Malcolm Chase: A Roundtable Tribute

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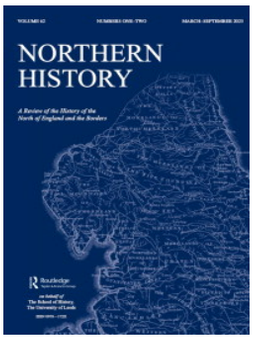

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MALCOLM CHASE: A ROUNDTABLE TRIBUTE

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This paper brings together the reflections by three historians who knew Malcolm Chase, presented at the *Northern History* memorial conference in Leeds on 29 November 2024. It shows how integral Malcolm Chase's work was to nineteenth-century political and labour history of Britain. It explains his impact and legacy on the study of history, especially in and of northern England, and ends with a call for more work on regional and working-class history.

Keywords: labour history; Chartism; Malcolm Chase; northern history

Introduction

The authors formed a roundtable discussion of the significance and legacy of Malcolm Chase's work at the *Northern History* conference in Leeds celebrating his life, on 29 November 2024. This paper brings together their three papers, with added commentary on Chase's many talents as an essayist, speaker, historian of Chartism and the labour movement, editor, colleague, chair and leader of many scholarly societies, his encouragement of early career researchers and local historians, and his dedication to the history of northern England. While the following appreciations range more broadly than the history of northern England – just as Chase did in his teaching and research – it is worth pausing here to say something about the origins of his abiding interest in the north. Although a southerner by birth – hailing from Essex –

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he went north to the University of York as an undergraduate, and then, following a return to the south for postgraduate study, he was appointed as a tutor at the University of Leeds's campus in Middlesborough to teach adult education, much of it focused on the history of the north-east and northern England more broadly. Even when he relocated to Leeds, and taught adult education and then, finally, in the School of History, northern England remained an important aspect of his teaching and research – the long-running special subject that he offered to undergraduates on Chartism focused on northern England, for example. Yet it wasn't just his teaching which led Chase in the direction of northern England. This area of England has always featured prominently in the history of radicalism and the labour movement. Ever sensitive to the rich diversity of northern England, past and present, Chase did not just focus on urban history, but also the smaller towns and the countryside and, crucially, the links between them. It is fitting in more ways than one, then, that the journal *Northern History* pays tribute to one the finest modern historians of the north.

Malcolm Chase: Ever-Present to the Radical Mind – Matthew Roberts

Malcolm was and remains the pre-eminent historian of Chartism. Impressive as this is, his career and legacy were and are much wider. His research interests were broad, ranging from radical agrarianism and environmentalism, the history of adult education, local history, especially the history of the north-east, as well as radical politics, its personalities and its conflict with authority since the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, it will almost certainly be his enormous contribution to the history of Chartism that will prove most enduring. After all, he achieved in his book *Chartism: A New History* (2007) what an earlier pre-eminent historian of the movement – Dorothy Thompson – had said was pretty much impossible: authoring a single volume account of the movement from its inception to its demise in all its rich facets.[1] Not only did Malcolm succeed admirably in communicating the history of Chartism to a general audience beyond academia, he also breathed new life into the academic study of Chartism, radical politics and labour and social history.

Until *Chartism* was published in 2007, the field – and labour history more broadly – was still reeling from the assault of postmodernism, the 'end of class', and the turn to language. Worse still, for junior academics such as myself starting out in the fields of labour history and popular politics, there was a perception among the wider academy that once these intemperate debates fizzled out, little more remained to be said about well-mined topics such as Chartism and popular politics in the long nineteenth century. Fortunately, Malcolm demonstrated how wrong this perception was – not just through his own work, but also by generously supporting those entering academia. However, he took the judicious view that labour history and popular politics would not be revitalised by intemperate, theoretical historiographical interventions as these ran the risk of making the field seem elitist and disconnected from the history of working people. This is perhaps why he, unlike other labour historians of his

[1] Dorothy Thompson, 'The Chartists and Their Legacy', talk delivered to the Bristol Radical History Group, 10 April 2010.

generation, never explicitly intervened in these debates.[2] One of the first emails that I ever received from Malcolm – and it remains the oldest one in my inbox – was in response to an email that I'd sent – a total stranger to him at the time – saying how much I had enjoyed *Chartism*. This is what he said:

> One of the things, I fear, that may harm the book in reviewers' eyes is the absence of any overt engagement with the historiography. This is partly because I wanted to produce a narrative, thickened by analysis but not cluttered by theory and abstraction which - in my judgment - alienate many readers. The old adult educator in me wants everything I write to be accessible to the interested general reader. But I also wanted to lay out what I believe Chartism was like, on its own terms. I know this is a Rankean fallacy (I nearly typed 'was actually like' in that last sentence!) - this in the hope of moving the debate about Chartism forward once more, re-asserting for the Chartists (rank, file and leaders) a claim to be taken seriously by historians.[3]

Malcolm's fears were, of course, unfounded: the book was widely reviewed and extremely well received. The email is also testament to just how welcoming, generous and supporting Malcolm could be, not just over email but also in person at conferences and other gatherings where his joviality along with a genuine interest in what people had to say and constructive suggestions about possible sources and other avenues worth pursuing, all combined to put people at ease.

One of his major achievements was to place ordinary working people at the heart of labour history – a strategy that was integral to *Chartism*, interleaved as it is with biographical portraits. It is fitting that one of the enduring legacies of Malcolm's work is that the annual Chartism Day conference, often held at higher education institutions in northern England and at which Malcolm was a stalwart attender and organiser, now features shorter presentations on Chartist lives interspersed with longer academic papers. While the objective of placing people at the heart of labour history had always been part of the history from below agenda – recall Thompson's famous rescuing mission in the preface to the *Making of the English Working Class* – unlike many (including Thompson) who came before him, Malcolm did not write from an overt theoretical or political position. What mattered to him was recreating the lives of those he was writing about in their own terms. Indeed, biography – although important from the beginning – appears to have become even more so in Malcolm's later work, convinced as he was that telling the history of the lives of the people was central to history from below.[4] In other words, his vision of what labour history should be was by reconnecting it with social history. As with many in the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH), with which Malcolm was long involved, he believed that labour history was about so much more than trade unionism, as important as that was, and we might note that he also authored what remains the best and most authoritative history of early trade unionism.[5] Similarly, he did not share the view that labour history should remain the study of organised labour

[2] Though he did, along with Joan Allen, survey the historiographical landscape in Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase, 'Britain: 1750-1900', in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John Mcllroy (eds), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (London, 2010), pp. 64–98.

[3] Email correspondence between the author and Malcolm Chase, 10 October 2008.

[4] Malcolm Chase, 'Labour History's Biographical Turn', *History Workshop Journal*, 92 (2021), pp. 194–207.

[5] Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (Aldershot, 2000).

narrowly defined, and certainly not one from a narrow ideological/theoretical perspective. Indeed, it was his expansive definition of labour history that made him more optimistic about the strength and development of the field in the 1990s and 2000s, despite a very small but vocal minority within the SSLH executive who were prophesying the crisis and death of the field if it continued to widen its scope from the study of organised labour.[6] That breadth, and as it turned out, a foretaste of what was to come in *Chartism*, was encapsulated in a brilliantly insightful paragraph in his book on trade unionism, in which he summarised what Chartism was, and is worth quoting at length:

> … Chartism was the structure within which for a time the majority of industrial workers pursued their political and even cultural activities… The new-born child of Chartist parents might be received into the movement at a special ceremony presided over by one of its leaders, and possibly given his name. Subsequently they might attend a Chartist Sunday School or have a subscription to the Chartist Land Plan taken out on their behalf. Meanwhile the parents would be immersed in the political and social life of the local branch of the National Charter Association, maybe the father also in one its trade localities and the mother in a Female Chartist Association. They might shop at a Chartist joint stock provision (i.e. co-operative) store. It a ratepayer, the father might be able to support Chartist candidates in local elections; if teetotal, the family could enlist in a Chartist Temperance Association. Prints of Chartist leaders would adorn the home and spare pence subscribed to support Chartist prisoners and their families. The family's main source of national news would be a Chartist weekly paper, usually the *Northern Star*. Male Chartists might join a clandestine group for arms drill. And men and women would participate in the great nocturnal mass meetings.[7]

This is labour history at its finest, recapturing the lived reality of the Chartist experience which was so much more than the six points, or abstract historiographical debates about whether the movement's language was class-conscious or not.

We should also remember that Malcolm's journey towards being the pre-eminent historian of Chartism was, in some respects, unconventional. True, he had been an undergraduate at York and was taught radical history by Edward Royle, and then he had gone to that most radical of institutions, Sussex, where he was supervised by J.F.C. Harrison where he was also, I suspect, influenced by, among others, Eileen Yeo and Alun Howkins, and his friend Ian Dyck with whom he would later co-edit a festschrift to J.F.C. Harrison.[8] But following this, Malcolm then followed in the footsteps of those like E.P. Thompson into adult education, albeit within a university setting but hardly a conventional one, based as he was at Middlesborough (which was then part of the University of Leeds). The focus of Malcolm's early research was hardly conventional either. He began as an historian of radical agrarianism at a time when few, if any, paid serious attention to radical ideas in relation to land ownership and usage, so often written off as tory, backward-looking, diversionary, divisive (labels, incidentally, often used to write-off the Chartist leader, Feargus O'Connor,

[6] Malcolm Chase, 'The Current and Future Position of Labour History', *Labour History Review*, 60 (1995), pp. 46–48.
[7] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, p. 173.
[8] Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996).

whom Malcolm would later emerge as a champion of). Along with Iain McCalman, Malcolm succeeded brilliantly in showing just how central land remained to new generations of urban radicals, and of course they both rescued Thomas Spence and his followers – albeit in different but complementary ways – from the enormous condescension of posterity.[9] Yet this was no mere rescuing of an ultra-radical marginal strand; as Malcolm showed, their influence and legacy was wide and varied, and even included democratic readings of Christianity, in particular the original notion of jubilee – a radical redistribution of the land, the subject of an article he published in *Past and Present*.[10]

The final tribute that I'd like to pay to Malcolm relates to his enduring commitment to local, regional and community history. For all the continuous glittering publications that he had to his name – prestigious university presses and high-powered journal articles, Malcolm continued throughout his career to research, publish and engage with audiences well beyond academia – and long before the REF-impact agenda mandated these sorts of connections. The old adult educator, again, one suspects, but also because he was part of a generation of labour and social historians who did not erect the sort of hierarchies and divisions that the academy often does. Again, this sort of inclusiveness lives on in Chartism Day, thanks in part to Malcolm's long involvement. No mere exercises in antiquarianism, much of Malcolm's published work in local and regional history journals, and talks to local, family and community history groups, was path-breaking and used case studies to cast light on much broader issues and concerns. A case in point is his article on the contrasting responses of two Teesside towns to Chartism, which illuminated so much about the dynamics of Chartism from below – of the types of communities where it succeeded, and didn't; of his work on the North-East Irish, republicanism; the nature of the state; and his work on the Chartist Land Plan.[11] Radical history – both as an academic field of study and as a form of public history that connects real people to their rich and difficult pasts – is all the more richer because of Malcolm's interventions, and all the poorer because of his untimely departure.

Malcolm Chase, Essayist and Speaker – Robert Poole

What I most relished about Malcolm was his skill as an essayist and speaker. After four fine monographs, his fifth major book was a collection of essays, *The Chartists,* which forms a companion volume to *Chartism: a History*. Exhibit A here is the

[9] Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775–1840* (Oxford, 1988).
[10] Malcolm Chase, 'From Millenium to Anniversary: The Concept of Jubilee in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 129 (1990), pp. 132–147.
[11] Malcolm Chase, 'Chartism, 1838–1858: Responses in Two Teesside Towns', *Northern History*, 24 (1988), pp. 146–171; 'The Chartist Land Plan and the Local Historian', *Local Historian*, 18 (1988), pp. 76–79; 'The Teesside Irish in the Nineteenth Century: The Irish in British Labour History'. *Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool Conference Proceedings in Irish Studies*, 1 (1993), pp. 47–58; 'The Local State in Regency Britain', *Local Historian*, 43 (2013), pp. 266–278; '"Stokesley Books": John Slater Pratt and Early Victorian Publishing', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 13 (2018), pp. 32–46; 'Chartism in Huddersfield, the Cultural Dimension', in John A. Hargreaves (ed.), *The Charter Our Right: Huddersfield Chartism Reconsidered* (Huddersfield, 2018), pp. 63–81.

FIGURE 1. Malcolm speaking at the Palace of Westminster 2013. (Credit unknown, from his papers).

wonderful piece, 'The Chartist Legacy for Parliamentary Democracy', a lecture on the 175th anniversary of the People's Charter delivered at the Palace of Westminster in 2013 before an audience of MPs, peers, and others (Figure 1). Malcolm begins by announcing that Chartism was 'the first, and arguably still the greatest, mass political movement in modern Britain', and deftly sketching out its immense scale and scope. Later he describes Chartism as 'the UK's civil rights movement', opening up a further dimension. The centrepiece of his talk is this superb account of the climax of the Chartist movement, the presentation of its biggest ever petition to the Commons by the Whig MP Thomas Slingsby Duncombe in 1842:

> Duncombe presented the largest of the three Chartist petitions to Parliament, marshalling 3.3m signatures (around a third of Britain's adult population and four times larger than the combined British and Irish electorate created by the Reform Act of 1832). This was the single largest petition ever laid before Parliament, occupying an estimated six miles of paper and weighing a third of a ton. On 2 May 1842, relays of burly London tradesmen carried it through the streets of London in a huge decorated box constructed for the purpose. Even *The Times* (no friend of Chartism) estimated the accompanying crowd at 50,000.
>
> On entering Parliament, the petition jammed tight in the doorway into the Commons. After attempts to dismantle the door frame (authorised by the speaker) failed, the petition had to be disassembled and taken into the House of Commons by members of the Chartists' National Convention. The mountain of paper, heaped onto the floor of the Chamber, dwarfed the clerks' table upon which, technically, it was supposed to be placed. Procedure then required the Clerk of the House to read out all 3,000 words of a plea not only for parliamentary reform but also for other key Chartist demands. These included a clean-up of government corruption, disestablishment of the C of E and home rule for Ireland. It was a deeply satisfying piece of political theatre.[12]

[12] Malcolm Chase, 'The Chartist Legacy for Parliamentary Democracy', *The Chartists,* pp. 7–8.

Combining grand scale with high resolution detail, this passage says it all, using the format Malcolm most favoured: well-rooted narrative. He succinctly conveys the historic scale of the petition, then describes the Chartist movement's supreme confrontation with the political establishment with an eye for the significant detail. It reads like good journalism, but it arises from a mastery of the historical sources, one of which he himself has collected and published: a high-quality commemorative print of the occasions issued with the *Northern Star*. The immensity of the Chartist movement relative to the existing political order is dramatised by the comedy of trying to squeeze the monster petition into a House of Commons woefully unequipped for democracy. The whole is sharpened by a close understanding of parliamentary procedure. Delivered in the Palace of Westminster itself, the lecture is perfectly pitched for its audience of MPs and peers. Like much classic history, the essay is written with integrity for one context yet transferable to others.

Malcolm always wrote specifically for his audience, typically linking local or sectional experience with wider history in a way designed not just to inform but to motivate. This commitment was in part the legacy of his experience as one of Edward Thompson's successors in the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Leeds. Like Thompson, Malcolm paid homage to past struggles by mapping out their positive achievements. He had little time for the stale critique that Chartism failed because it was divided or because it frightened off Whig sympathisers. As for the equally dismissive critique that Chartism failed because it didn't live up to some later Marxist model of class struggle, this was just 'revolutionary antiquarianism'. For both Thompson and Chase, a full appreciation of the scope and significance of a movement depended on understanding it historically, in relation to the context of the time. Good history is the best polemic.

In his Westminster lecture Malcolm avoided the conventional narrative of Chartist failure. He always saw it is his work to explain what Chartism did do, rather than pick over what it didn't; research for Malcolm was always a constructive activity. In historical perspective, the achievements of Chartism, he argued, were fourfold. First, through organisation and education, Chartism increased the 'social capital' of ordinary people. Second, through its press and publications, it created a national working-class awareness of common interests. Third, it persuaded Westminster to begin legislating in the interests of working people, starting with labour legislation. Fourth, by opening the way for working people to get involved in local and national government, 'the movement was a crucible for active citizenship'.[13] In a related essay from 2009, 'Labour's candidates: Chartism at the parliamentary polls', he identified three Chartists who eventually became MPs, another who topped the poll twice in Tavistock but was blocked from taking his seat, and numerous others who, acclaimed as victors at the hustings but losing at the polls, were able to call themselves the real representatives of their constituencies: 'Chartism's concerted challenge was to the political system itself'.[14]

[13] Chase, 'The Chartist Legacy for Parliamentary Democracy', p. 10. The same argument can be found in Malcolm's 'Brief History of Chartism', written for the *History Extra* website following the success of the TV drama *Victoria,* https://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/what-was-chartism-peoples-charter-vote-mass-movement-victoria/. It makes an interesting contrast with the traditional failure narrative of Chartism still current at the time his book *Chartism* came out, for example on the *Victorian Web* site, https://victorianweb.org/history/chartism/index.html

[14] Chase, 'Labour's Candidates: Chartism at the Parliamentary Polls', *Chartism,* p. 135.

Malcolm had the rare talent of making his spoken and written deliveries equally fluent. When Fabrice Bensimon and I edited together different versions of his piece on Samuel Smiles and Leeds Chartism for posthumous publication, the task was surprisingly straightforward. There was no difference of style between the texts: his spoken papers were carefully prepared while his written essays retained the fluency of the spoken form. Perhaps this facility is what made Malcolm such a prolific essayist – 55 of them, from local journals to *Past and Present.* Then there were the dozens of biographical entries for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Labour Biography,* including group biographies of the National Charter Association and the Cato Street conspirators. To these we can add the nine Chartist lives which punctuate his great book *Chartism,* his contributions to a volume of *Durham Biographies,* his booklets on Thomas Paine and Allen Davenport, and his warm and insightful tributes to fellow-historians Eric Hobsbawm, Ian Dyck, and his own mentor J.F.C. Harrison.[15] He has indeed earned his own tributes.

Malcolm's lecture on the first historian of Chartism, Mark Hovell, at the Manchester colloquium to mark the centenary of his death, was typically alert and generous. He criticised Hovell's sharp distinction between 'moral force' and 'physical force' Chartism, but by a careful reading of the book alongside the relevant archival material he showed this to be the consequence of posthumous editorial work by Hovell's head of department, Thomas Tout. He then deftly unpicked the way in which the moral force/physical force thesis became 'the leading question in Chartist historiography'. In a final flourish, he pointed out that Hovell himself was himself preoccupied with questions of leadership as an officer in the First World War, and he died in 1916 leading his company from the front. There could hardly be a better example of respectful critique.

People mattered to Malcolm, so it is fitting that one of his later essays, delivered as a paper at a 2011 colloquium event in Paris, was on 'Labour History's Biographical Turn'. He set out a persuasive manifesto for the historical value of the individual life, reminding his hearers of 'the many sacrifices and small acts of bravery that political activism typically involves'. To recover them as lived was not an exercise in empathy or hagiography but rather a true test of the historian's mettle, requiring 'energetic archival work, piecing together sometimes scanty written sources and hazy memories'. (He had no time for the postmodernist corrosion of human agency). His last two published essays were biographical (Samuel Smiles and R.K. Philp), while his last, unfinished book project was a life of the radical Whig Sir Francis Burdett. Here he would undoubtedly have continued to develop the craft of historical narrative through the skilful sifting of establishment archives which marked his later career. Malcolm Chase's Chartist papers are hosted by the Society for the Study of Labour History and available to all those who wish to build on Malcolm's work.[16]

To add a personal note, Malcolm and I were born in the same summer, we both went to new universities which pioneered social history (York and Sussex, and Lancaster respectively), and both followed PhDs during the years of the Thatcher

[15] For the full bibliography, see Fabrice Bensimon's list, published below.

[16] See Society for the Study of Labour History newsletter, January 2025, https://sslh.org.uk Malcolm Chase Electronic Archives

cuts to university funding in the 1980s – years almost without hope, except for someone with Malcolm's character and consistency of purpose. We both attended the 1979 Oxford History Workshop on 'People's History and Socialist Theory', scene of the plenary showdown in a disused chapel in Jericho between E. P. Thompson and his theorist adversaries in the wake of *The Poverty of Theory*. We were both on the side of people's history, but we didn't meet; I was a spectator while Malcolm, genially at the heart of things, enjoyed a fish and chip lunch with Thompson. In the decade that followed, while others struggled erratically or even gave up, Malcolm worked with steady commitment, by his nature attracting friends, colleagues and PhD students. Those who over the years have received friendly and helpful correspondence from 'the old man of Osbaldwick' (as he once styled himself) must run into the hundreds. There was an impressive turnout at his eerily sunlit funeral in York in March 2020, notwithstanding the deserted railway stations and the dozens of withdrawals for health reasons on the last Friday before lockdown.

Given Malcolm's sociability and aversion to disputes, the saddest item in his papers is his 2008 letter of resignation as chair of the Society for the Study of Labour History and as editor of its jubilee volume, after 14 years on the executive committee and 29 years of membership. The 'tipping point', he explains, was some particularly offensive personal abuse at a meeting the previous day where, very uncharacteristically, he had to raise his voice to be heard: 'I seem to have spent much of the past five years trying to reconcile conflicts and I'm finding the role of peacemaker wearisome'. He identifies the problem as 'rancour, intolerance and (somewhat ironically) a very 'old Labour' suspicion of, and hostility to, anything that cannot be readily controlled.' Even in sorrow and in anger, no sooner does he begin writing than historical perspective reasserts itself. After this episode the executive rapidly refreshed itself and embraced his broad view of labour history, and the society remained his spiritual home until his death – and indeed after, as the guardian of his papers.[17]

Malcolm's paper on 'The Chartist Legacy for Parliamentary Democracy' concludes with another typical juxtaposition of past and present:

> There's an important lesson here for those who care about democracy. Chartism was at its most potent as a political force when it was socially most inclusive … . It is worth recalling … as we ponder declining election turnouts, the diminishing base of unpaid party activists, and the distance that remains between the parliamentary system and those to whom elected representatives are ultimately accountable.[18]

This gentle call to arms marked the inauguration of one of the most visible parts of Malcolm's legacy: the permanent exhibition on Chartism and democracy which ushers every visitor along the way to the public gallery of the House of Commons. As the fabric of the Palace of Westminster itself crumbles, Malcolm's papers and writings grow in force and significance. On every page we hear his voice, still.

[17] Malcolm Chase to officers of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 25 August 2008, in his research papers.
[18] Chase, 'The Chartist Legacy for Parliamentary Democracy', 12.

Malcolm Chase: An Associational Historian – Katrina Navickas

The long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were arguably the age of the association in Britain. Associations created and fostered sociability among the upper and middle classes, structured a lively urban renaissance, and helped to channel new forms of politics as parliamentary parties and factions jostled for position and as the franchise expanded.[19] So fittingly, Malcolm Chase was an associational scholar. His early scholarly work focused on the role of associations in popular politics, ranging from nascent trade unions to Spencean republican societies to the Chartist branches.[20] The emergent working-class popular politics of the era of reform spread through networks, connections, personal conversations and lectures. Action was organised through committees, and through branches, delegations, nominations, sub-committees and executive committees. Malcolm recognised the vital work done by clerks, secretaries, administrative staff, treasurers and other roles behind the scenes. The engines of both Chartism and trade unionism were not just firebrand militants, although he acknowledged the key role of leaders such as Feargus O'Connor, but also the people with the pen and the print block, the accounting book and the minute book, and the families that supported them.[21]

Malcolm's work on the management committee of *Northern History* continued the journal's strong sense of purpose to disseminate the best research in regional history. He offered generous guidance on papers from a whole range of scholars from those at the early career stage to the well-established, and from academic to local historians working outside the university system. Malcolm shared and promoted a commitment to regional history. This was the history contained in the boxfiles in the county record office, the pamphlets on the shelves of the local studies library, the stories from the provincial town at the centre rather than the periphery of the national story. Malcolm was dedicated to the study of northern England, especially the north-east regions of his beloved Teesside and the North Riding of Yorkshire. Malcolm was no provincial scholar in the reductive sense of the term: rather, he understood the power of place, and how local and regional industries and politics collectively influenced national and international movements and structures, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[22]

Given Malcolm's interest in the history of political associational life, it is fitting that he played an active part in scholarly history societies. He served as President of the Society for the Study of Labour History (2005–07), and then as chair of the Social History Society (2011–14) while also serving on the management boards of *Northern History* from 1998, and contributed to the boards of *Cultural and Social History, Labour History, and Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*. My main recollection of being on the Social History Society committee with Malcolm at the helm was his

[19] See for example, Eugene Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769–1793* (Oxford University Press, 1963); Stefan Ludwig Hoffman, 'Democracy and Associations in the Long Nineteenth Century: Toward a Transnational Perspective', *Journal of Modern History,* 75:2 (2003), pp. 269–99.
[20] Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (Routledge, 2000).
[21] Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester University Press, 2007).
[22] For example, Malcolm Chase, 'Unemployment without Protest: The Ironstone Mining Communities of East Cleveland in the Inter-war Period', in Mattias Reiss and Matt Perry (eds), *Unemployment and Protest: New Perspectives on Two Centuries of Contention* (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 265–282

calm leadership and steady steer, with an ever attention to encouraging new scholars. The societies that Malcolm was most involved with are concerned with history from below—social history of the most grounded kind—and very much rooted in local and regional history as a mode of understanding people in the past.

Malcolm was, furthermore, a fine writer. His prose and talks were carefully crafted down to the last phrase. He appreciated the power of both the written and spoken word, and was committed to telling a good story. Indeed, he quietly combatted postmodernism and other trends that came and went in historical and literary scholarship with an emphasis on narrative. In an article for *Studies in the Education of Adults*, he made his argument against postmodernism clear, suggesting rather that the act of piecing together a historical narrative clearly and coherently is a method in itself, and one that brings in far more interest to the study of history than debates over semantics.[23] This did not mean, however, that Malcolm ignored the role of words in politics and social movements—far from it. Words and their dissemination were central to the formation of ideas and ideologies. The newspaper, correspondence and pamphlet played a large part in his understanding of and interest in nineteenth-century political movements.[24] He evidently saw the mission of a historian in a parallel way to some of the historic characters he studied, from the orators and obvious leaders including Sir Francis Burdett and perhaps Feargus O'Connor, to lesser known activists such as Robert Kemp Philp and Charles Stubbs, who conducted their activism from their desk as much as from the lectern, and relied on the practical politics of the committee, the letter and the newsletter to spread the word and form a national movement and enact genuine and lasting change.[25] Many tributes to Malcolm comment on his sense of moral purpose. To be an active historian, in his view, was to seek to tell the holistic, most accurate and complete story of the past as possible given available evidence, and to reach the general public with the power of the story more than with abstract theories that did not directly relate to lived experience.

Malcolm was committed to fostering the new generation of scholars, who were gently encouraged to follow his practices and interests. In this age when so-called 'early career researchers' are treated by universities akin to late eighteenth-century day labourers begging for piece work after enclosure wiped out the small farms, or indeed deskilled handloom weavers forced to find pin work in the factories, his quiet patronage of emerging scholars harked back to respect of the ideals of apprenticeship and long-term investment that he discussed in his book, *Early Trade Unions*. Writing and research are a craft to be guided. Malcolm's numerous former PhD students shared in appreciation for his care and attention to their work and ideas.

As far as I know, Malcolm did not take up social media with the same eagerness that I and other scholars have for professional and historical conversations and networking. Yet, with the disintegration of sites like Twitter (and parallel to this, the upheaval that the malicious hacking of the British Library's online resources caused in October 2023), perhaps Malcolm's measured, analogue, approach was right. Scholars should return to tried-and-tested forms of scholarly practices and

[23] Malcolm Chase, 'Stories We Tell Them? Teaching Adults History in a Postmodern World', *Studies in the Education of Adults,* 32:1 (2000), pp. 93–106.
[24] Malcolm Chase, "Stokesley Books": John Slater Pratt and Early Victorian Publishing'.
[25] Malcolm Chase, 'An overpowering "itch for writing"': R. K. Philp, John Denman and the Culture of Self-Improvement', *English Historical Review*, 133:561 (2018), pp. 351–382.

communities in which he was very much at home, and indeed led. We learn from each other through conferences and correspondence, sharing drafts of articles and manuscripts, embedded in the corresponding and literary worlds of the long nineteenth century.

For Malcolm, politics and education were not simply complementary, they were integral to each other in the working-class project for self-emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century. Working-class self-improvement in its various forms chimed with Malcolm's commitment to adult education, with twenty years at the helm of the University of Leeds's extra mural department until it was shut in 2005. I believe he committed to doing as many talks to local history and labour history societies as he did academic talks. It was truly fitting that his last public talk was to the Newport Chartist Convention in November 2019. This annual event represents, I think, the best of both worlds, where local historians, archivists, left-wing history groups and the interested public could discuss democratic and trade union histories on an equal footing. Chartism Day, held in a different location meaningful to the movement each year, often in Sheffield and Leeds, was a high point of his calendar. It is always grounded in connecting historians with knowledgeable local historians, and with the very places where Chartists campaigned. The active local history societies, notably at Huddersfield, delighted in inviting him to speak. Malcolm delivered Huddersfield Local History Society's second Luddite Memorial Lecture in 2015 on 'York Castle and its political prisoners: the Luddites in a broader context'.[26] When I organised the 2017 Chartism Day at Heronsgate, Hertfordshire, at what was the Chartist settlement of O'Connorville, I remember Malcolm's enthralled face when he first entered the village hall hosting the event. This wasn't the usual fluorescent-lit seminar room of a university building: it was a real and active centre for the local community, which Malcolm appreciated more, I think. The amenable residents showed us around the original Chartist cottages, and Malcolm revelled in this direct material connection to the movement. He was always generous with his time with local communities. In 2018, the friends' group of Kennington Park in south London won a grant from the Lottery Heritage Fund to hold the 170th anniversary commemorations of the great Chartist meeting on the site. His talks at the events at the Kennington Chartist Project were genuinely inspirational to the myriad assembled audiences (see Figure 2), passers-by who dropped by St Mark's Church where he was speaking, and local historians and scholars such as S. I. Martin, expert on local Black Chartist leader William Cuffay, sharing knowledge and a passion for the movement.

What is Malcolm's legacy? Here I ask readers to carry on what we now call 'community coproduction', that is, working with and alongside community historians as well as talking to them. Robert, Matthew and I regularly do the rounds of the village halls and local history societies at Halifax, Manchester, Huddersfield, Nottingham and Derby, among other places. The spirit of Malcolm's zest for public engagement and for local radical history can be experienced at the annual Tolpuddle Radical History School and Newport Rising festival among other grass-roots radical history events. So, if you are asked to go to a scout hut in Malton on a Wednesday night in February, do it.

[26] https://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.com/2015/04/the-2015-luddite-memorial-lecture-york.html, accessed 24 November 2025.

FIGURE 2. Malcolm at Kennington Chartism Day 28 April 2018 by Stefan Sczelkun, CC-BY-NC-SA https://www.flickr.com/photos/stefan-szczelkun/26963752697/in/photostream/

Even though such activity might not – in the neoliberal university – gain much credit or indeed count as 'impact', do it out of a commitment to a co-operative or philanthropic alternative vision of what adult education should be, to carry on Malcolm's great work.

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