Sheffield Hallam University

Women and Late Chartism: Women's Rights in Mid-Victorian England

ROBERTS, Matthew <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0639-1634>

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Citation:

ROBERTS, Matthew (2021). Women and Late Chartism: Women's Rights in Mid-Victorian England. The English Historical Review, 136 (581), 918-949. [Article]

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*Women and Late Chartism: Women's Rights in Mid-Victorian England**

ABSTRACT

This article revisits the relationship between women and Chartism, the mass movement for democratic rights that swept across Britain from the late 1830s to the 1850s. It argues that the opportunities for women to participate in Chartism were more varied, extensive and enduring than has often been argued. Particular attention is paid to late Chartism (1843-52) by documenting in full, for the first time, the number of female Chartist bodies in existence for the period of late Chartism. By presenting new material, based on a combing of the press and the Home Office files, the article then moves on to consider the role played by Chartist women in 1848, the year of European revolution when the movement revived. By presenting new material, based on a combing of the press and the Home Office files, the article then moves on to consider the role played by Chartist women in 1848, the year of European revolution when the movement revived. It then builds on the theme of late Chartism by offering a case study of the Women's Rights Association (WRA), a body established in 1851 by a group of Sheffield Chartist women, to campaign for votes for women, which, it is argued here, represented the culmination of a women's rights discourse within early Chartism, documented by previous historians. The article concludes by comparing the women's rights discourse in early Chartism and other contemporary feminisms with that deployed by the WRA.

Since the 1970s there have been several works which have examined the role of women in Chartism, the British movement for democratic rights which dominated popular

politics from the late 1830s to the early 1850s. While the resurgence of feminism, the collapse of Marxism and the 'fall of class' in the 1980s and 1990s created the space for a far-reaching examination of the gender politics of Chartism, historians had been recovering the role played by women in the movement for some time. This earlier research was largely limited to documenting the extent of women's involvement in the movement, with the key conclusions being that: women were heavily involved in early Chartism (to 1842); women justified their 'intrusion' into the male-world of politics on account of the poverty of their families; women mainly positioned themselves as auxiliaries – as helpers of their menfolk rather than as political actors in their own right; and, as Chartism progressed, women were increasingly marginalized.[1] This earlier work laid important foundations for the more ambitious interpretations that began to appear in the 1990s. The most substantial work to date is Jutta Schwarzkopf's rich monograph *Women in the Chartist Movement*, though this has tended to be overshadowed by Anna Clark's *Struggle for the Breeches*,[2] in part because Clark's was a much broader study but also because Schwarzkopf's overall argument was strikingly similar to that of Clark's: for all that women were involved in Chartism, their role was highly and increasingly circumscribed as the movement developed, a reflection of the patriarchal attitudes of the working-class men who dominated the movement.

* I would like to thank my colleague, Professor Alison Twells, who first suggested that the Sheffield Women's Rights Association deserved more attention than it had received, and for her comments on this article. Thanks also to Dr. Jane Rendall for her careful reading of an earlier draft of this article, to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, and to convenors and audiences at: 'Chartism Day 2019', held at Newcastle University, 1 June 2019; and 'Before Suffrage: Women and Political Participation in Europe 1815-1850', Warwick Quaker Meeting House, 23 November 2019.

[1] C.E. Martin, 'Female Chartism: A Study in Politics', (University of Wales MA, 1973), p. 53; D. Thompson, 'Women and Nineteenth-Century Radical Politics: A Lost Dimension', in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley, eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (London, 1976), pp. 112-38; M.I. Thomis and J. Grimmett, *Women in Protest, 1800-1850* (London, 1982), ch. 6; D.J.V. Jones, 'Women and Chartism', *History*, lxviii (1983), pp. 1-21.

[2] J. Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement* (Basingstoke, 1991); A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London, 1995).

At the same time, however, both Schwarzkopf and Clark uncovered the existence of a women's rights discourse within Chartist gender politics, even if it was subordinate and, subsequently, marginal. Although Schwarzkopf contends that votes for women was never seriously considered by Chartists, throughout her book it becomes clear that this was, in fact, a widely debated and open question – a conclusion supported by Gleadle's work on the influence of radical Unitarians on moral force Chartism.[3] Similarly, Clark, building on the work of Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor,[4] argued that Chartists increasingly bought into a Lockean, civic humanist conception of political rights which simply extended the idea that citizenship should be limited to those with property by defining skill as a form of property, as well the emerging cult of separate spheres, thus jettisoning the sexually egalitarian Paineite view of citizenship as a natural right. But elsewhere Clark cites evidence (as does Schwarzkopf) which shows that Chartists - including women - continued to legitimate their demands by recourse to Paineite notions of natural rights.[5] Taken together, both Schwarzopf and Clark's books showed how Chartist women cleverly negotiated their way in to the public sphere – through the trope of what Clark terms 'militant domesticity' which justified women stepping outside the private sphere to defend their families, for example – and sometimes in ways that fundamentally challenged the notion that they had no place there. As Clark concedes, as women 'became more deeply involved in Chartism, some women changed their political identities from passive spectators to outspoken activists'.[6]

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[3] Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, p. 59-62, 68, 90, 101; K. Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-51* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 75-88.
[4] S. Alexander, 'Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History', *History Workshop Journal,* xvii (1984), pp. 125-149; B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1984), pp. 268-9.
[5] Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 230; Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, p. 71.
[6] A. Clark, 'The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language, and Class in the 1830s and 1840s', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxi (1992), pp. 62-88 (at 77); id., *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 229.

Twenty-five years on since the publication of Clark's book, and nearly thirty years since the appearance of Schwarzkopf's, what impact have these works had on the historiography of Chartism? A number of historians have challenged or refined particular aspects of these interpretations: de Larrabeiti cautioned against taking at face value the repeated declarations of Chartist women that they were mere auxiliaries (this was a highly stylized rhetoric designed to disarm opponents and masked female political agency); Eileen Yeo took Schwarzkopf to task for the way she was too quick to collapse the London Chartist leader William Lovett's relationship with his wife, Mary, into a straightforward ideology of patriarchal separate spheres as this failed to acknowledge the companionable nature of their marriage and the considerable agency exercised by Mary, and Malcolm Chase has shown that the London Chartist Elizabeth Neesom was not just a political partner of her husband but an activist in her own right; Helen Rogers demonstrated that Chartist women did not always present themselves as wives, mothers and daughters, but also saw themselves as students and teachers – not that the roles of mothers and wives was necessarily disempowering as work on 'woman's mission' and 'militant motherhood' attests; and my own recent work has shown how Chartist women were active producers and consumers of the radical tradition, the invention of which was a central part of the Chartist experience.[7] The cumulative effect of this and other scholarship, however, has been to further excavate and amplify the existence of a women's rights discourse within the movement, along with furnishing more evidence of the multifarious ways in which women participated in the early years of the movement.

[7] M. de Larrabeiti, 'Conspicuous Before the World: The Political Rhetoric of the Chartist Women', in E. Janes Yeo, ed., *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 106-26; E. Janes Yeo, 'Will the Real Mary Lovett Please Stand Up?: Chartism, gender and autobiography', in M. Chase and I. Dyck, eds., *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 163-81; Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007), p. 191; id., 'Neesom, Elizabeth (1797/8-1866), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 12 Sept. 2019; H. Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 17, 82; M. Roberts, *Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero* (Abingdon, 2019), ch. 1.

Women set up their own organisations as took a full part in the communal, festive and crowd activity of the early years, and were central to a number of Chartist tactics such as exclusive dealing, petitioning, and fund raising for the movement. In addition to this was the highly unusual practices – for the time – of admitting women as members on the same basis of men, as Lovett's National Association did in the early 1840s. Also unusual and assertive was the ruling of some Female Chartist Associations (FCAs) that only women could be members and only by the consent of women could men address their meetings, or – even more unusual – that women lecturers could address mixed audiences.[8]

Despite these qualifications, virtually all historians are agreed that women were increasingly marginalized as Chartism progressed, whether measured by the decline of FCAs or women participating in crowd politics.[9] Even Tom Scriven's recent work on Chartism and masculinity ultimately reinforces the marginalization thesis.[10] For all the impressive scope of scholarship, the view that women did not participate in any significant way after 1842 remains to be proven as little sustained work has been undertaken on this aspect of late Chartism. As long ago as 1985 Jane Rendall observed that 'we need to know a good deal more about the later careers of women active within Chartism'.[11] David Jones also called for 'a closer investigation of the common claim that working-class women "retreated into the home at some time around, or a little before the middle of the century"'.[12] As this article will show, there is considerable evidence to

[8] Gleadle, *Early Feminists*, p. 77, Chase, *Chartism*, p. 186.
[9] The most recent narrative history of Chartism also largely confirms the arguments of Schwarzkopf and Clark: Chase, *Chartism*, pp. 43, 359. Rogers also reinforces this argument: Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 27.
[10] T. Scriven, 'Humour, Satire and Sexuality in the Culture of Early Chartism', *Historical Journal*, lvii (2014), pp. 157-78; id., *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical Moral Politics, 1820-70* (Manchester, 2017).
[11] J. Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 242.
[12] Jones, 'Women and Chartism', p. 19.

suggest that the opportunities for women to participate in Chartism may have been more varied, extensive, and, crucially, enduring than either Schwarzkopf, Clark and others have been willing to concede. Further, the role of women within Chartism, and the gender politics of the movement, need reassessing in light of more complex models of female political activism and nineteenth-century feminism, which were only beginning to emerge when Schwarzkopf and Clark's books were published.[13]

Late Chartism remains relatively under-studied compared with the movement in its heyday, but as numerous studies have underlined, the movement cannot be written-off after the 'climb-down' following the Kennington Common meeting in April 1848. Chartism endured into the 1850s, albeit more as a pressure-group than a mass movement. This article begins by documenting in full, for the first time, the number of female Chartist bodies in existence for the period of late Chartism (1843-51). By presenting new material, based on a combing of the press and the Home Office files, the article then moves on to consider the role played by Chartist women in 1848, the year of European revolution when the movement revived. It then builds on the theme of late Chartism by offering a case study of the Women's Rights Association (WRA), a body established in 1851 by a group of Sheffield Chartist women, to campaign for votes for women. The WRA is mentioned in a number of histories, but it remains a shadowy body, and it has not been accorded the significance it deserves: in 1851 it sent the first ever petition for women's suffrage to the House of Commons by a group of women, predating by fifteen years the more famous petition organised by Liberal middle-class

[13] B. Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1997); K. Gleadle and S. Richardson, eds., *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat* (Basingstoke, 2000); S. Morgan, *A Victorian Woman's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2007); K. Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford, 2010); S. Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2013).

women at the time of the second Reform Bill agitations.[14] In contrast to previous accounts which have presented the WRA as either an Owenite import or a middle-class feminist creation, this article suggests that the body emerged from within the Chartist movement itself, and was the culmination of the women's rights discourse and vibrant tradition of women's participation. Thus, it amplifies further the women's rights discourse detected by previous scholars. By drawing on the Sheffield press and using new archival material, this article reconstructs the full range of activities undertaken by the WRA and it sheds new light on the women who led the body. The article concludes by comparing the women's rights discourse in early Chartism and other contemporary feminisms with that deployed by the WRA.

I

There are a number of problems with the interpretation that there was a marked decline in the participation of women in Chartism, the first being evidential. There is much that we do not know about Chartist women, and perhaps are never likely to know because of the paucity of evidence, a problem that increases as Chartism progressed. The fact is that the main source for documenting Chartist women – the Chartist press – was a shadow of its former self by 1848, with far fewer titles and reports of Chartist localities. Apart from the *Northern Star* – the premier Chartist newspaper – the remainder were periodicals which did not carry news items such as reports of the doings in Chartist localities, which for the early years of the movement contain much information relating to female

[14] For this campaign, and the middle-class feminist background of it, see J. Rendall, 'The Citizenship of Women and the Reform Act of 1867', in C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender, and the Making of the Second Reform of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 119-78. Barbara Caine's survey of English feminism, for example, does not mention the WRA or its petition: *English Feminism*, pp. xiii-xiv. The WRA does, however, feature as an entry in E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866-1928* (London, 2003), pp. 630-31.

Chartism. As a result, the conclusions reached by Thompson and Schwarzkopf about the marked decline of FCAs are difficult to quantify. True, by 1848 the *recorded* number of FCAs had declined compared with the period of early Chartism, but even with the paucity of evidence, the decline was nowhere near as steep as has been suggested (Figure 1).[15] Other, often hostile, newspaper sources are also an unreliable indicator of female Chartism, especially in relation to crowd activity when gender-neutral terms such as the mob were used, though this was not always the case as well shall see in relation to 1848.[16]

A total of fifty-two separate female Chartist bodies have been identified as being in existence at some point between 1843 and 1851 (Table 1).[17] Only a small proportion of these bodies appear to have been included in the lists compiled by previous historians.[18] While this means that the total number of around 150 female Chartist bodies over the whole period of the movement (1838-52) identified by Thompson and Schwarzkopf would need revising upwards, the fact remains that around one-third of these bodies existed during the period of late Chartism, which hardly suggests that the opportunities for women to participate in Chartism were being systematically and inexorably closed

[15] D. Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1984), p. 122; Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, p. 199.
[16] An observation made by Nicholas Rogers for an earlier period, which still applies for the Chartist years. N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), p. 223.
[17] The number can be raised to fifty-three, if a group of women operatives at the Fabric factory in Boulogne, France, are included, some of whom may have been Chartist emigrants. This group of women sent 14*s* 4½d to the defence fund for Chartists standing trial: *Northern Star*, 4 Feb. 1843. See also F. Bensimon, 'British Workers in France, 1815-1848', *Past & Present*, ccxiii (2011), pp. 147-89.
[18] This figure has been calculated by including any explicit reference in the press to a *group* of female Chartists: not just FCAs, but also where a discrete body of Chartist women were mentioned - notably in the subscription lists for prisoners and their families which detailed voluntary contributions sent in by local groups of Chartists. Excluded from this list are the numerous references to single female Chartists who also sent in contributions. Also excluded are the many references to Chartist women who attended larger meetings of the movement – unless explicit mention was made of the women being part of an identifiable female body.

off – not least because there was a marked upsurge in 1848-9: a total of twenty-three separate FCAs were in existence in 1848-9; the same number in existence in 1843.[19]

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

The figure of fifty-two almost certainly underestimates the number of female Chartist bodies in existence due to the fragmentary nature of the historical record: only those bodies which sent in reports (or monies) to the *Northern Star* gained a place in the pages of the newspaper. Thus, while the table suggests that only a minority of these bodies endured beyond a fleeting existence, it seems fair to assume that at least some of these *did* endure but are not represented in the historical record. Again, as far as we can tell, with the notable exception of Rochdale and the WRA in Sheffield, discussed below, all the FCAs had disappeared by 1852, though it is surely no coincidence that this was the year in which the *Northern Star* ceased publication.

Female Chartism, it has been argued, was strongest in places where significant numbers of working-class women were employed in manufacture, particularly textiles.[20] True, some of the most enduring FCAs *were* in such locations, but this explanatory framework appears a little reductionist and, more importantly, is virtually impossible to verify because there is no way of knowing whether the women involved were employed

[19] The fullest lists of FCAs to date are provided in two MA theses: Martin, 'Female Chartism', pp. i-ix; J.E.B. Lowe, 'Women in the Chartist Movement (1838-52)', University of Birmingham MA, 1984), pp. 274-80. Including female Chartist bodies that were in existence in 1843 is slightly problematic in that some of them were survivals from the period of early Chartism. On the other hand, Martin lists a further five FCAs which exited until 1843-4, but these have not been included in Table 1 as no corroborating evidence of their existence has been found. Had these been included, the total number of FCAs would number 56. See the tables in Martin, 'Female Chartism', pp. ii-ix.

[20] The main exponent of this argument is Lowe, 'Women in the Chartist Movement', ch. 1.

in industry as the census is too unreliable, and if the women were named in the press, they were invariably recorded as Mrs with their forename omitted. A factor that does appear to explain the geographical profile of *late* female Chartism is the role of the radical tradition itself: late female Chartism appears to have been strongest in those places with a tradition of female radicalism, such as London and Sheffield. But even this factor, on its own, can only be made to explain so much. Helen Rogers has observed of Birmingham and Nottingham that, despite the existence of vibrant FCAs in early Chartism, when Chartism revived in 1848 the FCAs in those places were not resurrected.[21] Other factors were clearly in play; perhaps the uppermost being that the Chartist revival in Birmingham and Nottingham in 1848 was only a partial one, with the movement a shadow of its former self. This was also the case in Wales and north-east England. Tentatively, then, we can conclude that a tradition of female radicalism allied to the strength of the Chartist movement, were the two most important factors in determining the geography of late female Chartism. Compare Birmingham and Nottingham with Bradford and Ashton-Under-Lyne in 1848: Chartism was still a mass movement at Bradford and Ashton and there was a tradition of female radicalism – the Chartist women of Ashton had demanded votes for women in 1839; hence the vibrant and assertive female Chartism that existed there in 1848. An identical point can be made in relation to London.[22] The case-study of the Sheffield WRA, discussed below, also bears this out.

Another factor in the relative decline of FCAs in the mid-1840s was that women were permitted to join male Chartist bodies and take out subscriptions to the National

[21] Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 109.
[22] For Bradford, see D.G. Wright, *The Chartist Risings in Bradford* (Bradford, 1987), ch. 5; for Ashton, see J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London, 1978), pp. 62-3; for London, D. Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838-1848* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 68-96; for Wales, see M. Chase, *The Chartists: Perspectives & Legacies* (London, 2015), pp. 103-5.

Charter Association (NCA). The Leicester Chartists even went to the trouble of advertising this fact in the *Northern Star*: 'Females are equally eligible with males to join the Chartist Association, or the Chartist Co-operative Land Society.'[23] At Sheffield the women who would go on to establish the WRA were members of the Sheffield branch of the NCA. Women also appear to have been members of London branches of the NCA.[24] How representative these instances were, is impossible to say, though Chartist meetings continued to draw mixed audiences of men and women into the 1850s. When Joseph Barker lectured to the Chartists of Preston in July 1848, a women seconded the vote of thanks.[25] The Manchester FCA organized the twenty-ninth anniversary of Peterloo, a meeting at which both men and women spoke.[26] The Chartists of Rochdale, home to one of the longest and most active FCAs, met in a room adjoining the home of Hannah Schofield in Yorkshire Street.[27] Whether Schofield herself was present when the men met is unclear; it seems probable that she was present when the FCA also met there. We also know that women subscribed to O'Connor's Land Plan (the scheme to resettle urban workers on their own plots of land): there are nearly 1,800 women listed in the Chartist Land Company Register, roughly half of whom are listed as having an occupation. Just under half of that number were employed in textiles, with the greatest concentrations of

[23] *Northern Star*, 3 Oct. 1846.
[24] York City Library, Archives (hereafter YCA), MSS/2/290, Anne Knight to Mrs Rooke, 20 Jan. 1851; *Northern Star*, 4 Feb. 1843 (Marylebone), 24 May 1845 (City of London); *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 5 May 1850 (John Street, London).
[25] The National Archives [hereafter TNA], Home Office Files [hereafter HO] 45/2410, Box B, Mayor of Preston to Home Office, 7 Aug. 1848, fo. 248.
[26] *Bradford Observer*, 24 Aug. 1848; *Northern Star*, 28 Jan. 1843. For other examples, see: *Northern Star*, 18 May 1850, 28 Jan. 1843 (Perth), 6 May 1843 (Stockport), 29 May 1847 (Rochdale); *Reading Mercury*, 3 June 1848 (report of female Chartist meeting at Redcross Street, Shoreditch); *Blackburn Standard*, 15 March 1848 (Chartist meeting); *Morning Post*, 1 Aug. 1848 (Chartists and Repealers); *Worcester Journal*, 23 March 1848 (Chartist meeting at Dudley); *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 5 May 1850 (Hanley), 6 Oct. 1850 (Aberdeen).
[27] TNA, HO 45/2410/A, Deposition of Thomas Leary, 16 Aug. 1848, fo. 276. Schofield was, by then, nearly 70 years old, and is listed as a lodger (mother of the resident wife) in the 1851 Census. The male head of the household, Joseph Benn, is listed as a beer seller. His wife, Jane, was not listed as being in employment. TNA HO 107/2246, 1851 Census, Enumerator's Book, fo. 261.

subscribers in the manufacturing midlands and the north.[28] It is also worth noting that many of these meetings, including those of FCAs, took place in pubs, which suggests that some Chartist women were willing to encroach on these otherwise 'male' spaces.[29]

There is even evidence that some male Chartist trade unionists were beginning to open their ranks to groups of women workers from the mid-1840s. This is particularly noteworthy as male trade unionists are usually seen as the most hostile to working women because, as a source of cheap labour, they undercut the bargaining power of men. An address from the Metropolitan Tailor's Protection Society, published in the *Northern Star*, called on fellow unionists to enrol women tailors. After making the usual complaint that female labour undercut the wages of men, instead of calling for their exclusion from the trade, the address recommended that women be admitting to the union, concluding 'justice demands that they shall be protected as well as ourselves'.[30] This suggests that some male trade unionists within the orbit of Chartism did concern themselves with the condition of women workers and appealed to them as economic agents in their own right. This foreshadowed a similar shift towards women workers in the National Association for United Trades (NAUT), an inter-trades organization with strong Chartist leanings. In 1845, the Power Loom Weaver's Society at Bradford had female members, one of whom spoke (and was cheered) at a meeting proposing that the society join the NAUT. The woman was Hannah Rothwell, a thirty-year old powerloom weaver who, by the time of the 1851 Census, was a lodger in Ovenden between Halifax

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[28] To date, the fullest analysis of female membership of the Land Company has been undertaken by the U3A, led by Peter Cox. The transcriptions of the Land Company's Share Register have been deposited in the 'Chartist Ancestors Databank', compiled by Mark Crail and hosted on his website, *Chartist Ancestors Blog*: http://www.chartistancestors.co.uk/chartist-ancestors-databank/ [accessed 19 June 20190. For the analysis of the registers, see the post by Peter Cox 'Analysing the Chartist Company Registers': https://chartist-ancestors.blogspot.com/2017/08/analysing-chartist-land-company.html [accessed 19 June 2019].

[29] For female Chartist meetings in pubs, see *Northern Star*, 21 Feb. 1846 (Ashton-Under-Lyne), 26 Sept. 1846 (Rochdale), 28 Oct. 1848 (Loughborough), 10 June 1848 (Bethnal Green), 23 March 1850 (Hull).

[30] *Northern Star*, 25 Nov. 1843.

and Bradford.[31] At the 1846 conference of the NAUT it was debated whether women and children working in the framework knitting trade (and handloom weaving) could be admitted as members in their own right, which was considered to be crucial by some members given the large number of women working in these trades: in 1851, roughly equal numbers of men and women worked in hosiery in the Leicestershire villages, though the sexual division of labour and remuneration were far from equal.[32] Predictably, perhaps, the organizing committee refused to commit one way or the other.[33] Three years later, the NAUT admitted as members the women shoemakers of Daventry.[34] While these may be isolated examples,[35] they do nevertheless suggest that the attitude of male trade unionists was not uniformly hostile to working-class women.

II

What evidence is there that women continued to participate in Chartism in 1848, the year of European revolution? It is worth pausing over the third and last of the Chartist mass petitions to the House of Commons, presented on 10 April 1848. The clerks in the House of Commons (who allegedly counted every signature in less than seventeen hours) claimed that 8,200 signatures in every 100,000 came from women.[36] Even if we accept the much downwardly revised figures of the clerks - that the petition contained 1.975 million signatures (as compared with O'Connor's claim of 5.7 million signatures) - then there were some 162,000 Chartist women in 1848. If we accept O'Connor's figure, and take the clerk's estimate that 8.2 per cent of signatures were those of women, then the

[31] *Northern Star*, 3 May 1845; TNA HO 107/2301, 1851 Census, Enumerator's Book, fo. 129.
[32] A. Little, 'Chartism and Liberalism: Popular Politics in Leicestershire, 1842 to 1874', (University of Manchester Ph.D., 1991), p. 306.
[33] *Northern Star*, 6 June 1846.
[34] *Northern Star*, 11 Nov. 1849.
[35] M. Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 234.
[36] *Hansard*, House of Commons, vol. 98, col. 290, 13 Apr. 1848; Chase, *Chartism*, p. 312.

figure is 467,000. Again, the absence of reliable data makes it hard to quantity and compare with the number of women who signed earlier Chartist petitions, but these figures are hard to square with the narrative of the inexorable and dramatic decline of female Chartism. The mass petition of 1848 would not be the last time that Chartist women petitioned parliament, as we shall see.

Other indicators also confirm, as Helen Rogers has suggested, 'that lower-class women continued to participate in less formal and more spontaneous forms of protest' in late Chartism.[37] Women remained a significant constituency at Chartist meetings. A report to the Home Office indicated that women were present at a Chartist meeting in Salford just before the Kennington Common meeting.[38] Women were also present at the mass Chartist meetings held on Oldham Edge, Blackstone Edge and Skircoat Moor (Halifax) in the spring of 1848.[39] When a Chartist lecturer visited Keighley in January 1848 – held, we might note, at the Working Man's Hall – women were present to such an extent that the lecturer 'made a powerful appeal to the women to use their influence' to strengthen the movement.[40] A year later, an FCA was in existence at Keighley, which also went by the name of – or there was a separate body called – the Female Democratic Silk Society of Keighley.[41] When Feargus O'Connor visited the Potteries in March 1848, he was struck by the number of women who attended his meetings, which, he naturally assumed, was evidence of their interest in the Land Plan. O'Connor was no supporter of votes for women, and he was quick to emphasize that 'A mother's place is in her house'.[42] Just how many of the women present would have concurred is impossible to

[37] Rogers, *Women and the People*, pp. 44-5 n. 77.
[38] TNA, HO 45/2410, Box B, Mayor of Salford to Home Office, 7 Apr. 1848, fo. 109.
[39] TNA, HO 45/2410, Box B, Rev. T. Mills to Home Office, 12 June 1848, deposition by Sergeant Thomas Leary, fo. 415; HO 45/2410 AB, George Pollard to Home Office, 21 Apr. 1848, fo. 916
[40] *Northern Star*, 29 Jan. 1848.
[41] *Northern Star*, 10 Feb. 1849.
[42] *Northern Star*, 11 March 1848.

say, especially given the high number who worked in the pottery industry: as late as 1862, 37 per cent of the workforce was composed of women and children. And there was also a tradition amongst the male potters of admitting women into their unions.[43] A considerable number of women were observed at numerous Chartist meetings in London throughout the spring and summer.[44] Women and children were present at the anti-income tax demonstration held in Trafalgar Square in March 1848, which turned into a pro-Chartist meeting and ended in riot, the orderly part of this meeting terminating with women on the platform leading the crowd in a rendition of the *Marseillaise*. Women were also present at the Kennington Common meeting in April, some of whom clothed themselves in tricolour flags and formed part of the processions which preceded the meeting.

The Chartist women of Glasgow, Bradford, Manchester and Ashton-Under-Lyne were involved in the violent clashes with the authorities in March, June and August respectively. Three Bradford women – Sarah Lindon, Ann Cantwell and Rosanna Power – all wives of Chartists and Irish by birth, were charged with threatening the life of one of the chief witnesses for the prosecution of the rioters.[45] A Chartist woman, Marian Marron, was arraigned before the magistrates of the Mansion House in June 1848, allegedly for inciting a group of female Chartists in Shoreditch 'to give a demonstration of their love of liberty'. Marron had done little more than speak to a crowd at the coffee house where she was lodging, telling them to turn out the Whigs. That Marron had allegedly been drunk, along with the tone of her defence – that she had only participated impromptu on her way out to buy a newspaper to ascertain the fate of the Irish

[43] R. Fyson, 'Chartism in North Staffordshire', (Ph.D., Lancaster, 1998), pp. 20, 69.
[44] TNA, HO 45/2410, Box A, Report of Samuel Hughes, D Division, 4 June 1848, fo. 486.
[45] TNA, HO 107/2308, 1851 Census, Enumerator's Book, fos. 260-1, 462; TNA, RG 4/4439, Register of Births and Baptisms at Mount St Marie Catholic Chapel in the parish of Bradford, Yorkshire from 1823 to 1840, fo. 22.

republican John Mitchell – did little to endear her to the bench.[46] The participation of Irish women in Chartism is particularly noteworthy, as Chartist-Irish relations in England has been told almost exclusively as a male affair. It seems likely that Irish women, no less than men, had been politicised by the Famine, the new alliance between the Chartists and the Irish Confederates – the democratic wing of the Irish repeal movement – and, as we've seen with Marron, the controversy surrounding the arrest of John Mitchell and the outpouring of popular support for him.[47]

In some localities, the involvement of women in Chartism assumed more organized and less transient forms. A report in the *London Standard* claimed that 7,000 women had enrolled as Chartists in the aftermath of the Kennington Common meeting, though how it came by this information is unclear.[48] The figure was inflated to 100,000 by the Chartist lecturer Mrs Theobald. Sarah Theobald,[49] born in Ireland, is listed as a Manchester factory hand on the 1851 Census.[50] When the latter lectured at Middleton in Lancashire, two women were also present who lectured 'on the present system of organisation among chartists and Irish repealers', which suggests that women may have also played a part in forging the alliance between the two movements.[51] In June 1848, the Chartist women of Bolton sent their own petition to the House of Commons. Signed

[46] *Northern Star*, 11 March, 15 Apr., 3 June and 23 Dec. 1848; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 8 March 1848; *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, 3 June 1848; *Reading Mercury*, 3 June 1848; *Sheffield Independent*, 16 Sept. 1848.
[47] D. Thompson, 'Ireland and the Irish in English Radicalism before 1850', in D. Thompson and J. Epstein (eds), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 120-51; R. O'Higgins, 'The Irish Influence in the Chartist Movement', *Past and Present*, 20 (1961), pp. 82–96; J. Belchem, 'English Working-Class Radicalism and the Irish, 1815–50', in R. Swift and S. Gilley (ed.), *The Irish in the Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 85–97; M. Roberts, 'Daniel O'Connell, Repeal, and Chartism in the Age of Democratic Revolutions', *Journal of Modern History*, 90 (2018), pp. 1-39.
[48] *London Standard*, 26 Aug. 1848.
[49] *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Aug. 1848.
[50] TNA HO 107/2226, 1851 Census, Enumerator's Book, fo. 41. The identity of Mrs Theobald has eluded previous historians, but thanks to a report of one of her lectures to the Hull female Chartists, she is listed in local newspapers (*Hull Advertiser*, 29 Jan. 1849) as 'Mrs. S. Theobald', and we know from other sources that she resided in Manchester. Only one 'S. Theobald' is listed in the 1851 Census in the whole of Lancashire.
[51] *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July 1848.

by 448 women, the petition prayed for the enactment of the People's Charter in order to remedy the distress of the working class.[52]

What was the purpose of the FCAs in late Chartism? How far do they conform to the argument that Chartist women presented themselves as auxiliaries? The evidence is far from being clear cut. True, most groups of female Chartists appear to have devoted their energies to raising money, organizing exclusive dealing (only patronizing those shopkeepers who supported Chartism), and supporting the campaign for the People's Charter – at least according to the reports that were published in the *Northern Star*. But absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence when it came to the issue of votes for women. There is no doubt that when FCAs issued addresses, they tended to be vague, no doubt deliberately (recall de Larrabeiti's caution that these addresses were highly stylized), about whether women should be enfranchised, noting simply that both men and women were being denied 'privileges' that they ought to possess in the words of the Leicester FCA in May 1843. A month later 400 women from Quarrington Hill, County Durham, met to form their own Chartist Association to assist their husbands (mostly miners) to gain the vote. At first glance, this appears to confirm the argument that women presented themselves as auxiliaries and injured mothers/wives desirous of returning to the sanctity of the private domestic sphere. But the meeting went on, not only to adumbrate a moral economy of how much the women were willing to pay for staple food items, but also to demand a minimum wage for women who worked as agricultural labourers – and this in a region where patriarchy was, allegedly, in the ascendant. In the pit villages, 'an extremely rigid sexual division of labour existed' and 'Women, to the miners, were not equal'.[53] By the mid-1840s, it was common for the

[52] *Bolton Chronicle*, 1 July 1848.
[53] K. Wilson, 'Political Radicalism in the North-East of England, 1830-1860: Issues in Historical Sociology', (Durham University Ph.D., 1987), p. 225.

wives and daughters of miners to work as agricultural labourers on farms, some of which were owned by colliery masters, where they were paid as little as 9d. a day and sometimes in truck to be redeemed in stores owned by the colliers.[54]

By 1848, some of the FCAs, and the meetings they held, attracted significant numbers of women. In June 1848, the women of Leicester held their own public meeting outdoors on a large field at which some 4,000 people were present. A Mrs Culley (daughter of the East Midlands Chartist leader T. R. Smart) was in the chair and announced that the purpose of the meeting was to set up an FCA. Caroline Culley was the wife of Joseph Culley, another prominent Leicestershire Chartist, who was a master tailor by the time of the 1851 Census, while Caroline was listed as a schoolmistress.[55] Another woman speaker who was present, a Mrs White, struck a defiant, if ambiguous, note: 'if the women would be united, they would obtain their rights'. According to the police superintendent of Leicestershire, there were 1,748 female Chartists in the county (compared with 5,035 male Chartists, just under a ratio of 1:3), with the greatest concentration in the Loughborough area – the birthplace of Mrs Culley and Chartist fiefdom of the Smart family. How exactly such precise numbers were arrived at is unclear, though the Home Office was assured that the data had 'been collected with great care'.[56] The women of Bethnal Green and Tower Hamlets also formed their own FCAs, both issuing manifestos published in the *Northern Star*. The Bethnal Green FCA had 1,500 enrolled members by June 1848. Such figures begin to corroborate the numbers of women who signed the 1848 mass Chartist petition. Even the address of the Bethnal Green FCA, which Schwarzkopf cites as evidence of the way Chartist women presented themselves as auxiliaries, could easily be read as implying the political equality

[54] *Miner's Advocate*, 13 July 1844.
[55] TNA, HO 107/2090, 1851 Census, Enumerator's Book, fo. 17.
[56] TNA, HO 45/2410/R, Return of the number of persons called Chartists residing in the County of Leicester, May 1848, fos. 850, 852.

of women: 'Hitherto, she has obeyed the imperious dictates of man, and thought she had no right to political existence; but now, when she beholds nothing but silent despair on the one hand, and cold-blooded cruelty on the other, she feels it to be her duty to step into the arena of political strife'.[57] Such statements are hardly unequivocal declarations of female political equality based on natural rights, but there were some Chartist women who were much more explicit, as the case-study of the WRA below suggests.

III

It is still sometimes observed that the first petition sent to parliament in favour of women's suffrage was in 1866, and that this marked the beginning of an *organized* campaign, but this is not entirely true.[58] In fact, it was the 1851 petition organized by the Sheffield Women's Rights Association – a bold name in itself which hardly conforms to the stereotypical image of mid-Victorian female demureness, or of excusing women's intrusion into the 'male' public sphere of politics. The act of petitioning parliament was also bold, though it was hardly unusual. As a number of historians have shown, a growing number of women in the first half of the nineteenth century 'used the petition, either singly or collectively, as a method of getting their voices heard, as a means of organising and mobilising female opinion, and of encouraging others to political activism'.[59] Little is known about either the activities of the WRA or the individual women who set up this body. The WRA was established in the winter of 1850-51, under the umbrella of the Chartist movement in Sheffield. Sheffield was a hub of Chartist

[57] *Northern Star*, 20 May and 24 June 1843, 8 July 1848; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 3 June 1848; *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, 10 June 1848.
[58] Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, p. 119.
[59] Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, p. 109. See also C. Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1860* (London, 1992), pp. 62-70.

activity, and two of its leaders would achieve national fame: Samuel Holberry, the Sheffield Chartist who led the abortive uprising in the town in January 1840, and Isaac Ironside – the Owenite and Chartist who led the influential Chartist contingent on Sheffield Town Council. A third name should be added to this pantheon: Abiah Higginbottom (or Higginbotham in some sources), the leader of the WRA. One of the few supportive voices of the WRA beyond the Chartist movement, and indeed Sheffield, the *Dundee Courier* mused: 'From her very name we would infer that she is no ordinary woman'. The fact that, as far away as Dundee, Higginbottom was known is testament to her national renown. Pointing out the defects of the People's Charter as it then stood – limited as it was to the demand for universal manhood suffrage – the *Dundee Courier* entreated the Chartists to add female suffrage as a 'seventh point', to be known henceforth as the 'Abiathar [sic.] point', and that likeminded bodies be established throughout Britain to be known as 'Abiathar associations'. 'Three times three cheers for Mrs Abiathar Higginbotham', the *Courier* concluded its peroration.[60]

According to the few accounts which mention the WRA, it was the external prompting of a middle-class feminist, the Chelmsford Quaker abolitionist Anne Knight, who was responsible for setting up the organization.[61] According to this view, Knight, casting around for likely supporters of women's rights, wrote to Isaac Ironside, and he supplied her with the names of those who would go on to form the WRA at Knight's urging. In a letter to Mrs (Eliza) Rooke, one of the names that Ironside had supplied, Knight encouraged the Sheffield women to pursue the question of female suffrage.[62] There is a long tradition within women's history that the origins of the organized

[60] *Dundee Courier*, 19 Feb. 1851.
[61] Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, pp. 248-9; Jones, 'Women and Chartism', p. 8; B. S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860* (New York, 2000), p. 8.
[62] YCA, MSS/2/290, Knight to Rooke, 20 Jan. 1851; Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, p. 249.

feminist movement was a largely middle-class project, which was led and inspired by middle-class women – especially by those like Anne Knight who had campaigned for the abolition of slavery – even when working-class women can be shown to have participated. Marian Ramelson in her book *Petticoat Rebellion* even cast doubt on whether Abiah Higginbottom was a Chartist before she was contacted by Knight, which is untrue. As Knight's letter to Rooke confirms: 'I did not know the chartists had now any organization for their rights till the news joyful came of ladies being united with them.'[63] A parallel tendency amongst gender historians of Chartism has been to ring-fence the feminist current within the movement and attribute it to Owenism: Lowe and Barbara Taylor even conjectured that the members of the WRA were also Owenites.[64] That Knight was casting around for support in her campaign for female rights is undeniable, but as her correspondence makes clear, she had failed to interest middle-class women; hence, her turning to the working class.[65]

When the WRA sent its petition for women's suffrage to parliament in February 1851, the genesis of the organization had been quite long in the making, and it was not solely or even mainly the result of the external intervention of either Anne Knight or Isaac Ironside. The intention to form the body actually predated the letter from Anne Knight by some two months (as subsequent evidence testifies).[66] The immediate origins of the WRA was the dissatisfaction of a group of Chartist women with Ironside's conduct as a town councillor. Ironside for some time had refused to vote in council

[63] M. Ramelson, *Petticoat Rebellion: A Century of Struggle for Women's Rights* (London, 1976), p. 73; YCA, MSS/2/290, Knight to Rooke, 20 Jan. 1851.
[64] Lowe, 'Women in the Chartist Movement', p. 251; Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 282; Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, pp. 249, 255.
[65] Library of the Society of Friends, MSS 725/5/35, Ann Gilbert to Anne Knight, 26 Feb. 1849, Elizabeth Pickett to Anne Knight, 8 Apr. 1850. Bonnie Anderson has argued that it was the absence of revolution in Britain, and the lack of support for it abroad, which accounts for the weak and divided women's movement in Britain. Conversely, 'Revolutions created the energy and pressure that enabled feminists to overcome similar fissures in the United States, France, and Germany'. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings*, pp. 172-5.
[66] *Northern Star*, 15 Nov. 1851.

divisions on the anarchistic ground that voting would represent an unwarranted use of force to coerce the unconvinced minority.[67] The group of women who reproached Ironside would go on to form the WRA.[68] As far as we can tell, none of the Sheffield women involved in the WRA were Owenites as neither their names nor, even more revealingly perhaps, their husbands appear in connection with Owenite branch life in the town. While Anne Knight sought out Isaac Ironside for an introduction to Chartist women in Sheffield, Ironside only played a peripheral role in the WRA, as did the other local Owenite leader, Richard Otley. Of more significance, neither Ironside's wife nor Otley's played a part in the WRA. The inaugural meeting of the WRA was not held at the Hall of Science in Rockingham Street – the dedicated space established by the Owenites for their activities – but was held at George Cavill's Democratic Temperance Hotel on Queen Street, which, by the late 1840s, had established itself as the premier Chartist venue in the town.[69]

Thus, the roots of the WRA were not to be found in Owenism or middle-class feminism; they were to be found in Chartism itself. Anne Knight was pushing against an open door when she sounded out Ironside for a list of names of any women who might support a petition for female enfranchisement. The WRA was not the first body of Chartist women in the town. Not only can we trace the existence of a nearly continuous group of Chartist women in Sheffield back to 1839, but female Chartism arose out of a rich tradition of indigenous working-class female activism. A female radical association

[67] J. Salt, 'Local Manifestations of the Urquhartite Movement', *International Review of Social History*, xiii (1968), pp. 355-6.
[68] *Sheffield Independent*, 9 Nov. 1850.
[69] *Sheffield Independent*, 8 Feb. 1851. Some of the WRA meetings were held at the Hall of Science, though this appears to have been for occasions demanding a larger space such as public lectures: e.g. *Sheffield Independent*, 25 Oct. 1851 (Mrs Dexter's lecture); *Northern Star*, 13 Sept. 1851 (lecture by Mr. George Hows of Boston).

had been established in Sheffield in 1819, just as they had been elsewhere in the north.[70] A combing of the Chartist and Sheffield press reveals that separate bodies of Chartist women were in existence in 1839, 1842 and 1849-50. By 1849 not only were some of the women who would go on to form the WRA already members of the Sheffield FCA, but the address was identical to that of the WRA's: 33 Queen Street (George Cavil's Democratic Temperance Hotel).[71] But apart from 1849, the names of the women are different, which suggests that those who set up the WRA were part of a new generation of radicals, politicized perhaps by the revival of Chartism in the late 1840s. On the other hand, it is conceivable that the women who would go on to form the WRA were members of earlier female Chartist bodies in the town, but that their younger age and lack of organisational experience precluded them from playing a leading role. Either way, a tradition of working-class female Chartism and radicalism existed. What does link earlier female Chartism with the WRA is that virtually all those involved were working-class women. The women of the WRA were not from middle-class backgrounds, as has been conjectured.[72]

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

Cross referencing the names with the census (see Figure 2), where possible, reveals that the women of the WRA were married to better paid working-class men, and they tended to be older (the mean age was 38), a similar constituency identified by Taylor for the Owenite movement: mainly upper working class, with some lower

[70] *Sheffield Mercury*, 11 Sept. 1819, 9 Oct. 1819.
[71] *Sheffield Iris*, 18 June 1839; *Northern Star*, 4 June 1842, 6 Jan. 1849.
[72] Lowe, 'Women in the Chartist Movement', p. 251.

middle-class support and a very small number from wealthy backgrounds (like Anne Knight).[73] It is noteworthy that nearly all the women were married to artisans, which supports Clark's assumption that the 'more articulate women' in Chartism 'probably came from politically active artisan families'.[74] Abiah Higginbottom was born, not in 1812 as she claimed on the 1851 Census, but in 1808 at Hunslet, Leeds (parish of Kippax).[75] The fact that half of the women were married to Chartists also reveals that, as late as the early 1850s, there were still some Chartist men who, at the very least tolerated and at most fully supported, their wives' commitment to female enfranchisement, including active campaigning towards that end – even though some of the women were mothers of young children. This suggests that the companionable model of marriage identified by Yeo and Chase for other Chartist couples in the earlier years of the movement was still alive in the early 1850s.[76] The WRA was meeting once a week for much of 1851, as the reports in the *Sheffield Free Press* attest, and there was clearly a good deal of activity taking place behind the scenes with correspondence, all of which meant that those heavily involved in the WRA were regularly participating in the public world of politics. The only name on the list really known to historians is that of Mary Hutton, a working-class poetess of some talent with several published volumes to her name, though she appears to have been involved in the WRA only peripherally.[77]

The religious beliefs of the WRA leaders are difficult to pinpoint, much less to attribute their feminism or Chartism to any religious motivations. None of the women

[73] Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 57.
[74] Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 228. This contradicts Clark's overall argument that artisans were one of the most resistant groups within the working class to female political rights.
[75] West Yorkshire Archives Service, Wakefield, RDP 47/7, Yorkshire Parish Records, St Cuthbert, Hunslet Moor, Baptisms 1808, 30 Oct.
[76] Yeo, 'Will the Real Mary Lovett Please Stand Up?'; Chase, *Chartism*, p. 191.
[77] *Sheffield Free Press*, 26 Apr. 1851; *Sheffield Independent*, 26 Apr. 1851. For Hutton's poetry, see M. Timney, 'Mary Hutton and the Development of a Working-Class Women's Political Poetics', *Victorian Poetry*, xlix (2011), pp. 127-47; M.A. Loose, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary From in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* (Columbus, OH, 2014), pp. 160-68.

were Unitarians or Quakers, two denominations which provided platforms and networks for the articulation of middle-class feminism for some metropolitan women.[78] As one would expect of a cross-section of typical Chartists, a range of beliefs are apparent. Abiah Higginbottom, *nee* Jackson, was baptised in the parish church at Hunslet, married in Sheffield Cathedral in 1834, and she was buried in the Church of England section of Doncaster Cemetery. Similarly, Eliza Rooke was married in the St Mark's parish Church in Hull in 1846, and she, too, was buried in the Anglican part of Sheffield General Cemetery.[79] While a burial, just like a baptism or marriage, in a parish church is not necessarily indicative of Anglicanism, given that there was a non-consecrated (i.e. nonconformist) section in Sheffield General Cemetery, there is a higher probability that those buried in parish churches were Anglicans. Eliza Bartholomew was buried in St Mary's parish Church, Bramall Lane (a short distance from the General Cemetery, thus ruling out geography).[80] There is circumstantial evidence that some of the other WRA leaders were from Nonconformist and/or freethinking backgrounds. George Cavill, Eliza's husband, engaged in a series of militantly anti-clerical public letters to the Rev. Thomas Kerns, but in the process revealed himself to be an advocate of primitive Christianity, uncorrupted by modern sects. In the advertisement placed by the Cavill's in the *Northern Star*, we can see the Paineite freethinking adage at the top: 'Religion: to do

[78] None of the names associated with the WRA appear in the marriage or burial records for Upper Chapel, the Unitarian chapel in Sheffield, or the Friends Meeting chapel: Sheffield City Archives, UCR 1/2-3, Upper Chapel, Sheffield, Marriage Registers, 1837-51, Register of Burials, 1837-54; QR 67, Births, Marriages and Deaths in Sheffield Friends Meeting.
[79] West Yorkshire Archives Service, Wakefield, RDP 47/7, Yorkshire Parish Records, St Cuthbert, Hunslet Moor, Baptisms 1808, 30 Oct.; Sheffield City Archives, PR-138-3-30, p. 292; Friends of Hyde Park Cemetery, Doncaster Old Cemetery Register of Graves, fo. 33; East Riding Archives, PE156/16, St Mark in the Groves Parish Records, p. 44; Sheffield General Cemetery Burial Records: Consecrated Section 1850-1978, No. 1236, Grave G2 126, accessed via Sheffield Family History Society, [http://www.sheffieldfhs.org.uk/product-category/sheffield-general-cemetery-burial-records/], accessed 29 May 2019.
[80] St Mary Bramall Lane 1830-1908 Burial Records, No. 1285, accessed via Sheffield Family History Society.

all the good possible', though this hardly precludes religious affiliation.[81] But Eliza Cavill was also buried in her parish Church, as was her eight month-old baby.[82]

There were other continuities between the WRA and early female Chartism, notably internationalism, which even predated the arrival of Chartism's premier internationalist George Julian Harney, who took up residence at Sheffield in the early 1840s as the town's correspondent for the *Northern Star*.[83] While early female Charism in Sheffield had shown particular concern for Polish exiles in Britain, of which there were many refugees who fled after the failed uprising of 1830, the women of the WRA continued this tradition of radical internationalism.[84] They even penned and published an address to Madam Kossuth, the wife of the Hungarian revolutionary, another pair of exiles after the failure of the 1848 revolutions on the continent: 'Most esteemed Lady, - We, the members of the WRA, beg to give you our heartiest welcome to England', the address began. '[W]ords are too poor to express the sentiments we feel towards you, and the great, noble, and holy cause in which you are engaged'.[85] They also sent an address to republican women in France, almost certainly facilitated by the connections of Anne Knight who spent several periods living there and campaigning with French feminists, notably Jeanne Deroin who, along with Pauline Roland, was the recipient of another address from the WRA.[86] The WRA collected £6 15*s* for refugees fleeing persecution

[81] Sheffield Local Studies Library, MD H02/4, 'Chartist Sunday Meetings', May 1848; *Northern Star*, 21 Dec. 1850.
[82] Sheffield City Archives, PR-70-3-2, p. 281; PR-70-3-3, p. 222.
[83] A.R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge: A Portrait of George Julian Harney* (London, 1958), p. 105.
[84] *Sheffield Iris*, 22 Oct. 1839.
[85] *Morning Advertiser*, 27 Oct. 1851.
[86] Library of the Society of Friends, MS VOL S 486, Notebook of Anne Knight; MS BOX W2/6/27, 'To the Electors of the Seine, Jeanne Deroin, translated by Anne Knight. Knight was in Paris at the time of the February revolution and was ecstatic that Louis Philippe was overthrown, and in the process revealed her republican sympathies: MSS 725/5/52, draft of letter by Anne Knight, 24 Feb. 1848. For Knight's European and transatlantic connections, see: M.H. McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Lexington, KY, 1999), p. 90, Appendix A; Anderson, *Joyous Greetings*, passim.

following the crushing of the 1848 revolutions on the continent.[87] It would be wrong to see this radical internationalism as a peripheral concern of the WRA. The radical newspaper the *Sheffield Free Press* even hinted that it was a conference in the USA – the Women's Rights Convention – which was the inspiration for setting up the WRA in Sheffield.[88] As we shall see, there are further transatlantic connections.

As the emphasis on internationalism suggests, the WRA was certainly not a single issue body, rather, like the umbrella movement it was part of, it had a diverse range of interests. In this crucial respect, the WRA was defying the advice of Anne Knight who had deprecated what she viewed as the social side of Chartism and its diversionary preoccupations; she entreated the women of the WRA to campaign only for the revision of the first point of the People's Charter so that universal suffrage included women as well as men.[89] The WRA not only penned addresses, it also hosted lectures.[90] It promoted temperance, again a well-established current within Chartism; pacifism; improved conditions for British seamen; petitioned against the remaining 'taxes on knowledge' (presented to the House of Lords, 5 June 1851); and supported the feminist calls for rational dress, which called for women to wear loose fitting clothing, as opposed to the highly restrictive, 'fashionable' clothing respectable women were expected to wear.[91] This last effort is particularly interesting as it emerged first on the other side of the Atlantic in New York. When the WRA sponsored a lecture on rational dress, the speaker was Caroline Harper Dexter, a middle-class English woman who had links with

[87] *Northern Star*, 9 Aug. 1851; *Reynolds's News*, 8 June 1851.
[88] *Sheffield Free Press*, 18 Jan., 8 Feb. and 26 Apr. 1851.
[89] YCA, MSS/2/290, Knight to Rooke, 21 Jan. 1851.
[90] *Sheffield Free Press*, 19 Apr. 1851.
[91] *Notes to the People*, vol. II (London, 1852 [1967]), p. 709; *Greenock Advertiser*, 10 June 1851; *Northern Star*, 6 March 1852; *Sheffield Free Press*, 19 Apr. 1851; *Sheffield Independent*, 25 Oct. 1851; *Journals of the House of Lords*, vol. 83, 1851, p. 243.

the feminist 'bloomers', as they were known, in the USA after Amelia Bloomer.[92] It seems that the WRA also began to develop links with American feminists, as we learn in May 1852 that they had engaged the services of Mrs. Hannah Tracey, the American bloomer for three lectures on: 'The Marriage Laws, the Rights of Women, and Dress Reform' – further evidence of the transatlantic origins and links of the WRA.[93] At a soiree in April 1851, the WRA proposed toasts to 'The Women of France' and 'Madam D'Arusmont [Frances Wright] and the Women of America'.[94] And a report of a meeting in November 1851, stated that 'the proceedings of the Women's Rights Convention in the United States were taken into consideration', though no further details were forthcoming.[95]

It is no exaggeration to say that the WRA played a part, albeit briefly, in keeping Chartism alive in Sheffield during its final, lean years, which was no mean feat as the men in the movement were increasingly fractious.[96] While votes for women was its overriding objective, as was providing a platform for women to express their concerns, the WRA also brought men and women together: indeed, by January 1852 the secretary of the WRA was William Groves.[97] This is not to suggest that the women of the WRA were subordinate or decorative; even when men were present, they chaired some meetings.[98] But just as the working-class had come to realise the importance of waging their own campaign for democracy, by forming their own associations, so had the women of the WRA: 'we have waited too long…until we have found that we must

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[92] T. Urwin, 'Dexter, Dextra, Dextrum: The Bloomer Costume on the English Stage in 1851', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film*, xxviii (2000), pp. 89-113.
[93] *Sheffield Free Press*, 24 Apr. 1852; *Northern Star*, 1 May 1852.
[94] *Sheffield Free Press*, 26 Apr. 1851. Frances Wright may have been personally known to the Sheffield Chartist women as she resided in Sheffield for a brief period in the late 1840s: *Sheffield Free Press*, 4 Jan. 1851.
[95] *Sheffield Free Press*, 15 Nov. 1851.
[96] E.g., *Northern Star*, 25 Jan. 1851 (meeting at Sheffield).
[97] *Reynolds's News*, 4 Jan. 1852.
[98] For meetings with both men and women present, see: *Northern Star*, 13 Sept. 1851; *Sheffield Independent*, 26 Apr. 1851; *Northern Star*, 1 May 1852.

organise ourselves, independent of our brothers, and fight our own battle'.[99] Most remarkable of all, of course, is the way the women of the WRA demanded votes for women at a time when few others were doing so. It demanded votes for women, not on the basis of their status as helpmeets to their menfolk or even as militant mothers but on the basis of right. As an address by the WRA made clear, this was a right unjustly withheld 'but which, legitimately, belong to our sex'; after all, women worked and they, too, paid taxes. 'And we ask, in the name of justice, are we to continue for ever the silent and servile slaves of man's injustice?'[100] As Mrs Bradbury stated at a meeting in April 1851: 'It was nothing but a right, in her opinion, that woman should be raised to a higher position in society. They had waited a long time, quietly and patiently, and she thought it was time they began to think and act for themselves.' It was unfair, Bradbury continued, that the majority should be ruled by the minority 'and as females were in the majority, they had a right to have a voice in the legislature, or at all events to legislate for their own sex'. At the same meeting, Higginbottom proposed the toast: 'The industrial independence and heroism of women.'[101] Women should enjoy the reward of her own industry, she concluded.

The WRA submitted its petition for female suffrage in February 1851. One of Sheffield's two MPs, the Whig John Parker, presented the petition in the House of Commons on 18 June 1851, while the Earl of Carlisle (as one of the MPs for the West Riding of Yorkshire) presented it in the House of Lords.[102] The petition occasioned no comment in the Commons, but it provoked mocking derision in the Lords: '"Hear!" and

[99] *Dundee Courier*, 5 March 1851.
[100] *Northern Star*, 8 and 22 Feb. 1851.
[101] *Sheffield Free Press*, 26 Apr. 1851.
[102] *Sheffield Free Press*, 15 Feb. and 21 June 1851; *Journals of the House of Commons*, vol. 106, 1851, p. 61. Interestingly, Sheffield's other MP, the radical John Arthur Roebuck who had played a peripheral part in the birth of Chartism, was opposed to the enfranchisement of women: *Reformers' Gazette* (Glasgow), 29 May 1852.

laughter'.[103] The WRA's ambitions to turn itself into a national body, an impressive objective in itself, does not appear to have fully materialized, though in one of its addresses it took credit for emboldening 'their sisters in Glasgow, Leeds, Edinburgh, and other towns', which suggests that other branches were also projected if not actually formed – as does the presence of one of the WRA leaders at a meeting of Chartist women in London.[104] Clearly the WRA was serious about forming branches as it appointed an agent to achieve this objective.[105] Further evidence of the national links of the WRA and of the traction it was gaining, at a weekly meeting in August 1851, a motion was passed congratulating the anonymous author (Harriet Taylor Mill, the women's rights advocate and wife of John Stuart Mill) of a recent article on female suffrage in the *Westminster Review*, which concluded by noticing favourably the WRA's petition. Letters were read from various places (unspecified) requesting information about the practical workings of the association with a view to the formation of similar societies.[106] But just as the WRA was beginning to gain traction, Chartism itself was in steep decline by the early 1850s. The WRA disappears from the historical record after 1852. The last reference occurred during the 1852 general election when Higginbottom asked the candidates whether they would support female enfranchisement, though we only have the Liberal George Hadfield's response: 'wives should manage the inside of the house and husbands the outside affairs'.[107] Some seven years later, Higginbottom was dead, having died at Doncaster in April 1859, aged 49.[108]

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[103] *Journals of the House of Lords*, vol. 83, 1851, p. 23; *Bolton Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 1851.
[104] *Northern Star*, 11 and 15 Nov. 1851; *Sheffield Free Press*, 28 Feb. 1852.
[105] *Northern Star*, 28 June 1851.
[106] *Sheffield Free Press*, 6 Sept. 1851; Harriet Taylor Mill, 'Enfranchisement of Women', *Westminster Review*, lv (July 1851), p. 311.
[107] *Sheffield Independent*, 19 June 1852.
[108] *Sheffield Independent*, 30 Apr. 1859.

While the impact of the WRA in its own time might appear minimal, in the longer term it was an important milestone on the road to female enfranchisement – and was recognised as such, especially in Sheffield when votes for women finally came in the early twentieth century.[109] One of the organizations that was at the forefront of the campaign for female suffrage in the late 1850s and again in the 1860s took as its name the Women's Rights Association.[110] But the crucial difference between the WRA and the next generation of campaigners for votes for women was that the WRA, as we have seen, was overwhelmingly working class in composition. True, the WRA received some support from local middle-class women as well as the patronage of Anne Knight, but this was little more than tokenistic in the form of the occasional supportive letter, evidence, perhaps, of the class prejudices of some middle-class feminists that Gleadle and Rogers have detected.[111] Thus, the failure of the WRA to achieve its objectives rests just as much with middle-class feminists, both male and female, who were even thinner on the ground in the 1850s as working-class feminists, at least in Sheffield. The exception that proves the rule is Letitia Bowker who, as a propertied widow, tried to assert her right to vote in the municipal elections of 1851. Bowker, a member of the WRA, claimed that as a ratepayer she was entitled to vote; to withhold that right from her was taxation without representation, a claim that is not as fanciful as it might appear given that complexities and contested nature of women's local electoral rights at this time.[112] When the returning offices refused to let her vote, she ceased paying rates and was subsequently brought

[109] *English Women's Journal*, 15 May 1882; *Sheffield Independent*, 11 Dec. 1919; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 1925. The WRA only appeared once in the suffragette press, and unsurprisingly it was remembered as the achievement of middle-class feminism, with Anne Knight singled out. *Women's Franchise*, 10 Dec. 1908.
[110] *Morning Advertiser*, 28 Jan. 1858; *Bells Weekly Messenger*, 26 Sept. 1868; *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 28 Sept. 1868.
[111] A Mrs Jane Beety, Sheffield Park, wrote a letter in support of the WRA. *Sheffield Free Press*, 17 May 1851; K. Gleadle, '"Our Several Selves": Middle-class Women and the Feminisms of Early Victorian Radical Politics', in Gleadle and Richardson, *Women in British Politics*, p. 143; Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 24.
[112] Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, pp. 38-42; Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, pp. 95-6.

before the bench. The magistrates ordered that she pay the arrears; when she refused the bailiffs were sent to seize her goods.[113] As far as we know, no other member of the WRA practiced this form of civil disobedience; no doubt because most of the WRA were working-class women and thus few, if any of them, would have been ratepayers in their own right as Bowker was.

Apart from Ironside and a few other Owenite socialists, the WRA received no support from the powerful contingent of radicals on Sheffield Town Council – the Democrats. At first glance, this would appear to confirm the view that Chartist men were opposed to women's rights by the early 1850s. While the Democrats certainly reached out to the Chartists for support, they were, in fact, an overwhelmingly middle- and lower middle-class body, dominated by tradesmen and small manufacturers.[114] In other words, the Democrats were in the orbit of middle-class radicalism rather than Chartism; a group, it would appear, who were less supportive of women's rights than the working-class men whose wives dominated the WRA. It is noteworthy that the WRA does not appear to have lent its support to the Democrats in municipal elections or in the general election of 1852. The brief ascendency of the Democrats, and their subsequent co-option into the Liberal party with its emphasis on respectable manliness, the breadwinner ideal and separate spheres ideology, may have played a part in killing off the WRA, as did the decline of Chartism and its replacement by the hyper-masculine populism of Urquhartism in the town – the followers of David Urquhart whose obsessive conspiratorial view of foreign affairs was popular in the mid-1850s.[115]

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[113] *Bells New Weekly Messenger*, 2 Nov. 1851; *Morning Chronicle*, 1 Nov. 1851.
[114] D.E. Fletcher, 'Aspects of Liberalism in Sheffield 1849-1886', (University of Sheffield Ph.D., 1972), p. 24.
[115] Salt, 'Urquhartite Movement'.

Although the term 'feminism' was not invented until the 1890s, as a number of historians have argued, some of what would come to be recognised as feminism was clearly in existence in the years before: the challenge to the irrationality of the dominant views about women and to the injustices that women faced, and demands for the redress of those grievances, each of which, as we have seen, applies to the WRA.[116] But given the anachronistic nature of the term feminism, especially if defined in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century terms, it makes more sense to compare the language of the WRA with other examples of women's rights discourse in the first-half of the nineteenth century. The WRA did not mount as far reaching a critique of marriage as the Owenites did – there was to be no collectivisation of family life, for example,[117] but it was clearly versed in criticisms of its legal structure as one of the lectures delivered by Hannah Tracy suggests. Tracy had lectured on the need to reform the marriage laws so that women retained their property rights; she also advocated easier and cheaper divorce so that it was accessible to women of all classes; and she demanded an end to the practice of widowers marrying their deceased wife's sister. Throughout her lectures, Tracy was 'often warmly applauded' by the women of the WRA.[118] Anne Knight also made clear that female enfranchisement would be no prelude to a revolution in gender roles: 'We expect no lady Cicero, no interesting "agitator". All that is simply demanded is the conveyance to them of a right to which they are entitled, and which would leave them simply as they are – the helpmates of men and the mothers of future generations'.[119] The married status of most of the WRA's leaders underlines the 'respectability' of the women; there was no advocacy of 'free love' in the form of open support for birth

[116] Rendall, *Origins of Modern Feminism*, p. 1; Caine, *English Feminism*, introduction; C. Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865* (London, 2007), p. 8.
[117] Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. xiii.
[118] *Sheffield Free Press*, 8 May 1852.
[119] Library of the Society of Friends, MS VOL S 486, Notebook of Anne Knight, 'The Political Rights of Women', draft of an article published in *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 23 March 1851.

control, though given that a number of the women had small families at least some of them may have been practising contraception. Nevertheless, the WRA was clearly less radical in its sexual ideology than the Owenites or the Zetetic followers of Richard Carlile.[120]

In assessing the women's rights discourse of the WRA it is, however, important to put it in perspective. While they insisted that women had the same rights as men, the women of the WRA, like many feminists in the nineteenth century, appear to have viewed women as different from men in terms of their intellectual and emotional characteristics – women had more empathy, compassion and capacity for nurture, for example; women were equal but different. One of the refrains that comes through in the rhetoric of the WRA is that the enfranchisement of women would lead to the restoration of normative gender roles: Mrs Bradbury asked 'Was it compatible with the laws of reason…that women should be made to toil and drudge in a coalpit, whilst a man should stand behind a counter, serving out linen, ribbons, lace, &c.?'[121] Bradbury, it should be emphasized, was not questioning the right of women to work, however. Thus, there was a tension in the feminism of the WRA: on the one hand, an assertion of gender equality based on natural rights; on the other hand, an attachment to more conventional gender roles based on notions of sexual difference, though not to the conservative ideal of separate spheres. This tension is not all that surprizing or unusual given that gender roles, although beginning to be redrawn in more exclusive terms along the lines of separate spheres and the male breadwinner wage, were still in flux at mid-century.[122] Further, as Barbara Taylor has shown, a similar tension was also present in Owenite feminism, 'between the desire to minimize sexual difference and the need to re-assert it

[120] Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*; I. McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History*, xxxviii (1980), pp. 1-25.
[121] *Sheffield Free Press*, 26 Apr. 1851.
[122] S. O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1992), pp. 7-17.

in women's favour'.[123] Nevertheless, the feminism of the WRA was clearly in advance of the middle-class incarnation that Gleadle has identified with middle-class radical women which did not emphasis either the peculiar qualities that women might bring to politics or the natural rights of women to participate fully as citizens in the public sphere.[124]

In contrast to the more moderate incarnation of mid-Victorian feminism that rejected appeals to natural right (which Anna Clark has argued was also jettisoned by Chartists), the women of the WRA placed this front and centre.[125] Bowker is the exception that proves the rule, content to mount her claim on the particular legal claims of property in relation to married (propertied) women – the hallmark of the mid-Victorian moderate feminism.[126] But there was never any suggestion that votes for women should be confined to single women, a view put forward by the Chartist John Watkins in his *Address to the Women of England* in 1841 on the grounds that 'they [married women] and their husbands are one'. Similarly, there was none of the drawing of fine distinctions between 'women, who are men's equals, and wives, who are subordinate to their husbands' that had bedevilled R. J. Richardson's *The Rights of Woman*, the single most important key text advocating votes for women by a male Chartist in the early years of the movement.[127] It should be emphasized, though, that Richardson – a Salford joiner and subsequently radical pressman – was one of the first Chartists to use 'a Painite language of rights and citizenship to show that women, because they were subjected to the laws of the state, paid taxes, and worked, should participate in political affairs'.[128] Thus, we can see how the WRA amplified a women's rights discourse that was present

[123] Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, pp. 30-31.
[124] Gleadle, 'The Feminisms of Early Victorian Radical Politics', p. 147.
[125] Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, ch. 12.
[126] R. Delmar, 'What is Feminism?', in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds), *What is Feminism?* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 8-33.
[127] Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, pp. 60, 69.
[128] Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 230.

in early Chartism. Sheffield Chartists were aware of these aware of these debates over women's suffrage in the early 1840s. As Malcolm Chase notes, when the Sheffield Chartists collected pamphlets to send to their brethren in Ireland, no fewer than 1,000 copies of Watkins' *Address to the Women of England* were sent.[129]

IV

The survey of female Chartism between 1843 and 1848 along with the existence of the WRA reminds us that Chartism was far from dead, even after 1848, and the same was true of participation in it by women. The very existence of the WRA challenges a number of the assumptions in the historiography, notably that: women were marginalized and subordinated in late Chartism; Chartist artisans were particularly resistant to the participation of women; any residual feminism within Chartism was the preserve of a middle-class and/or Owenite current. What is also remarkable about the WRA is its broad-ranging interests; this was no single-issue pressure group. The working-class women who formed the WRA were more than mere auxiliaries to their menfolk; they challenged head on the gender exclusivity of Victorian politics by asserting their right to speak publically for their rights. We have also seen how even working-class women in provincial Sheffield could be a part of the sorts of transnational networks which historians of gender and feminism have recently been retracing.[130] That an organization like the WRA existed under the umbrella of Chartism suggests that this movement has not been given enough credit for enabling this early assertion of women's

[129] Chase, *Chartism*, p. 123.
[130] O. Janz and D. Schönpflug, eds., *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders* (New York, 2014); C. Midgley, A. Twells and J. Carlier, eds., *Women in Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global* (Abingdon, 2016).

rights which is too easy to find wanting when measured against late twentieth- and early twenty-first century feminism.

The WRA's existence also lends support to the argument that as Chartism progressed, feminism became stronger – as suggested by the change in attitude towards women's rights in the *Northern Star* in its last two years (including articles on rape and prostitution, which were used to demand more legal protection for women); by greater attention to the manifold and interlocking ways in which women were exploited – as explored, for example, in Ernest Jones's novel *Woman's Wrongs*; by promoting the natural equality of the sexes and support for women's suffrage among some of the Chartist leadership, notably Jones, W. J. Linton and Bronterre O'Brien; and women were also contributing more articles to a range of Chartist and radical periodicals by this stage.[131] The WRA represented the most visible organisational expression of this women's rights discourse. While many of the earlier FCAs, like the female reform societies of the post-war years before them, had framed their public interventions in ways that couched women as auxiliaries and were used by women to 'share their distinctly feminine reasons for seeking reform',[132] the WRA went considerably beyond this by asserting female equality and the right to the vote. The female Chartists of the WRA were clearly able to break out of the rhetorical conventions established in the first year of agitation'.[133] This flowering of feminism within late Chartism also suggests that we need to modify Clark's argument that the gendered nature of working-class consciousness, though further research will be needed on the gendered language of late Chartism,

[131] Lowe, 'Women in the Chartist Movement', ch. 8; Martin, 'Female Chartism', pp. 22, 25. For Jones's *Woman's Wrongs*, see I. Haywood (ed.), *Chartist Fiction Volume 2: Ernest Jones, Women's Wrongs* (Aldershot, 2001).
[132] R. Mather, '"These Lancashire Women are Witches in Politics": Female Reform Societies and the Theatre of Radicalism, 1819-1820', in R. Poole, ed., *The Return to Peterloo* (Manchester Region History Review, 23 (2012), Manchester, 2014), p. 51; Rogers, *Crowds*, pp. 240-1, 246.
[133] Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 113.

particularly as articulated by men, to fully substantiate this. Basing her argument on the decline of women's participation in Chartism, along with the increasing 'focus on respectable, chivalrous manhood…also narrowed the scope of working-class consciousness'.[134] The continued existence of FCAs, along with the women's rights discourse of the WRA, suggests that Clark may have exaggerated this narrowing.

Clearly, it would be a serious misreading of the historical evidence to suggest that Chartism did not contain within it some of the patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes, or the willingness of some Chartist women to accept the role as auxiliaries, which Schwarzkopf and Clark detected; even the WRA, as we have seen, could not quite liberate itself from conventional ideas of gender roles. Yet the evidence presented here does suggest that these attitudes were not as strong as Schwarzkopf and Clark claimed, and that the women's rights discourse that they and other historians detected not only lived on but was amplified in late Chartism. At the very least, it would appear that the patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes did not constitute a rising insurmountable barrier to the continued participation of women within the movement. It seems fair to conclude that if women were willing, they could still participate in Chartism as active political agents in their own right. Thus, the purpose here has been, to quote Sarah Richardson on the political worlds of Victorian middle-class women, to present 'the positive evidence of female agency in a counter-narrative to that which focuses on the restrictions and exclusions women faced'.[135]

The relative decline of organized female Chartism in the 1840s needs putting into perspective. The 1840s witnessed a wider decline of mass support for Chartism, especially after 1842, the partial revival of 1848 notwithstanding. To what extent can we

[134] A. Clark, 'Manhood, Womanhood, and the Politics of Class in Britain, 1790-1845', in L.L. Frader and S.O. Rose, eds., *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), p. 278.
[135] Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, p. 1.

see the withdrawal of women as part of this wider process (as opposed to any masculinization of Chartism which aimed at marginalizing women)? Thompson, Schwarzkopf and Clark seem to suggest that there was a *disproportionate* decline in the participation of women, yet, as we have seen, this is difficult to quantify. The evidence presented here suggests that the participation of women did not decline as dramatically as they suggested. On the basis of this evidence, a case could be made for female Chartism being just as proportionally strong in 1848 as it had been a decade earlier. If we refuse to accept the argument that the 1840s saw a *marked* decline in women's involvement in Chartism, then we are left with the question of what happened in the 1850s and 1860s – on which further research is clearly needed. One could take the view, therefore, that the decline of working-class women's political participation reflected a wider working-class disengagement with politics. On the other hand, thanks to a growing body of detailed research on the mid-Victorian years, we now know that radicalism, though no longer a mass movement, did not collapse. An independent-style of popular radicalism – latter-day Chartism, labour militancy, republican and secularist radicalism, and anti-statist radicalism, and with it working-class political engagement – punctuated the mid-Victorian 'age of equipoise'. It is unclear from existing work what role working-class women played in the persistence of this independent radical politics; recent scholarship having focused overwhelmingly on middle-class women. Yet there are some clues that women did continue to participate in popular politics, especially if we define politics expansively to include the sorts of everyday conflict over power and resources which was such a large part of working-class life.[136] There was a plethora of radical and reform organizations in the mid-Victorian years, at both local and national level, many

[136] C. Chinn, *They Worked all their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester 1988); E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 1993); N. Durbach, *Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907* (Durham, NC, 2005); R. Mather, 'The Home-Making of the English Working Class: Radical Politics and Domestic Life in Late-Georgian England, c.1790-1820', (Queen Mary University of London Ph.D., 2016), pp. 98-9.

of them admittedly short-lived, but with the notable exceptions of the Reform League and Reform Union,[137] the gender politics and the extent to which women participated in these bodies has not been fully explored. What is clear, however, is that if popular radicalism had become much more masculinized by the 1860s, then it seems difficult to blame this entirely on the Chartists, not least because some of the future working-class women who would play a part in the later women's suffrage movement came from families and communities with radical and Chartist backgrounds.[138]

Sheffield Hallam University MATTHEW ROBERTS

[137] Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*; M. Chase, 'The Popular Movement for Parliamentary Reform in Provincial Britain during the 1860s', *Parliamentary History*, xxxvi (2017), p 21.
[138] Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 247; K. McClelland, 'England's Greatness, the Working Man', in Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, p. 108; Liddington and Norris, *One Hand*, p. 63.