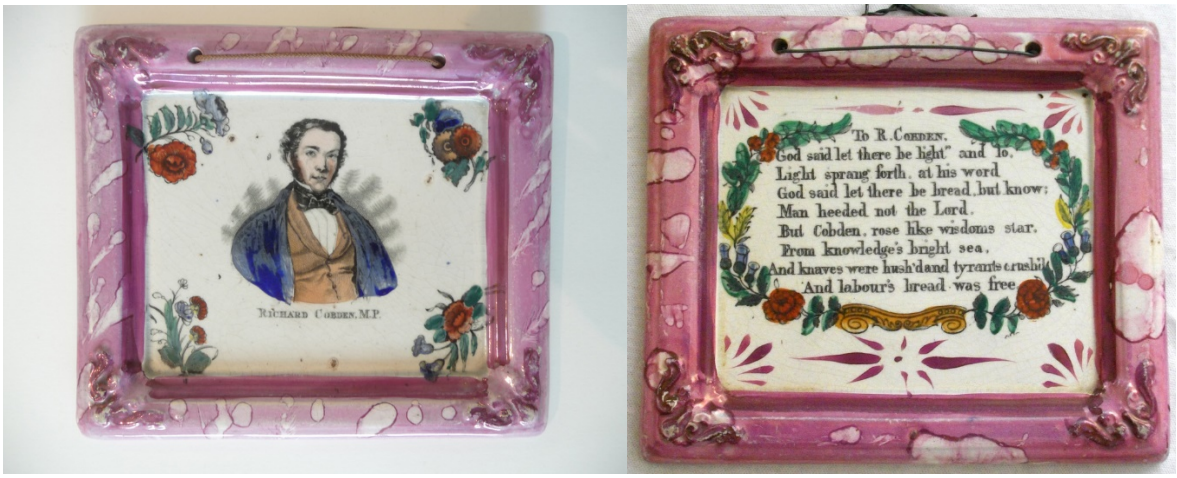
when lecturers were dispatched throughout the four nations of the British Isles. However, this was a movement which remained largely in the hands of the 'millocrats' of Lancashire, and unlike the openly democratic Chartist Conventions it was run very much along the lines of the 'subscriber democracies' which R. J. Morris has identified as the quintessential mode of middle-class voluntary action in this period.

Cobden was therefore not a 'people's champion' in the mode of O'Connell or O'Connor. He was in any case temperamentally unsuited to such a position, though there were some notable attempts to cast him in that role. The first came in February 1843 when he notoriously clashed with Peel in the House of Commons over his remarks that he held the premier 'personally responsible' for the distress then prevalent in the country. Peel, still reeling from an assassination attempt which had mistakenly claimed the life of his private secretary, chose to interpret Cobden's words as an incitement to further violence. While the incident damaged Cobden in the House, in Lancashire, Scotland and other League strongholds it had the opposite effect – leading to a flood of addresses in Cobden's support. By fortuitous timing, Cobden had recently completed a political tour of Scotland where he had been granted citizenship of numerous Scottish burghs – unsurprisingly these towns were anxious to defend Cobden's honour against what was widely perceived as an attempt to bully and discredit him.[25] In a very real sense Cobden was portrayed as the champion of an important part of popular opinion against the functionaries of an indifferent and sometimes hostile state. As I have argued elsewhere, the incident was instrumental in making Cobden a household name and enhancing his reputation as an independent MP ready to stand up for the rights of both the disenfranchised masses and disadvantaged

[25] These addresses can be found in the Cobden Papers, West Sussex Record Office.

minority groups, including Welsh dissenters who deluged him with petitions against the education clauses of Sir James Graham's factory bill.[26]

The repeal of the Corn Laws in June 1846 saw a further attempt to cast Cobden as the true 'people's champion'. This is demonstrated in some of the vast outpouring of memorabilia around repeal, some of which was produced by the League itself, notably in the form of the medallions cast for the great celebration of Corn Law repeal in Manchester and Salford on 2 August 1846. Other examples include the Sunderland plaques produced around the same time, including one with a verse portraying Cobden as an instrument of divine will, thwarting the efforts of governments to interfere with the right of the people to their daily bread (see below). For the occasion of the free trade celebration in Manchester, the working-class Yorkshire poet Robert Dibb penned a laudatory poem demanding 'A wreath for Cobden – A bright sparkling wreath' and finishing 'Hurrah for Cobden – and Hurrah for Free Trade; in 1842 Dibb had contributed similar verse to the *Northern Star* in praise of Feargus O'Connor, but clearly by 1846 Dibb considered O'Connor yesterday's man.[27]



[26] Simon Morgan, 'From Warehouse Clerk to Corn Law Celebrity: the Making of a National Hero', in Anthony Howe and Simon Morgan (eds.), *Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Liberalism: Richard Cobden Bicentenary Essays* (Ashgate, 2006).
[27] *Manchester Courier*, 5 Aug. 1846

Sunderland plaques (c.1846) celebrating Cobden: Stephen Smith, matesoundthepump.com

In *Celebrities, Heroes and Champions* I argue that what can be termed the 'celebrification' of Cobden in the wake of Corn Law repeal was an important part of Cobden's co-option into the mainstream political culture. Much of the ephemera produced by third parties divorced Cobden from the immediate context of a hard-fought, occasionally violent and even more occasionally subversive campaign by the Anti-Corn Law League which had often been portrayed as a threat to the British constitution by the Tory press. With Chartism at least temporarily in abeyance and the political map in Parliament being redrawn by the Conservative revolt against Peel (the true architect of repeal) it must have been attractive to have a more reasonable and respectable popular champion than the demagogue O'Connor. The more radical reformers, however, looked on this development with horror. The O'Connorite Chartists had always opposed the League, on the basis that Corn Law repeal without political reform would mean that the working classes would not see the full economic benefit of the change. Their suspicions were further aroused by the fact that the League's Council was dominated by Manchester Mill Owners, some of whom had made no secret of their belief that lower bread prices would allow them to pay lower wages. In 1851, when the more advanced radicals perceived that Cobden and other middle-class radicals were (in their eyes) getting ready to hi-jack the visit of their new idol, the Hungarian revolutionary Lajos Kossuth, *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* went on the offensive. The author was anxious to correct Kossuth's impression that Cobden was popular among the working classes, where in reality he was 'the champion of a section of their oppressors', the manufacturers, whose interests had 'as much identity with those of the crushed millions as fire with water'.[28]

[28] *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 2 Nov. 1851.

Cobden himself was deeply reluctant to being cast as a popular champion. His decision to depart for a lengthy tour of Europe in the aftermath of repeal, while having the attraction of helping him to spread the gospel of free trade across the continent, was also partly driven by a desire to abstract himself from the social and political 'whirlpool' which repeal of the Corn Laws and his new-found celebrity had generated.[29] Instead, in the wake of repeal itself he wrote an extraordinary letter to Sir Robert Peel urging him to complete the re-drawing of the political map of Britain (and the House of Commons) by dissolving Parliament and putting himself at the head of a middle-class party which would draw in the urban manufacturers against the aristocratic Whigs and Tory squires.[30] By the time a reform agitation began in earnest in the 1860s, he was content to leave its leadership to a younger generation.

In establishing his credentials in the Commons following his election for Stockport in 1841, Cobden benefitted from an understated debating style based around the calm presentation of facts and statistics – the 'unaffected and unadorned' eloquence that Peel praised so extravagantly in his own resignation speech.[31] He also had the benefit of being able to attach himself to an existing network of independent radical MPs. The elevation of more ex-League 'Manchester School' MPs to the House of Commons over the next few years helped to strengthen that network, at least until it spectacularly unravelled between the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 and their virtual wipe-out at the General Election of 1857. While maintaining his independence and turning down office under both Lord John Russell and Lord Palmerston, Cobden also established a reputation as a practical politician,

[29] Cobden to Abraham Paulton, 4 July 1846, in *Letters*, i. 441.
[30] Cobden to Peel 23 June 1846, printed in John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman, 1881), i. 390-97
[31]

scoring a spectacular success for his free-trade principles when, with Gladstone's blessing, he helped to negotiate the Cobden-Chevalier Commercial Treaty with France in 1861. This seems to have been the occasion for a further outpouring of public affection to him, as was his death in April 1865. From the being the 'gothic invader' of 1841, Cobden had become part of the political furniture of the mid-Victorian House of Commons. As Disraeli famously put it in his response to Cobden's death:

> There are some Members of Parliament who, though not present in the body, are still Members of this House: independent of dissolutions, of the caprice of constituencies, even of the course of time. I think, Sir, Mr. Cobden was one of these men. I believe that when the verdict of posterity shall be recorded on his life and conduct, it will be said of him that he was, without doubt, the greatest political character the pure middle class of this country has yet produced—an ornament to the House of Commons, and an honour to England.[32]

From 'People's Champion' to 'Tribune of the People'

Early nineteenth-century political culture drew principally for its imagery and mind-set on three powerful idioms: Classical literature and history, a romanticised English past, and Christianity. The idea of the 'people's champion' (in contrast to the firmly classical 'Tribune of the People'), drew on all three, having overtones of the gladiatorial arena, and with Bible stories such as that of David and Goliath providing a ready metaphor for the unequal struggle between the chosen man and the state Leviathan. E. P. Thompson famously highlighted the influence of Christian's fight with Apollyon in *Pilgrim's Progress* in shaping

[32] *Hansard*, vol. 178, col. 677.

popular perceptions of early nineteenth-century political and economic conflict as an apocalyptic, existential struggle between good and evil.[33] Hannah More's poem *Balshazzar* has Daniel refer to Joshua as 'thy people's champion' when exhorting God for aid (More also wrote poems about Daniel and David and Goliath). There were of course other influences: the label 'The People's Friend' also drew on the French Revolutionary example of the journalist Marat, editor of *L'Ami du Peuple*, while the Byronic hero, with his insouciant attitude towards authority, also became a model for their struggles with the *status quo* in the form of the state and its representatives. Arguably, however, the notion of the 'People's Champion' was shaped most by the contemporaneous rediscovery of an imagined chivalric past. In the chivalric model, it was the duty of the wealthy and the educated to protect the weak by speaking out on their behalf and campaigning for their rights, even at the potential cost of personal suffering. These were the available cultural images which shaped the presentation of popular politicians such as Hunt, O'Connell and O'Connor, who sought to wield mass popular support as an effective tool for pressurising parliament into political reforms.

However, in the final third of the nineteenth century, the great age of the extra-parliamentary pressure group gave way to the era of the mass-membership political party, and the notion of the 'people's champion', defined primarily in opposition to a corrupt and unrepresentative Parliament, became an anachronism. The last great extra-parliamentary campaign of the period covered by *Celebrities, Heroes and Champions* was that of the Reform League, whose activities contributed to the passage of the Second Reform Act of 1867. Lampooned by *Punch* as a 'leap in the dark', the act aimed to enfranchise

[33] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, chap. 2.

'respectable' working men, though this proved a slippery category.[34] Its outcome was to double the electorate, 'propelling the British state into the age of mass politics'.[35] In its impact on the British state and society, and crucially on the party system, it was a far more important turning point than the Great Reform Act of 1832.[36] By the time the act was passed, many of the great reformers and radical leaders of the first half of the century had left the stage. Burdett, Hunt, O'Connell and O'Connor were long dead. Cobden had died in April 1865. Some of the more minor players were pursuing new careers: Thomas Cooper as a Christian lecturer; Ernest Jones as a barrister in Manchester, where he found a new avocation as 'the people's advocate'.[37]

Arguably, even before 1867 changed the rules of the political game and forced both Liberals and Conservatives to court the popular vote, the struggles of the 1840s had reinforced the primacy of Parliament in political life. The Chartist Conventions had failed to undermine its legitimacy, and Chartism itself, at least as a mass-movement, had broken on the rock of its obduracy in 1848. As Norman McCord identified, Parliament had been the 'decisive theatre' for Corn Law repeal in 1846, though he surely underplayed the importance of the League for keeping the issue at the forefront of political debate and popular consciousness.[38] The demise of O'Connell's Repeal movement in 1843, followed by the retreat at Kennington Common in April 1848, saw radicalism abandon the mass platform and remain fractured and fragmented for more than a decade.[39] The age of the 'people's

[34] *Punch*, 3 Aug. 1867; Keith McClelland, "'England's greatness, the working man"', in Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), 71-118.
[35] Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote*, p. 1.
[36] Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015), p. 274.
[37] Taylor, *Ernest Jones*, chap. 6.
[38] McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, chap. 8.
[39] Taylor, *Decline of British radicalism*.

champion', oppositional, aggressive, often employing the language if not the actuality of violence, drew to a close amid disillusionment and the return of a fragile prosperity.

The visits of Kossuth and Garibaldi, in 1851-2 and 1864 respectively, dealt with in chapter six of my book, demonstrated that popular enthusiasm could still be recruited for political purposes, but also reinforced the difficulties of harnessing it. Rather than new popular heroes out of doors, media attention focused on more or less self-appointed 'Tribunes' in parliament itself. The Tribune of the People was a concept drawn from ancient Rome, where Tribunes represented and defended the interests of ordinary Roman citizens in the senate. In British political culture, the concept had gained currency in the context of the Westminster constituency in the time of Charles James Fox and Sir Francis Burdett.[40] George Julian Harney adopted the style when sitting for the Chartist Convention of 1839, while the Chartist-sympathising MP for Finsbury, Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, was awarded the title by the *Sun* in 1847.[41] It re-entered the mainstream in the 1850s, first applied to John Arthur Roebuck for his role in forcing an enquiry into the disastrous conduct of the Crimean War.[42] However, beyond his Sheffield constituency, Roebuck squandered the position through too ready a recourse to personal invective and his savage *post-mortem* attacks on Aberdeen's ministry.[43]

Thereafter the appellation was more lastingly associated with John Bright. Bright's journey to acceptance in the Commons was more circuitous than that of his political partner, Cobden. Having developed a bruising, sarcastic knock-about style in rowdy public meetings, where he was often up against Chartists (including O'Connor himself on at least

[40] Baer, *Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster*, pp. 42-68.
[41] *Operative*, 16 Dec. 1838; 31 March 1839; *Sun*, 7 June, repr. *Northern Star*, 12 June 1847.
[42] See the ironic use of the title in the *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Feb. 1855.
[43] Asa Briggs, *Victorian People* (Harmondsworth, 1965), chap 3, esp. p. 89.

one occasion), Bright was slower to adapt to the etiquette and tone of parliamentary debate and was apparently reluctant to abandon the *ad hominem* style.[44] It was during the Crimean War that he began to emerge from Cobden's shadow as a parliamentary heavyweight in his own right, helped by measured orations such as his famous 'Angel of Death' speech on the Crimean War.[45] Despite bouts of poor mental health, he was the last of the great extra-parliamentary campaigners of the 1830s and '40s to remain active up to and beyond 1867. His support for the Union during the American Civil War saw him beatified as an American hero, while he achieved a new level of domestic popularity as the parliamentary champion of the out-of-doors agitation for another reform act. While his continued Parliamentary attacks on the aristocracy made him anathema to the old Whigs, he was eventually appointed to office as President of the Board of Trade during Gladstone's first ministry.

All this seemed inconceivable in 1857 when Bright was ejected from Parliament by his Manchester constituents, from whom he had become increasingly estranged during the Crimean War. However, as early as June of that year the *Morning Chronicle* was lamenting his absence from the political scene and looking forward to his return: 'that he may stand up against traitors and compromisers, and fulfil those functions of "Tribune of the People," of whose misuse so strange and striking an example is afforded in the recent conduct of Mr Roebuck'.[46] It seems that the *Chronicle* already assumed that the presence of such a 'Tribune' was an essential, if not official, part of the constitution. When Bright was returned unopposed for Birmingham later that year, he was still convalescing from nervous collapse.

[44] See Gammage
[45] *Hansard*, 23 Feb. 1855, vol. 136 cols. 1755-62.
[46] *Morning Chronicle*, 19 June 1857.

In his absence, Duncan McLaren declared that his brother-in-law was ready to take up the cause of parliamentary reform while maintaining his position as an independent radical: 'As a tribune of the people, he would denounce any shortcoming of the Palmerston Ministry, and struggle for the enfranchisement of the great body of his countrymen'.[47]

Conclusions:

MPs returned at the head of great popular movements faced many challenges, not least the difficulty of adapting to the forms, rules and customs of the House. However, they also had the challenge of satisfying their followers out of doors, who could often be impatient of parliamentary manoeuvring and suspicious of compromises. O'Connell only fully recovered his status as Ireland's champion after the fall of the Whigs and the advent of Peel's second ministry, which gave O'Connell free rein to launch his final great movement for the Repeal of the Union. The Chartists primarily relied on Thomas Slingsby Duncombe to be their Parliamentary champion. Duncombe was careful to keep the movement at arms length, not accepting any formal position within it. The Anti-Corn Law Leaguers were the exceptions who proved the rule, as the League remained primarily a movement of middle-class business owners rather than a mass-movement in the Chartist sense. Moreover, the demise of the mass platform itself and the relative quiescence of the population over the succeeding years perhaps made Parliament more willing to listen to those who claimed to speak on behalf of 'the people'. The People's Champion' had too often appeared as the demagogue at the head of a threatening mass-movement, with the Chartist slogan of 'peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must' summing up the threat of potential violence which that position implied. The 'Tribune of the People' instead was cast as in dialogue with the

[47] *Caledonian Mercury*, 12 Aug. 1857.

more reasoning elements of the people, increasingly characterised as the 'respectable artisans' whose political construction during the debates over the Second Reform Act is described in the work of Keith McClelland.[48] Crucially, the Tribune was not beholden to the unruly masses for his seat in Parliament and could therefore act independently. This shift in the language of popular representation therefore spoke to a world which was changing, where mass movements were no longer a permanent part of the political landscape, and where reason and pragmatism (supposedly) increasingly won out over passion and demagoguery.

However, it is important not to draw these diving lines too closely. Cultural change is a messy business, not least change in political culture. In Mile's Taylor's words, The campaign of the Reform League 'turned on the spectacle and carnival of a bona-fide people's movement', and even drew Ernest Jones out of semi-retirement to act as a paid lecturer.[49] Nevertheless, it was Jones's erstwhile antagonist Bright who was remembered as the defining figure of the campaign. As with the Anti-Corn Law League, the Reform League helped to force the political agenda; but once again parliament was the 'decisive theatre'. Nevertheless Whig suspicion of being seen to act at the dictates of the still-too-radical Bright helped derail Gladstone's bill and left the Tories under Disraeli to carry the measure over the line.[50] For many ultra-radicals, Bright was still too closely identified with the 'millocracy' to be trusted, and it is telling that Joseph Cowen endeavoured to minimise his influence on Tyneside.[51] Notwithstanding Patrick Joyce's argument that the Reform Act culminated with Bright's elevation to the status of 'a kind of cultural icon of the new

[48] E.g. McClelland's section of Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010)
[49] Taylor, *Ernest Jones*, pp. 210-20.
[50] Saunders, *Democracy and the* Vote, pp. 267-8.
[51] Allen, *Joseph Cowen*, pp. 114-15.

democracy', a more effective bridge between the 'people' and Parliament was required. Arguably that role would come to be filled by the reimagining of Gladstone as 'The People's William'.[52]

[52] Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects*, p. 142.