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THOMAS PAINE AND THE POLISH CONSTITUTION OF 3 MAY, 1791

Derek Bailey

THE constitution of May 3, 1791, is held in high regard by the generality of Polish commentators. Its mention in conjunction with the near contemporary United States Constitution and the French Constitution is not unusual. 'The May 3rd Constitution provided, on the basis of the ideas of the French revolution, for the introduction of fundamental changes in the system of Poland' (*Arnold & Zychowski, 1962. p.73*).

From 1765 to 1795 was a period of Polish national renewal, affected by the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. Both Rousseau's *Contrat Social* and Montesquieu's *l'Esprit des Lois* excited interest, and continuing contacts with France led in 1772 to the publication of Rousseau's, *Considerations sur le Gouvernement de Pologne*.

A year later, in 1773, there was established the Educational Commission, taking control of nearly all schools in Poland. The schools were reorganised and the curricula modernised, Polish becoming the language of instruction. The revival of the Polish language contributed to the awakening of independent thought and the strengthening of a sense of Polish identity. Earlier education had been monopolised by the Jesuits, teaching being conducted in Latin.

It is possible that the observation on Poland in *Rights of Man* Part 2, that 'it is only the government that has made a voluntary essay, though a small one, to reform the condition of the country' (*p.227*) may have been a reference to reform accomplished and not reform in prospect. That is, to educational reform.

A few pages later, Paine observes, 'Various forms of government have affected to style themselves a republic. Poland calls itself a republic...' (*pp.230-1*). Paine's judgement is unequivocal. 'But the government of America, which is wholly on the system of representation, is the only real republic in character and in practice, that now exists' (*p.231*).

Thus there are self-styled republics and real republics. Just so with constitutions.

The May 3 Constitution was adopted towards the close of the period of Polish national renewal.

Thomas Paine was known to Polish exiles, both in the United States and in France. Therefore it is natural to enquire, as does Libiszowski (1998), what may have been the attitude of Paine to the occurrences in

Poland. However, Thomas Paine was a practical man of public affairs and his attitude to the Polish Constitution may have been more circumspect than as suggested by Libiszowsk.

The process of constitution making and the content of the constitution may be considered separately. It is not known, with reasonable certainty, what Paine knew of either the one or the other concerning Poland. What his views may have been, had he been well informed, could be inferred, at least tentatively, from his known views in other contexts.

The constitution prepared in secrecy (*Zamoyski, 1992. p.348*). The secret preparatory work was undertaken by the Polish king, Stanislaw Augustus, and a small group of advisers. Most shared a common interest in freemasonry (*Gieysztor, 1968. p.351*).

'It was expected the project, with its eleven articles, would be approved by the Diet without discussion' (*Reddaway, 1971. p.135*). 'The events of 3 May 1791 were carefully staged... by circumventing normal procedure the draft law was read and voted at the same session' (*Gieysztor. p.374*). That is, it amounted to a coup d'etat (*Gieysztor. p.372*).

Paine was emphatic that both enquiry into the nature of reform, and the undertaking of the reform decided upon, were not to be entrusted to a parliament or a government (*pp.374-5*). Sovereignty resided in the nation and it was for the nation to construct its own constitution. 'A constitution is a thing antecedent to a government, and a government is only the creature of a constitution' (*p.122*). 'The constitution of a country is not the act of its government' (*p.122*).

The proper approach, for the expression of the general will of the nation, was through the election of a National Convention so that 'the nation will decree its own reform' (*p.376*).

It was not how matters proceeded in Poland.

Prior to the adoption of the constitution, in December 1789, representatives of the towns had petitioned against their exclusion from the constitutional life of the country (*Davies, 1982/ p.354*).

Concerning petitions, Paine was dismissive: 'As to petitions from the unrepresentative part, they are not to be looked for' (*p.371*).

What did the eleven articles of the Polish constitution contain (Perhaps surprisingly, an English language text of the complete constitution, presuming one to be extant, has escaped detection)?

The first article, while permitting the toleration of other faiths, confirmed that apostasy from the national faith of Roman Catholicism was not to be countenanced (*Reddaway. p.147*).

Thomas Paine, a deist, considered that each person should be free to

commend himself to God in his own fashion, unconstrained by institutionalised religion. For Paine, 'Toleration is not the opposite of Intolerance, but is the counterfeit of it. Both are despotisms' (p.137).

'The estates are preserved, and the gentry were to possess their old privileges. The peasantry... did not obtain political rights (*Reddaway*, p.135).

Paine regarded the landed interest as, in effect, a conspiracy against the general interest (e.g. showing how in Britain their tax burden had been lightened to the disadvantage of the general population (p.277)).

Enfranchisement was confined effectively to those possessing property. There were 'tens of thousands of landless szlachta (Szlachta were members of a caste like nobility) who lost their vote overnight' (*Zamoyski*, 1992. p.349).

For Paine, 'it is dangerous and impolitic, sometime ridiculous, and always unjust, to make property the criterion of the right of voting' (p.397).

The Polish king, Stanislaw Augustus, 'a confirmed bachelor', was to be succeeded by the Saxon dynasty. 'Frederick Augustus, Elector of Saxony... was invited to start the dynasty, and since he had no son yet, his daughter was designated the Infanta of Poland' (*Zamoyski*, 1992. p.241). That is, the throne was to be 'dynastically elective' (*Zamoyski*, 1987. p.248).

Paine disapproved of monarchy, although not necessarily of the person of the monarch (p.97). For Paine, 'To connect representation with what is called monarchy is eccentric government' (p.233).

There is a further consideration.

'In all the volumes expended by Polish historians on the period 1788-94 very few words are wasted to explain that none of the splendid constitutional and social projects of the reformers were ever put into effect. Neither the Constitution of 3 May... were ever implemented' (*Davies*, p.530).

And Paine? He set his face firmly against theoretical formulations. 'A constitution is not a thing in name only, but in fact' (p.122).

The Polish king 'did not take advantage of the extensive powers the constitution gave him in order to push through the revolution implicit in it' (*Zamoyski*, 1992. p.347). There were practical reasons for not doing so. 'Polish historians have tended to assume the country was united in its support for the constitution... This is retrospective wishful thinking based on the memoirs of leading Patriots' (*Zamoyski*, 1992. p.348).

The adoption of the 3 May Constitution was controversial within Poland. In fact, soon after the first anniversary of its adoption the 3 May

Constitution was rescinded. 'In 1794 all laws passed between 1788 and 1792 were cancelled' (*Zamoyski, 1992. p.408*), the Polish king throwing his lot in with the Confederation of Targowica (a group of nobles opposed to the reform process), the latter supported by Catherine the Great (an autocrat presumed to be sympathetic to the new currents of the Enlightenment) and Russian soldiery.

In 1795 the Third Partition led to the disappearance of Poland from the map of Europe for over one hundred and twenty years. And 'England's acquiescence' (*Libiszowsk. p.13*)? The beheading of ten leading burghers of the town of Torun in 1724, merely for being Protestant, had shocked non-Catholic Europe.

Writing in that year of 1795, Paine observed, 'In all the countries of Europe (except in France) the same forms and systems that were erected in the remote ages of ignorance, still continue' (*p.387*).

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Book Review

EDMUND FROW (EDDIE) 1906-1997, THE MAKING OF AN ACTIVIST. Ruth Frow. Illustrated. 168pp. Paperback. ISBN 0 9523410 9 3. Salford, Working Class Movement Library, 1999. £6.00:

ANYONE seriously interested in radical working class history owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Eddie Frow (and Ruth Frow), for having brought into being the Working Class Movement Library. When so many were oblivious to the rich history of of the British working class as illustrated through its literature, they commenced to assiduously seek

these publications, and manuscript material, out which eventually grew to enormous proportions. Thankfully they did not sell their collection, for over the past twenty or so years institutional interest in social history has increased dramatically and many collections and individual rare books and pamphlets have emigrated from these shores to collections, public and private in the United States, and, one might add, to Japan. Instead they took steps to preserve their collection, and made it available to all with a serious interest in working class history. It was very much to the credit of Salford Council that they offered a home to the collection, which is still being added to.

This is not a biography in the strict sense of the term, but rather, as she describes it, an anecdotal biography. From its pages its subject emerges as a remarkable and certainly brave individual dedicated to the welfare of his fellow men, although there are times when the reader who does not share his political ideology gets the impression that he may have achieved greater results had he displayed a greater degree of political flexibility, which could have been done without compromising his beliefs. This point is made by another former trade union leader, Bob Wright, when he refers to his 'dogmatic tendency' and goes on to identify what he considers to be his colleague's 'blind spots', which he describes as a 'reflection of his Communist Party discipline or a Marxist analogy' which tended to make him ignore the practical problems of trade union life in a non-socialist/aggressive capitalist situation. Nevertheless, Wright stresses that Eddie was 'a kind man with a moral discipline, though not one happy with having a drink in the local pub, preferring, instead, to 'go home and read'.

Eddie (and Ruth) Frow's passion for books comes increasingly to the fore in this work when the author discusses the origins and ultimate fate of their magnificent library. How they travelled around on holidays and at weekends to rummage in secondhand bookshops, giving details, in brief, of some of their finds and how they managed to attract donations of collections to enhance the library, which had been made into a trust. The experiences related strike a chord in me as I have a passion for secondhand bookshops and well know the feelings when chancing upon a particularly desirable book at a price I could afford. Both Ruth and Eddie Frow were members of the Thomas Paine Society (I am unsure whether Ruth remains one), and it was to their Working Class Movement Library that the late Christopher Brunel, a good friend of the Frows and first Chairman of the TPS, left his superb Paine library, perhaps the finest Paine collection in Britain, thus making the library

one of the most important places where rare works by and on Thomas Paine and his influence can be consulted - I had been under the impression, from what he had told me, that it was to go to the Marx Memorial Library in London, with which Chris had close associations.

Formal recognition of the Frow's work was given when they were awarded Honorary Degrees by Salford University and Edmund made an Honorary Fellow of Manchester Polytechnic. In addition they were elected as Honorary Fellows of the University of Mid-Lancashire the Library Association gave them a Special Certificate of Merit. A fact not mentioned in the book is the award of a substantial grant to the Working Class Movement Library by the National Lottery to pay for the rebinding of scarce books. Although he may not have approved of the Lottery, I suspect Edmund Frow would have approved of the grant.

On a personal level I have good reason to remember Edmund Frow with gratitude, for when researching a particular obscure individual for a paper I had been requested to write, I had come up with a complete blank. In desperation I wrote to him and a few days later received several pages of photocopied material which not only supplied some of the facts I required but also pointed me in the direction of where I could find additional information. Perhaps I am biased, although I hope not, but I found this an absorbingly interesting book, one of the few which I literally read in one session. Its subject comes alive in its pages, for Ruth Frow is an extremely able writer, and one does not have to share his (and her) political beliefs to enjoy it. It is also an important record of political and trade union activity, primarily in the Manchester area, where Edmund Frow achieved one of his major desires, election as a full time union official, although he was not in the job long enough to receive a union pension when he retired.

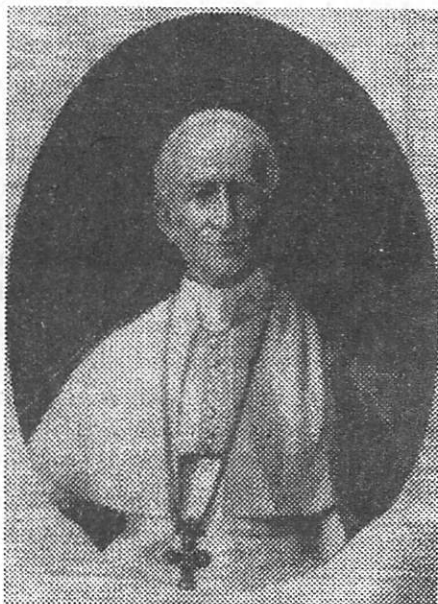
The book is well illustrated and if I have any criticisms, they are of a selfish desire to want to know more about the books and book collecting exploits of Eddie and his wife, which could well, I suspect make a book in themselves. One final critical point, although mention is made of 'the Thomas Paine Collection' being willed to the library there is no reference to the person who willed it, Chris Brunel, the first chairman of the TPS.

R.W.Morrell.

RIGHTS OF MAN CENTENARY AND THE POPE

P.O'Brien

LAST December my wife and I moved from a sizable bungalow to a flat for oldies (sheltered accommodation). Losing our loft necessitated shedding many books and loads of paper going back many years - the accumulation of an indiscriminate hoarder! There are still box loads which have yet to be pruned to yield further fascinating discoveries. One recent treasure to emerge was a slim booklet (price twopence) of 51 pages, which I had studied in late schooldays, more than sixty years ago. It was an encyclical Letter emanating from Pope Leo XIII entitled *Rerum Novarum*, with the English subtitle, *The Workers Charter*, published in 1891. I still remember being impressed with it at the time (probably 1939).



Pope Leo XIII

With great interest I again read the opening paragraph and, in the light of other material studied since then, my immediate reaction was: "That could have come from the pen of Thomas Paine". Then I noticed the date; 1891 was the centenary of *Rights of Man*. Could this mean that the Pope, or one of his advisers, being familiar with Paine's work, and considering relevant changes through the intervening century, decided that the time was ripe for reassessment and fresh recommendations?

I have gone back to *Rights of Man* and compared it carefully with *The Workers Charter*. I would find it hard to believe that this new work, coming on the centenary of Paine's, was merely coincidence and of no further significance. But, although there is evidence, I cannot assert proof. It has been suggested to me that this is another instance of Paine being plagiarised, as he was by Edmund Burke, but this is not so, because nowhere in the papal document is Paine quoted either with or without acknowledgement.

So let us consider the writing and leave readers to reach their own

conclusions, either from what I present, or from studying the original texts which are still readily available. But, first let us consider why the papacy might fail to acknowledge a philosophic debt to Paine. Christian denominations in general were affronted by his publication in 1793-95 of *The Age of Reason* and ceased to rate what he had previously achieved. So it might have been considered poor tactics for the Vatican to acknowledge him at that time.

The Age of Reason which adopted the Deist philosophy of Robespierre and other French philosophers was highly critical of Judeo-Christian scripture, although Paine's background was certainly Christian and his *Rights of Man* reflects this. His mother was Anglican, the church in which he was baptised, confirmed and married. His father was a Quaker and he writes of: the affectionate and moral remonstrance of a good father. In early days at Grantham he heard John Wesley preach and followed him for a time into Methodism as a lay preacher, hoping to be ordained, but in this he was stymied due to his lack of Latin and Greek. Later, after experience in America and France he would proclaim, "My country is the world and my religion is to do good"; whilst criticising "governments, putting themselves beyond the law as well of God as of Man".

There can be no doubt as to his moral approach in considering the ills besetting society at that time, and most of this is to be found in *Rights of Man*, Part II, chapter 5, 'Ways and Means', where his opening comment is on 'widespread poverty and wretchedness.... in countries that are called civilised we see age going to the workhouse and youth to the gallows.... Why is it that scarcely any are executed but the poor? Bred up without morals, and cast upon the world without a prospect, they are the exposed sacrifice of vice and legal barbarity'.

He blames much on inequity in taxation by saying that, 'Civilised relationships between nations could reduce taxation'. Poor Rates he saw as a direct tax with a considerable part of its revenue expended in litigation, 'in which the poor, instead of being relieved are tormented'. These rates effect the labourer who 'is not sensible of this, because it is disguised to him in the articles which he buys'. Is this so different from the VAT we have today, which inevitably falls most heavily on the poorest in society since many essentials cannot be purchased without paying up? He goes on to comment that 'the poor are generally composed of large families of children and old people past their labour'. He pleads for 'good provision for primary education', also to address 'problems of the aged, ex-soldiers, worn out servants, poor widows and middling tradesmen'. This should be a matter of 'enlightened support... and not a

matter of grace and favour'.

Then he summarises his major recommendations: Family allowance, old age pensions, a marriage grant, maternity benefit, a death grant for funeral expenses, provision for the casual poor in inner cities (our cardboard cities today), Army and Navy pensions, provision for widows with children to maintain, and Education for all, commenting that: 'It is monarchical and aristocratic government only that requires ignorance for its support,... Many a youth comes up to London with little or no money, and unless he gets immediate employment he is already undone.... Hunger is not among the postponable wants.'

Finally, returning to worship and belief he reviews his own situation: 'Why may we not suppose that the great Father of all is pleased with variety in devotion' (he would surely welcome today's ecumenicism). 'I am fully pleased with what I am now now doing, with an endeavour to conciliate mankind, to render his condition happy, to unite nations that have hitherto been enemies... to break the chains of slavery and oppression, is acceptable in His sight, and being the best service I can perform, I act it cheerfully'.

In *Rights of Man* Part I, in his 'Observation on the Declaration of Rights' by the French National Assembly, he comments on the query raised: whether the tenth article sufficiently guarantees the right it is intended to accord with. This article states that: no man ought to be molested on account of his opinions, provided his avowal of them does not disturb the public order established by law. He then comments, 'It takes off from the divine dignity of religion and weakens its operative force upon the mind, to make it a subject of human laws', adding in a significant footnote:

'There is a single idea which, if it strikes rightly upon the mind either in a legal sense, will prevent any man, or any body of men, or any government, from going wrong on the subject of religion which is that before any institution of government was known in the world there existed, if I may so express it, a compact between God and Man, from the beginning of time; and that as the relation and condition which man in his *individual person* stands in towards his Maker, cannot be changed, or anyway altered by any human laws or human authority, that as religious devotion, which is part of this compact, cannot be made subject of human laws; and that all laws must conform themselves to this prior existing compact, and not assume to make the compact conform to the laws, which besides being human, are subsequent thereto. The first act of man, when he looked around and saw himself a creature which he did not make, and a world furnished for his

reception, must have been devotion, and a devotion must ever continue sacred to every man, *as it appears right to him*, and governments do mischief by interfering'.

He also touches lightly on Workmen's Wages, a topic scarcely considered in society generally at that time and where he had his own very bitter experience, when his first pamphlet, *The Case of the Officers of Excise* (1772), caused him to be dismissed from that service, whose members had no Association to argue for their rights, so that his campaign was largely single-handed. He stood alone and could be swept aside!

So how does all this impinge on Pope Leo XIII in 1891 with his *Workers' Charter*? Much had changed in the course of a century, but much still remained for the following century. We start where his thesis has just left off with Worker's Rights and the need for Organised Labour, since that is where his Encyclical kicks off, considering: 'The fortunes of the few and poverty of the masses', the need for 'self reliance and mutual combination of workers...relative rights and mutual duties of rich and poor, capital and labour', then commenting on 'the misery and wretchedness' experienced by a 'majority of the working class' due to the 'hard heartedness of employers...greed of unchecked competition by covetous and grasping men...little better than slavery itself'.

Next comes a note of caution regarding Socialism which is 'striving to do away with private property' and warning that the 'working man... would be the first to suffer'. But here there is obvious confusion between what we now regard as Socialism and atheistic Communism, and remembering that the Russian Revolution is still some decade ahead, we can understand that the far sighted Paine would never have approved of Stalin's system. The Charter asserts the 'motive if work is to obtain property' which it sees as 'necessary for maintenance and education...every man having by nature the right to possess property as his own. ... For man... being master of his own acts, guides his way under the eternal law and power of God. ... Man precedes the State...and there is no-one who does not sustain life from what the land produces... providing that private ownership is in accordance with the law of nature...the results of labour should belong to those who have bestowed their labour'. But we should question whether if labour is bestowed on behalf of an employer the produce should then belong to the labourer? Paine would hardly have gone that far.

'A father should provide food and necessities for those he has begotten... but extreme necessity should be met by public aid. ... Paternal

authority can neither be abolished nor absorbed by the state'. The Charter goes on to assert that 'the child *belongs* to the father', but modern theology surely rejects such an extreme view, and would concede that a father who fails in his responsibility or abuses his child must, in extreme cases, give way to properly constituted, caring authority. What would Paine say?

The Charter, as we would expect, has much to say on the role of the Church, and in particular in upholding the rights of labour, asserting that 'men will be vain if they leave out the Church'. However, there have been times when the Church has lapsed into a state of decadence, and lost its authority. Paine, in France during the Revolution, was well aware of this, as were many others. It is worth consulting Hilaire Belloc's small tract on the French Revolution. A firm Catholic himself and born in France (though with an English mother, descended from Joseph Priestley) he strongly asserts the Church was merely reaping what it had sown through autocracy, arrogance and the aristocratic attitude of hierarchy, hand-in-glove with aristocracy. However, by the end of the 19th century much had changed and Pope Leo was standing on firmer ground. His Charter asserts that 'the Church improves and betters the conditions of working men by means of various organisations'.

However, it is 'impossible to reduce society to one dead level. ...People differ in capacity, etc.', although this is a 'mistaken notion that class is naturally hostile to class. ...Religion teaches the wealthy owner and employer that work people are not bondsmen. ...Labour for wages is not a thing to be ashamed of. ...Employers must never tax workers beyond their strength, nor employ them in work unsuited to sex or age. ...Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need...giving to the indigent out of what is over...remembering that: It is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts XX:35). Christian morality...leads to temporal prosperity...restrains greed for possessions and thirst for pleasure'.

'Safety of commonwealth is government's reason for existence. ...When the general interest of any particular class suffers...public authority must step in. ...Rights must be religiously respected. ...It is the duty of the public authority to prevent and punish injury, and to protect everyone in the possession of his own. ...The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves'.

Next the issue of *Strikes* is addressed: 'The chief thing is the duty of safeguarding private property by legal enactment of protection. Most of

all it is essential, where passion of greed is so strong, to keep people within the line of duty, for if all may strive to better their condition, neither justice nor the common good allows any individual to seize upon that which belongs to another, or, under the futile and shallow pretext of equality, to lay violent hands upon other people's possessions. Most true is that by far the larger part of the workers prefer to better themselves by honest labour rather than by doing any wrong to others. But there are not a few who are imbued with evil principles and eager for revolutionary change, whose main purpose is to stir up disorder and incite their fellows to acts of violence. ...When working-people have recourse to strike it is frequently because the hours of labour are too long, or the work too hard, or because they consider their wages insufficient. The grave inconvenience of this is not uncommon occurrence and should be obviated by public remedial measures; for such paralysing of labour, not only effects the masters and their work-people alike, but is extremely injurious to trade and to the general interests of the public. ...The laws should forestall and prevent such troubles from arising; they should lend their influence and authority to the removal, in good time, of the causes which lead to such conflicts'.

It is also important, 'to save unfortunate working-people from the cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments of money making. ...Those who work in mines and quarries should have shorter hours in proportion as their labour is more severe and trying to health. ...In regard to children care should be taken not to place them in workshops and factories until their bodies and minds are sufficiently developed'. In general, 'proper rest should be allowed for soul and body'. And there is an 'obligation of the cessation of work on the Sabbath'.

A Living Wage. '...Without the result of labour a man cannot live, and self-preservation is a law of nature'. *A Just Wage.* 'Let the working man and the employer make free agreements. ...Wages ought not to be insufficient to support a frugal and well behave wage earner. ...Circumstances, times and localities vary widely, for example, hours of labour in different trades, the sanitary conditions to be observed in factories and workshops. ...Thus it is advisable that recourse should be had to (appropriate) Societies and Boards'.

'The law should favour ownership and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners. ...Property will become more equitably divided. ...The result of civil change and revolution has been to divide society. ...On one side is the party which holds power because it

holds wealth...on the other is the needy and powerless multitude. ...Men always work harder and more readily when they work on that which belongs to them...provided that a man's means be not drained by excessive taxation'.

The Encyclical turns next to: '*Societies for mutual help and benevolent foundations established by private persons to provide for the workmen and his widow or orphans in case of sudden calamity, in sickness and in the event of death, institutions for the welfare of youngsters and the elderly*'. Then to Trade Unions: 'Most important are *Working Men's Unions*. ...History attests what excellent results were brought about by the Artificers Guilds of olden times. ...It is gratifying to know that there are not a few associations of this kind (at present) consisting of workmen alone, or of workmen and employers together'. Then, quoting Holy Writ: 'Woe to him that is alone, for when he falleth he has none to lift him up' (Ecclesiastics IV:10). And further, 'A brother that is helped by his brother is like a strong city' (Proverbs XVIII:19).

Next, on doubtful organisations: '...Many of these societies are in the hands of secret leaders, and are managed on principles ill-according to Christianity and the public well being; and that they do their utmost to get within their grasp the whole field of labour, forcing men either to join them or starve'. Then to the contrary influence of religion: '...that Gospel, which by inculcating self restraint, keeps men within the bounds of moderation, and tends to establish harmony among the divergent interests and the various classes which compose the state. ...There are not wanting Catholics blessed with affluence, who have cast in their lot with the wage-earners, and who have spent large sums in founding and widely spreading Benefit and Insurance Societies, by which the working man may acquire...the certainty of honourable support in days to come. ...Working-men's associations should be so organised and governed as to furnish the best and most suitable means of attaining what is aimed at...for helping each individual member to better his condition'.

In the relevant Societies, 'It is important that the office bearers be appointed with due prudence and discretion', to ensure that 'difference in degree or standing should not interfere with unanimity and goodwill. ...Prejudice is mighty and so is the greed of money'.

Then in final summary: '...Masters and wealthy owners must be mindful of their duty; the working-class, whose interests are at stake, should make every lawful and proper effort. ...The main thing needful is to return to real Christianity. ...All must earnestly cherish in themselves, and try to arouse in others, charity...which is the fulfilling of the whole Gospel law,

which is always ready to sacrifice itself for others' sake, and is man's surest antidote against worldly pride and immoderate love of self'. Then, rounding off with a quotation from St. Paul on *Charity*, which simply means *Love*: 'Charity is patient, is kind, ...seeketh not her own...suffereth all things...endureth all things' (I Corinthians XIII:4-7).

A true appeal for tolerance and understanding.

It is inevitable that readers will react in a variety of ways to what has been presented here, and it must be appreciated that the material has had to be edited, and considerably and selectively reduced, but with material from both sources which, not surprisingly, has its own bias. The aim has been not to introduce any fresh bias, but to present the extracted text as truly and as simply as the task demanded. Then, in the final analysis, any and every reader can search out the original texts to verify what has been on offer. I myself have a high regard for both Thomas Paine and Pope Leo; I would not wish deliberately to misrepresent either.

JOHN BLACKNER AND THE SUTTONS, AN EPISODE IN NOTTINGHAM'S POLITICAL HISTORY

R.W.Morrell

On July 22, 1815, Charles Sutton, founder, proprietor and editor of the *Nottingham Review* was charged with libel against the government and the British army, although it was not until February the following year that he was actually brought to trial before a special jury on an *ex officio information*.¹ Predictably found guilty, he was sentenced on February 17 to a year in Northampton prison, plus a substantial fine. According to the charge, it had been his 'intention to breed discontent in the minds of His Majesty's subjects' by publishing in the October 14, 1814 issue of the *Review* a letter purporting to have come from 'General Ludd' which contrasted the destructive activities of the British army in the United States, the two countries being at war, and the approval given this by the government with the attitude they took in respect of the Luddites, however rather than present isolated passages I give the letter in full as it does not appear to have been republished since it first appeared in Sutton's newspaper:

I take the liberty of dropping you a few lines to inform you of the good fortune of one of my sons, who is come to very high honour. You may know that some time ago, owing to some imprudent conduct, my eldest son Ned decamped and enlisted into his Majesty's service, and as he was notorious for *heroism* and *honourable enterprise*, he was entrusted with a commission to exercise his prowess against the Americans, and I am happy to say he has acquitted himself in a way which will establish his fame to generations yet unborn. I assure you Mr. Editor, I scarcely know how to keep my feelings within bounds, for while all our former and united efforts in breaking frames, were commented upon with some severity, and in a way which cast an odium upon my character and that of my family, I now think the scales are turned, and our enemies are converted into friends; they sing a new tune to an old song, and the mighty deeds of my son are trumpeted fourth in every loyal paper in the kingdom. My son is not confined to breaking a few frames, having the sanction of the government, he can now not only wield his great hammer to break printing presses and types, but he has the license to set fire to places and property which he deems obnoxious, and now and then even a little *private pillage* to wink at. Even the GAZETTE EDITOR of Mr. Tupman's¹ who was formerly one of my greatest enemies, and threatened to pursue both me and my family to the uttermost, is now in my favour, and is become a patron, and an admirer of my son, on account of his achievements in Washington.² There is one thing though in the conduct of this Gentleman which has caused me some little uneasiness; a few weeks ago he strongly recommended to the magistrates to offer a very large award to any person who would disclose our secret system of operation in the neighbourhood; he went so far as to say 5,000f ought to be offered, enough he said to enable the informant to live independent in another country, intimating that such a character would not be considered a proper person for the society of this country, and therefore he should emigrate to seek other associates. I hope it is not true that this notorious Editor has any secrets to disclose against me and my family, and that he is waiting for this very large reward to be offered, that he may avail himself of such an opportunity of making his fortune, and fleeing his country. Now, I really think, as my son is become truly loyal, and is working for his country's good, and under the sanction of the Crown, and as his achievements have been first rate "old grievances ought not to be repeated;" though bye and bye, I of the opinion that all which I and my son have done in Nottingham and neighbourhood, is not half so bad as what my son has done in America; but then you know he has supreme orders from indisputable authority, for his operations in America, and that makes all the difference.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant

GENERAL LUDD

Ludd Hall, October 5, 1814.'

In some notes prepared for his defence, Sutton describes the letter as

'an ephemeral trifling article' which the Attorney General, Sir William Garrow 'would not conceived the idea of prosecuting had he not been instigated thereto by some of our own townsmen who (shame on such hypocrisy) wore the mask of whiggism'.³ In other words, Sutton was of the opinion that some people had masqueraded as radicals whereas they were actually anything but so. The Home Office is known to have kept newspapers critical of government policies and supportive of reform under close surveillance, which in the case of the provincial press was undertaken by 'innumerable Tory magistrates and clergymen in all parts of the country' who sent the Home Secretary those papers and pamphlets they considered should be subject to prosecution,⁴ these included the *Nottingham Review*, which had been under official scrutiny from 1814,⁵ although it is likely this had commenced earlier. A reader of the paper, a Mr. Orgill, who may well have been one of Sutton's pseudo-Whigs, had sent a copy of the issue containing the letter to the Attorney-General, as he revealed in a letter he sent to Sutton in which he demanded the dismissal of the paper's editor, who he names as being John Blackner, in addition he also accuses Blackner of being the author of the 'General Ludd' letter.⁶

Despite the decision of the court in Sutton's case, Orgill was probably correct in naming Blackner as the author of the letter, perhaps having heard him talk about it and his other contributions to the paper, incorrectly concluding from the latter that he not Sutton was the editor. According to Derek Fraser, Blackner had assisted Sutton from 1809 to 1812 with editorials,⁷ basing this claim on a paper written by C.J. Warren, who actually says nothing of the sort but limits himself only to asserting him to have been a regular contributor.⁸ However, following Sutton being jailed it does seem Blackner then assumed some sort of editorial responsibility, although in this he appears to have been assisted, or overseen, by Sutton's son Richard.⁹ The Attorney-General appears not to have taken Orgill's claim seriously and no action was ever taken against Blackner. It is, of course, possible that Sutton had incorporated material written by Blackner into his own contributions but this would not constitute assisting with editorials in the formal sense, Sutton could do as he wished with material he had paid for, there being no copyright laws to worry about.

The sentiments expressed in 'Ludd's' letter reflect Blackner's known sympathy for the Luddites, in addition to which his eldest son, also named John, had joined the army and been sent to the United States where he participated in the war between that country and England, and

during which he was killed in action in 1812, the first year of the war. This must have been a terrible blow to Blackner and his wife who appear to have enjoyed a happily married life together. Of all Sutton's known associates Blackner was the most likely to have written such a letter. Moreover, Blackner could speak from personal experience about the problems the framework knitters were encountering and he was very sympathetic to their complaints. As a Paineite he also tended to look upon the newly established United States as the democratic ideal which most radicals saw as the blueprint for a new society in Britain. Such unquestioning idealism may have been flawed, but this fact was not obvious at the time.

During the late 18th and first quarter of the 19th centuries Luddism was a major political and economic thorn in the side of the government, consequently newspapers considered sympathetic towards it such as the *Review* became targets for prosecution, unless, of course, their owners and editors, frequently one and the same, could be pressured into publishing government propaganda against the Luddites, perhaps while still seeking to create the impression they were sympathetic to the Luddite cause. This plan of action can be seen in the case of Thomas Paine, for in order to reduce his support and influence the government paid George Chalmer's (who used the name Francis Oldys) to write an ostensibly friendly biography of him which was really an exercise in character assassination. We do not know if the government sought to pressure Sutton into working for them, but one suspects they may have attempted to, particularly as his paper was popular and had attained a considerable circulation, this in 1812 being around 1,500 copies per weekly issue, of which half were sold outside Nottingham.

At a Cabinet meeting held on January 29, 1812 to discuss action to be taken against the Luddites, time was devoted to exploring means by which articles hostile to them could be inserted into Nottingham newspapers. During the ensuing discussion it emerged that the Home Secretary had serious doubts whether there was a single paper in the town likely to cooperate, or 'that could be relied upon' to convince 'the lower orders' that their own ruin would be the result of further machine breaking. If this was not sufficient doubts were also expressed as to the difficulty in finding suitable writers for the proposed articles.¹⁰ One wonders whether these observations were made in light of a refusal on Sutton's part to accept a secret subsidy to ensure his newspaper took a pro-government stance. Such payments, using unaccountable secret service funds, had been paid to several publishers including John

Stockdale, who received close to £300, and John Heriot, who had been paid over £172 for producing pamphlets and advertisements.¹¹

Although the political nature of the prosecution was obvious to Sutton, he was convinced that the real reason for it was not the letter, but his sustained opposition to the war with France and believed that Attorney-General had given into pressure at the urging of 'an enemy' who 'stood at his (the Attorney-General's) ear... as Satan of old stood at the ear of Eve'.¹² Although he does not name the individual he had in mind one can speculate it was the lawyer, D.C.Coke, who had been, with one short but significant break, Tory MP for Nottingham from 1780 until 1812. The break occurred in 1802 when following a bitterly fought election campaign lasting several days Coke lost his seat to Joseph Birch, a radical. Coke was mortified and petitioned for the election to be declared invalid, arguing that the pro-radical Nottingham Council had failed to ensure his supporters protection when they sought to vote, as the radicals had intimidated them. A House of Commons committee accepted his complaint and order a re-run of the election in 1803.

Birch had been nominated to contest the 1802 election without his foreknowledge by two artisans, one a journeyman stockingmaker, the other, a woolcomber, but this notwithstanding he had agreed to accept nomination. This set the proverbial cat among the political pigeons, for Tory supporters were horrified by the fact that two members of an inferior social order had interfered in what was said to be a unofficial agreement to ensure that one of Nottingham's two Parliamentary seats went to the Whigs and one to the Tories. The 'lower orders' were supposed to know their station in society, this pair obviously did not. One hysterical supporter of Coke wrote of this being 'a frightful omen on the part of the labouring class'.¹³ Faced with a similar 'omen' a quite useless society ornament, the duchess of Buckingham, had spluttered in rage about workers being 'tinctured with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors'. To this Coke would have no doubt have added a sincere 'amen'.

Intimidation came from both sides during the 1802 election, for certain of Coke's supporters amongst local employers sought to pressure their employees eligible to vote into supporting him by threatening to dismiss them. This was instrumental in catapulting Sutton into the political arena, as in association with certain other prominent local radicals he established a benevolent fund from which payments would be made to assist anyone who had voted 'according to *Conscience*', and irrespective of party, and for which they had been oppressed 'by the

Iron-hand of power' until they had obtained further employment.¹⁴

The 1803 election became known as 'the paper war' on account of the sheer volume of electoral posters, handbills, broadsheets and such like that were produced and circulated in the town. Sutton, a Birch supporter, must have benefited financially as he printed much of the material issued by Birch and his supporters. Whether he wrote as well as printed any of the largely anonymously written handbills, etc., cannot be determined, nor do we know whether Blackner was involved, but one suspects this to have been likely. Did he have a vote and was one of those dismissed and so turned to the benevolent fund for assistance, and having done this did he make his first acquaintance with Sutton at this time? If so then it could also be when he decided to become politically active.

During the campaign Coke sought to show Birch as being if not the devil incarnate at least his right hand demon, while his supporters, if not himself, were depicted as being followers of Thomas Paine, and as such intent upon the destruction of the monarchy.¹⁵ In contrast, Coke represented himself as 'venerating the monarchy'.¹⁶ Sutton, one might add, is reputed to have held republican views and the coverage he gave republican radicals in the *Review* following its foundation in 1808 would tend to support this belief.

Charles Sutton was born 1765, his parents being Unitarians. He received a good education and was apprenticeship as a printer,

THOUGHTS,
ON THE LATE CHANGE
OF
ADMINISTRATION,
containing a
CONTRASTED TABLE
OF THE PRICES OF
PROVISION,

From the YEAR 1742, to 1806 ;

LIKEWISE A TABLE OF THE LENGTH, BREADTH, NUMBER OF PARISHES, SQUARE STATUTE MILES OF SURFACE, INHABITANTS ON EACH SQUARE MILE, AND THE TOTAL OF PEOPLE IN EACH COUNTY :

Also,

THE TOTAL IN

ENGLAND AND WALES,

as presented to the

HOUSE OF LORDS, APRIL, 5TH. 1806 ;

WITH AN ACCOUNT

What MEMBERS each County returns to PARLIAMENT,
AND WHAT EACH
County ought to Return, according to its Population.

BY JOHN BLACKNER:

AUTHOR OF "THE UTILITY OF COMMERCE DEFENDED" &c.

Dedicated to JOHN CARTWRIGHT FRS.

NOTTINGHAM :

Printed for the Author, at the Office of Sutton and Fowler,
Bridle-Smith-gate.

1807?

Title page of one of Blackner's publications

Despard's Ghost's Address

TO THE JACOBINS

YE firm associates of my great design,
Whom the same vows, and oaths, and order, join;
Ye faithful band, to whom I do give laws,
The best supporters of my daring cause,
Go on — ye mighty champions of your oaths,
Maintain our party, and subdue it's foes;
Restless, your aim pursue — let no defeat
your daring courage and attempts rebate,
Exclude not those of less desert; — decree
To all revolvers your foundation free —
To all whom gaming, drunkenness, or lust,
To rob or plunder should have thus seduc'd;
All you'll then be C———s, nor so for nought —
No, but in the depth of T———n taught.
Witness those flags that were so shewn along
The streets and market, and from windows hung;
Alike in solid reason, and orthodox read,
And in the art of killing fowls well bred;
Nor will you fail, or bungle in your trade,
Or shall a few sheeps' lives your sloth upbraid;
Pursue these things, or else you will not be,
Disciples of our great Tom Paine, and me! }
Think what those Fr——m——n, an ignoble crew,
Not worthy to be rank'd in sin with you;
Inspir'd by lofty wickedness, dare do.
How from his throne they hurl'd a Monarch down,
And doubly robb'd him of his life and crown.
But say what does alarm you, is it fear?
For shame, can such base actions you deter;

Or say, is it *Religion*? — No — you that disclaim,
As a frivolous pretence — an empty name,
Mere bugbear words devis'd by man to scare
the senseless rabble into slavish fear,
Dull creatures, why let your coward consciences
startle or wonder at such crimes as these.
Such whom fond inbred honesty befools,
Or that old musty piece, the Bible gulls;
That book you hate, the bulwark of our foes,
Who by it's rules support their drooping cause;
This pleasing conduct proves you still to be
As staunch as ever to Tom Paine and me:
Shame Faith, Religion, Honour, Loyalty,
And boldly vindicate impiety.
Oh! that kind heaven a longer thread did give,
And let me to that happy juncture live;
But 'tis decreed — at this, he pants'd and wept,
The rest their sorrow shew'd with due respect;
Then thus, continued he, since unjust fate
Enviest my race of glory longer date,
Bold as a wounded General, let me die,
And firmly make to you my last reply,
By hell, 'twas badly done, what less than this
Could we expect, if foil'd in our success;
So'll perish they, and such will be their fate,
Who dare like me presume to tempt the state,
Fare each like me, bold meddling fools, and be
As well secur'd, as well despatch'd as me.

Houndsgate, Nottingham: Printed by Harrod & Turner.

establishing his own business in Bridle-smith gate, Nottingham, in 1792. He converted, probably due to the influence of his 'pious' wife, from Unitarianism to Methodism, joining the breakaway Methodist New Connection in 1783. Like so many of his fellow co-religionists he had been

greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, indeed Paine himself had sought, without success, to become a Methodist minister.¹⁷ Although Sutton never mentioned Paine in his paper, or listed any of his titles in his book catalogues, these did contain many radical classics and accounts of the trials of radicals such as Thomas Muir, in which Paine loomed large, Muir being sentenced to transportation for having books by Paine. If he stocked Paine's works, which one suspects he did, Sutton would have done so on an 'under the counter basis', a common practice amongst booksellers. Despite his radicalism Sutton does not appear to have written any separate political works, his political feelings being expressed anonymously through the pages of his paper following its establishment in 1808, he did, though, produce several religious essays of no particular significance.

Little is known of John Blackner's early years apart from him having first seen the light of day in the small Derbyshire town of Ilkeston, a few miles from Nottingham. There is no record of his mother's marriage in the register of the parish church, there is an entry for the marriage of a

John Blackase to a Martha Brambury, which took place on December 4, 1769. There is no evidence of any connection and the only reason I mention it is the fact that Blackner's mother's name was Martha. Nor is there any mention of his baptism, but this is not surprising as his parents are known to have been nonconformists who worshipped at the town's Independent Chapel. Many nonconformists objected to participating in an Anglican rite, even if only of infant baptism and are known to have deliberately ignored their legal obligation to have their children baptised in an Anglican church. It was not until the passing of the 1836 Registration Act that nonconformists were allowed to baptise children in their own places of worship. There is, of course, the possibility that the family did not live in Ilkeston. Whether Blackner had any brothers and sisters is also unknown. His father is said to have died while he was an infant, but there is no entry for him in the parish burial register. However, his widowed mother remarried a man name Joseph Large, a tailor by profession, who came from Greasley, Nottinghamshire, on November 14, 1791, according to the the parish marriage register. To all effect and purpose she then disappears from the Blackner story, although John retained fond memories of his step-father, who he described as 'a kind parent, a father to the fatherless, a meek Christian and a good man'.¹⁸

Blackner is said to have been apprenticed to an Ilkeston stocking-maker, although at what age is not on record, but one suspects it was when he was either ten or eleven, although boys as young as none were apprenticed, particularly if they came from poor families and required assistance from the Guardians of the Poor in order to obtain an apprenticeship, in such cases they remained in servitude until they reached the age of twenty-one, thus making them a source of cheap labour. On May 11, 1788, presumably after he had finished his apprenticeship, Blackner married Sarah Brown, both bride and groom are said not to have been able to write.¹⁹ As can be seen documented biographical details about him are all but non-existent until around 1805, by when he had become an accomplished writer, publishing in that year his first known political essay *The Utility of Commerce Defended....*, which Sutton printed for him. This combines a discussion of the ill effects of the Corn Law with a passionate plea for radical reform, and concludes with a restatement of the argument in verse, a most unusual, but not unique, feature for a political pamphlet. In this essay Blackner provides one of the few fragments of biographical information he ever presented his readers, stating that he had been a father for sixteen

years.²⁰ This means his first child was born in 1789, however, he omits to say whether it was male or female. He incorrectly gives the number of his children as six children, whereas he actually had seven, a son he named Alfred having been born in 1804, being baptised on February 27 of that year according to an entry in the baptismal register of St. Mary's church, Nottingham. His other children were John, Algernon, Lucius, Mary, Sarah and Letitia.

Some time during the 1790s Blackner moved from Ilkeston to Nottingham, though the year he did so is not known. Most of those who have written about him opt for 1792, but some say it was the following year. To move from one place to another in order to settle required an official Certificate of Settlement, but there is no record of one ever having been issued to him in either year, or any other for the matter. The only certificate carrying the name Blackner was for a 12 year boy named Michael Blackner, who moved from Arnold to Nottingham in 1773. Nevertheless, John Blackner moved to Nottingham certificate or no certificate and found accommodation in Narrow Marsh along with what is said to have been a well-paid job in the lace industry. We now meet another of the stories circulated about him, namely he started to drink heavily and having spent his wages on the demon drink was forced to resort to poaching to feed his family, although whether a drunkard would have made a good poacher is anyone's guess. Although no one has produced a shred of evidence to support this tale I am inclined to think there might be some substance in it as a period of prolonged drinking may have effected his liver and contributed to the illness which shortened his life. Of course this is sheer guesswork, and it may just be that as in the case of Thomas Paine, Blackner's detractors cooked up the story to harm his reputation.²¹

Another incident which is supposed to have happened is that at some unspecified date Blackner accepted the 'King's Shilling' and joined the 45th (Nottinghamshire) Regiment, but bought himself out after only three months.²² I am yet to encounter any contemporary evidence supportive of this tale and until this is forthcoming there is no point in discussing it in any detail, it is sufficient to say that the regiment concerned had recently returned to England from the West Indies, its ranks depleted as officers and men had died off like flies from diseases contacted out there,²³ and being desperate for recruits recruits to replace them would have been exceedingly loathe to have allowed Blackner to so rapidly purchased his discharge, if they permitted him to do so at all. It is not impossible that the story of his military services originated in

someone hearing an account of his son John having joined up managed to confuse the two.

Despite the lack of evidence for Blackner's military service, several writers have commented upon it, particularly the rapid discharge element in the tale, thus one writer seeking to explain what he recognises as a difficulty attempts to get around it by advancing the proposition, qualified with the words, 'no doubt', that his 'radical temperament found army discipline as irksome as his military superiors must have found this very voluble and recalcitrant recruit and the parting would be to the benefit of both'.²⁴ Somehow this explanation fails to carry conviction, for the army was more than capable of breaking even the most 'voluble' and 'recalcitrant' of recruits.

Descriptions of Blackner do not represent him as a drunk, he appears to have been rather smart, being tall and commanding and an able public speaker who received respect and attention from his fellows.²⁵ He is said to have been 'insinuating in manner', in private 'mild and unostentatious', in public, 'boisterous in speech and argument and overbearing in behaviour', but also as a friend he was 'warm hearted, kind and generous'.²⁶ According to the entry on Blackner in *Dictionary of National Biography*, he was very popular among his associates.

According to all sources Blackner received little, if any, education as a child, which makes it all the more remarkable that he became a writer, being the author not only of material for Sutton's paper but of several political pamphlets and an important history of his adopted town. Like much else in his early years how he managed to receive an education is a mystery, but perhaps he maintained silence about this out of the embarrassment of publicly acknowledging he had once been illiterate may have caused him. It is possible that having settled in Nottingham Blackner became involved with a group of radical artisans who met at a local pub to debate, discuss and read the latest political news, publications and such like, which may have stimulated in him a desire to be educated.²⁷ The existence of such informal groups is well attested to and were much disapproved of by the Tory press, which found it astonishing that artisans and apprentices should consider themselves as authorities in matters they were supposedly unqualified to comment upon and which they would be best advised to leave for the attention of their betters. This is an attitude which is encountered occasionally even now. Whatever was the stimulus for Blackner to desire an education he did not receive as a boy, and wherever it occurred, the fact is that he managed to transform himself dramatically. In doing this he is said to

have been assisted by Scottish shoemaker named Arthur Gordon, which is about all we know of him, and that they used as a text book, *Louth's Grammar*.²⁸ Whether he later received further assistance from an educated individual such as Charles Sutton, is not known, though this is not impossible.

When, then, did Blackner become acquainted with Charles Sutton? Perhaps it was during the 1802 election, but whatever brought them together they got on very well. They were an unlikely pair, Sutton, the radical and very religious businessman who was rapidly expanding both his interests and his wealth, and Blackner, a relatively poor self-educated radical with a flair for writing and speaking but who was also an unbeliever. Their partnership survived even Sutton was jailed for publishing something that I contend Blackner to have written. What was Blackner's first first work? We do not know, but it just may have been the Paineite broadsheet, *Freedom Triumphant over Oppression*, issued during the 1803 election and which Sutton printed.²⁹

In 1807 Blackner issued another pamphlet, *Thoughts on the Late Change of Administration, containing a Contrasted Table of the Prices of Provisions.....* As with his earlier essay the theme repeatedly stressed was the need for political, economic and social reform: '...without Reform', he wrote, 'and that too of the most radical nature; all other renovations will be but patchwork, and that of the lowest kind'.³⁰ He goes on to attack hereditary monarchy, which, he observes, 'when viewed in the abstract, is laughable in the extreme', and refers to the risk of being 'governed by an idiot or a child,' a point which could have been lifted from chapter three of part two of *Rights of Man*. Writing of an elective monarchy he is equally dismissive, however, here he diverges from Paine in that he is not hostile to a monarchy as such providing it was hedged around with restrictions, yet having taken this stance he then pours cold water on the idea, implying it to be an impossibility, for if the House of Lords was seen as a curb on the power of the monarchy the king could easily circumvent it by creating more lords. He also points out that monarch could use the House of Commons to grant pensions to his cronies, and, as he puts it, 'the embers of English liberty, will be sold in their turn to complete the influence of the Oligarchy, and the Crown'.³¹ Blackner, like Paine, has scant respect for Burke, and refers to when he 'wrote an unpensioned hand, attacking the miseries of princes for want of a system of virtuous law'.³² Nor does he spare the clergy of the Anglican establishment, drawing attention to its lack of democracy and to 'so many parsons, who are a disgrace to their cloth'.³³

1807 was also to see Blackner become embroiled in a controversy concerning an attempt to establish a new workhouse in Nottingham, or as it was described, a 'House of Industry', to serve the St.Mary's and St.Nicholas's parishes. The scheme had been concocted in secrecy by a group of individuals associated with these churches, the vicar of St.Mary's being a particularly strong supporter. To put the proposal into effect required Parliamentary approval, hence a Bill was introduced into the House of Commons to obtain this. Eventually someone, probably Sutton, heard of the scheme and passed the news to Blackner, who commenced a campaign to make the public aware of what was going on and also to prevent it going through. It may well be that Sutton personally funded Blackner's campaign.

Blackner pointed out that while the scheme was being promoted 'under the plausible pretext of bettering the condition of the poor', the reality was rather different, for as far as the inmates went it would 'make their situation as dependent and wretched as galley slaves'. He saluted the third Nottingham parish, St.Peter's, for having 'had the good sense to keep out of this nefarious business'.

The proposed workhouse was intended to admit the poor from a twelve mile radius around the two parishes and the institution would be under the control of a 'a corporation' consisting of a number of directors who, among other things, would be empowered to order the use of corporal punishment on the inmates and send pauper boys to sea. The Bill stipulated that anyone who absconded twice from the house wearing clothes provided by it would be deemed to have committed a felony and be liable for transportation. About this Blackner sarcastically commented, that this fate could 'not have been avoided, except they had escaped in a state of *nudity*' (his emphasis). He said the powers of the corporation were dictatorial, the directors being 'accusers, jurors and judges. The harsh disciplinary rules planned for the new workhouse, though, were only a reflection of those currently prevailing in England at that time, a typical illustration of which was the sentencing to death of eleven year old John Write in 1801 for stealing a cow.²⁴ He was eventually reprieved on grounds of being too young to be hanged, though not long after his case a fourteen year old was hanged for acting as a Luddite look-out, and a few years later a six year old boy was sentenced to transportation and the sentence actually carried out.

So 'adroitly', to employ a term used by Blackner, was secrecy about the scheme maintained 'that even some of the committee were strangers to its contents', nor were 'the public acquainted with its existence till it was

on the eve of being read for a second time in the House of Commons'. Blackner's campaign gave rise to considerable, and to the proposers unwelcome, public interest, but 'progress on the Bill' was abruptly halted, not as a result of Blackner's agitation but because Parliament was prorogued on April 27, however, as he was quick to point out, the Bill could be revived. Although the scheme was now in limbo, the controversy continued unabated with the vicar of St.Mary's, the Rev.J.Bristow, said to have been its most outspoken defender, even entering into correspondence with Blackner on the subject. Eventually public interest resulted in a vestry meeting being convened to discuss the scheme, this, according to Blackner, attracted so many people that it was said to have been the best attended such meeting anyone present could recall. A string of hostile resolutions were moved and passed and, as he records, 'the iniquitous scheme fell to the ground never', he hoped. 'to be revived'.³⁵

Once the campaign against the proposed workhouse concluded, Blackner found himself something of a local hero amongst his fellow artisans, becoming their unofficial spokesman. In 1808 a group of them sought to make their feelings about him public by petitioning for him to be made a Freeman of the town. This was open to all who had served an apprenticeship in Nottingham, but in Blackner's case there was a major difficulty, he had served his in Ilkeston and so was ineligible for enrolment as a Freeman. But all, or most, problems have solutions and in his case it was overcome by making him an Honorary Freeman, his enrolment and stamp fees being met by the Lace Trade Committee, a substitute for a trade union, workers 'combinations' being banned, if ineffectively, by the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800.

According to C.J.Warren,³⁶ citing what he says is a manuscript memoir of Blackner written by someone who knew him personally, Blackner commenced contributing to the *Review* in 1809, his first article being in its issue for April 30, but there was no issue for that date, the nearest being April 28, the next May 5. Warren says his contribution dealt with home affairs, but an examination of both issues shows there were no articles specifically on this theme, though there are several items which encompassed the subject. As no material written for the *Review* is attributed to any writer it is difficult to decide about who wrote what, particularly as Blackner and Sutton shared almost identical political opinions. It is not impossible that he contributed to the *Review* from its first issue in 1808 onwards, as Sutton would have been familiar with his political opinions having printed his political essays.

The *Review* was highly critical of the financial sinecures enjoyed by the

government's supporters and officials, and in what I suspect may have been one of Blackner's contributions, on the grounds that he had addressed economic matters in his essay, *The Utility of Commerce Defended.....*, is a detailed list of the payments given to various political luminaries. The article is both critical and sarcastic, thus when commenting upon the 'pensions' paid to various individuals representing England abroad, the writer observes that 'The present state of the Continent proves to demonstrate the eminent services which have been performed at the various courts by these illustrious pensioners' Examples of the payments given to various functionaries are noted, these include, £4,086 to the 'filagazer', £1030 to the 'Clerk of Errors', £260 to the 'Surveyor of Green Wax', and the £23,081 and £23,474 paid respectably to the two 'Tellers of the Exchequer', both peers, one a marquis the other an earl. Another earl received £1,006 for being 'A Searcher, Packer and Ganger'.³⁷

In 1812 Blackner went to London to assume the editorship of a radical daily paper, *The Statesman*.³⁸ How long he remained in the capital is not known for certain, but it was probably until around November. A summons had been taken out against him in Nottingham on June 18 for having failed to pay the poor rate to St.Mary's, so it would seem he was still there then and had no knowledge of the demand as it had not been forwarded to him. A second summons was issued on December 14 which appears to have been paid as no more is heard of it, so presumably he was back in Nottingham by then. Blackner was standing in for the editor and owner of *The Statesman*, Daniel Lovell, who had been sentenced to twelve months in prison in 1811 for criticising the conduct of the military when they broke into the home Sir Francis Burdett in 1810 to arrest him. As Lovell was released late in 1812 and resumed his role as editor, Blackner's job was strictly temporary, a fact which makes a nonsense out of the charge levelled against him by W.H.Wylie that he was forced to give up the editorship because he was too old fashioned and boring as a journalist, as well as being educationally backward.³⁹ It goes without saying that Wylie was careful not to mention Lovell.

Having failed to find a newspaper in Nottingham to publish its anti-Luddite propaganda, the government may have resorted to using posters designed to create the impression that the Luddites were a revolutionary movement planning to assassinate the Prime Minister and overthrow the government. Circumstantial evidence for this may exist in the form of a verse copied on the back of a letter which had been sent to Sutton from Mansfield on on April 23, 1812. The verse appears to have

been copied from a poster which must have been put up around Nottingham some time after April 23, the copy being made by someone from Sutton's office, but just who is not known. The fact that the copy was made on a letter to Sutton rather than in a blank sheet is strange, one would have assumed that a blank sheet of paper would have been used had he ordered a copy to have been made. This poses the question was it planted on Sutton? The verse reads:

'Well walk on Ned Lud, your cause is good,
 Make Perceval⁴⁰ your aim,
 By the late Bill⁴¹ 'tis understood,
 Tis death to break a frame.
 Will dextrs skill to Hosiers kill,
 For they are quite as bad,
 To die you must by the late Bill,
 Go on my bonny lad
 You may as well be hangd for death
 As breaking a machine,
 So now my lad your sword unsheath,
 And make it sharp and keen.
 Were ready now your cause to join,
 Whenever you may call,
 To make fresh blood run fair and fine,
 Of tyrants grt and small.
 There now follows a postscript:
 Deface this who does,
 Shall have tyrants fare,
 For Ned's Every where,
 So both see and hear.
 "An enemy to Tyrants."⁴²

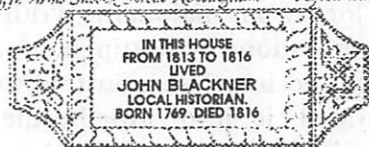
Perhaps those behind the poster hoped Sutton would print it, which might have left him open to a charge with serious consequences and as such putting him into a position which may have forced him to accept government propaganda for publication in the *Review*. The verse was never printed but from 1812 onwards the paper's sympathy for the Luddites declined, so if there was a government plot it may be said to have met with a measure of success, although at the time the authorities may not have realised it.

Early in 1813, Blackner became landlord of a public house, the Bull's Inn on the corner of what was then Turncalf alley, which in 1884 was renamed Sussex street. Not long after taking over he renamed the pub the Rancliffe Arms after the second Lord Rancliffe, who had been elected as a Member of Parliament for Nottingham in 1812 as a moderate radical. Joseph Birch had been invited to stand but had declined as he was contesting another seat, but had he done so and been elected the

pub may have been renamed the Birch Arms. It is rather ironic, though, that Blackner, who was contemptuous of titles, should have named his pub after an individual with one. Peers were in fact ineligible to sit in the Commons but Rancliffe's peerage was Irish so the restriction did not apply in his case. The inn, which was to retain its new name until its demolition in 1927, 'soon became the principle place of resort in Nottingham, for all the leading members, among the humbler classes in particular, of radical reformers'.⁴³ Blackner himself, in the words of one



The Rancliffe Arms Sussex Street Nottingham Alfred Barker 1931



historian, becoming a 'representative of the new industrial class',⁴⁴ while the textile historian, Gravenor Henson, describes him as having been 'an active man in forwarding the interests of the operating classes', these being the framework knitters.⁴⁵

Having managed to talk Birch into fighting the 1802 election, Nottingham's artisans appear to have got the bit between their collective teeth and ensured the omen the Tories had feared so much came to pass, for they made up a delegation, which included Blackner, to meet Rancliffe and request he fight the seat. Knowing Blackner's ability as a speaker and his commanding presence, it is likely that he led the delegation and acted as its spokesman. It is possible he had met the peer some years earlier as there is a reference in his, *Utility of Commerce Defended...* to him having discussed the Corn Law with a landowner; was this Rancliffe, whose family owned an estate at Bunny near Nottingham?

John Blackner is best known to present-day historians as being the author of an important book on the history of the Nottingham. According to Geoffrey Oldfield this was first advertised in the *Nottingham Review* of December 30, 1814,⁴⁶ but in actual fact the first announcement of its impending publication came several years earlier when a notice was inserted in the *Review* for November 18, 1808 stating 'a compendious history of Nottingham' would shortly be ready for the press and

requested 'ladies and gentlemen' to provide 'any information, either family anecdotes or otherwise' for inclusion in it. However, it was to be seven years before the *History* eventually came off Sutton's press in successive parts. The author never explained the delay in publication, so perhaps he had been submerged under a veritable deluge of 'family anecdotes' from hords of 'ladies and gentlemen'. It is thought the *History* was never completed and its author had planned to issue further parts.

Although Blackner's radicalism is evident throughout the pages of his *History*, as, too, is his lack of respect for those lauded by most writers of his day as the great and good, it emerges with greatest clarity in chapter thirteen which describes events that occurred in Nottingham during his own lifetime and in some instances he may have even participated. This is the chapter even his harshest critics have been forced to acknowledge, albeit often with great reluctance, to give the book its particular value not just locally but nationally. Writing of the impact of the American and French revolutions in Nottingham, but which may be taken as reflecting what occurred in other industrial towns throughout the country, he says they divided it into two hostile camps, 'the democrats and the aristocrats'. The former held 'delegated authority' was the only legitimate power and 'titles of nobility' were 'as so many excrescences upon the body politic which ought to be cut off'. The 'aristocrats', in contrast, had 'abandoned their rights as brother members of a community, and made unconditional submission to the will of the king, the nobility, and clergy the controlling article of their faith'.⁴⁷

However strong he sought to advance the cause of his fellow workers, Blackner never showed the least hesitation in criticising them when he considered this to be necessary. Thus he castigates 'the rustics of Newthorpe', a village near Nottingham, who, had behaved like the 'sons of ignorance and prejudice in many other places, giving a show of their loyalty, by hanging, shooting and burning a bundle of straw, &c which they, in *their manifest wisdom* (his emphasis), intended to represent Thomas Paine, author of the *Rights of Man*'.⁴⁸ He goes on to state that having expended their ammunition they then sought to obtain a further supply from a local shop, but as it was dark and against the law to sell ammunition the shopkeeper refused their demands whereupon they attacked and damaged his shop.⁴⁹ Brought before the local Tory magistrates, these individuals put political bias before justice and sided with the accused, releasing them without penalty. A consequence of this was that when they later met the shopkeeper in the street they attacked him, but once more, as Blackner points out, nothing was done about it,

indeed, he tells his readers, the shopkeeper was lucky to have escaped without serious injury. This incident appears to have influenced him in favour of the private possession of firearms, the right to hold them being, he argued, one which every Englishman had in order to defend his person, family and property when in peril.

To return again again to Blackner's contributions to the *Nottingham Review*, these, as noted earlier, are difficult to determine with certainty due to contributions not being attributed to specific writers. The *Review* strongly supported the principles of the French Revolution and in one article it is asserted that the lessons of the Revolution had been lost on the British ruling class who 'persevered in the old system, which springs from corruption, and breeds imbecility'.⁵⁰ Blackner was a strong supporter of the principles of the French Revolution, as his *History* indicates, so one is tempted to see this article as perhaps being his first contribution to the *Review*. Blackner also wrote verse, as noted earlier when reference was made to his 1805 pamphlet in which several pages are taken up by a resume of his argument set out in verse, and this suggests he may have contributed some to the *Review*, but care should be taken in assuming political verses came from his pen as some years after his death the paper published a short poem bitterly critical of the lack of freedom in Britain which forced people to emigrate, had Blackner been alive it may well have been attributed to him. Entitled, *The Emigrant's Farewell to his Country*, it concludes:

'To some more favor'd strand, where liberty
Still holds her sacred empire, I must go;
There under her sweet smile, learn to transfer
My warm affections to a happier land.'⁵¹

Sometime during 1816 Blackner was struck down by a serious and ultimately fatal illness which may have been drink related, although no medical details are available. He had abandoned the evangelical Christianity of his youth for deism,⁵² perhaps having been influenced by *The Age of Reason*, though exactly what form his deism took is another matter as the term covered a spectrum of beliefs ranging from mysticism to atheism, however, he gives a vague clue in a letter he sent to Sutton on September 17, in response to one Sutton had sent him on July 12. In this he admits to having become an unbeliever, so it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that his position was rather nearer the last part of the spectrum than of the first.⁵³ As an associate of several years standing Sutton must have known of his colleague's deism and his letter, presumably written after he had learned of Blackner's state of health, was

probably an attempt made out of real concern for what he would have considered the spiritual danger his friend was in. Whether Blackner saw it that way is uncertain, but his reply shows that whatever Sutton thought he considered his chances of a future life to be good, whatever mistakes he might have made. Nowhere in his reply does he specifically state he was a Christian. Readers, however, can judge for themselves as I reproduce Blackner's letter in full as an appendix. Had he become a Christian I have no doubt that once the news was made public, perhaps in the pages of the *Review*, the news of the conversion of so celebrated a local deist would have come to Nottingham's clergy like manna from heaven, the news being thundered forth from innumerable pulpits. But it never happened and Nottingham's clergy were left to worry, as were their brethren elsewhere, about the spread of infidelism amongst the 'the lower orders'.

During the course of his letter to Sutton Blackner refers to having protected 'professors of Christianity when they were unable to defend themselves against the scoffs and taunts of some of my more immediate acquaintances', or when he was 'in indiscriminate company'. This seems to suggest that a group of unbelievers met together and at times deliberately set out provoke their opponents. This would not have been unusual as it is known that from the late 18th century informal groups, who included apprentices, met in pubs to read and discuss political and deistical literature. In the late 1790s Nottingham radicals are said to have met at the Sun Inn on Pelham street, for allowing them to do so the landlady, a Mrs. Carter, was threatened with having her establishment burned down.

John Blackner died on the morning of December 22, 1816, at the age of 47 following, according to a brief announcement in the *Review*, 'a long and painful illness',⁵⁴ being buried four days later in St. Mary's churchyard, however, the site of his grave has long been lost, due, in all probability, to it being in one of the church's three satellite burying grounds all of which were eventually to be built over. In 1911 a local antiquarian undertook a survey of the monuments in the churchyard surrounding St. Mary's proper, parts of which have also been built over. His notes contain no reference to any monument to Blackner or any member of his family.⁵⁵ Recently the remains of a large number of people buried in one of the graveyards were uncovered when the foundations of Nottingham's new National Ice Stadium were excavated, these may include those of Blackner, but no identification was attempted and they have been reburied in a communal grave at Wilford Hill which

There is currently no monument of any sort to Blackner in Nottingham, although there once was, for in 1900 a resident of the city left the Council £200 for erecting, as he put it, 'tablets to mark the several spots within the city upon which events of historical interest have occurred'. One of these commemorated Blackner, being placed on the wall of the Rancliffe Arms. It bore the following inscription: 'In this house / from 1813 to 1816 / lived / John Blackner / local historian / born 1769. Died 1816'.⁵⁶ The fate of this monument is not known, for following the demolition of the pub in the 1920s, when the area in which it stood was redeveloped, it disappeared. The present Council appears keen to commemorate celebrated citizens of the city so they may eventually get round to remembering John Blackner and also Charles Sutton.

Blackner was survived by his wife Sarah, who became landlady of the Rancliffe Arms until her own death in August 1818, after which it passed into other hands. He was also survived by three daughters, Mary, Sarah and Letitia and two sons, Algernon and Lucius, the latter having been apprenticed to Richard Sutton as a printer in 1815, finishing this in 1822, but unlike his father and older brother, he did not become a Freeman of the town (in the late 19th century Nottingham had been designated a city, hence my use of the two terms). Both married, Algernon to Susan Thatcher and Lucius to her sister Rebecca. Mary married a shoemaker named Lee, who had his premises near Sutton's shop in Bridlesmith gate.

Charles Sutton was released from prison in February 1817 and resumed running his newspaper and other businesses until he eventually handed them over to his son Richard. Like Blackner, Sutton was struck down by a painful illness and died on December 4, 1829. Richard Sutton continued to run the *Nottingham Review*, which by now had assumed a much more local bias. He was also radical in politics and became an active Chartist, his name appearing on some of their locally issued literature while his paper printed the *National Charter* in full not once but twice, although in common with his father he deplored violence and condemned those Chartists who advocated it, describing them as 'assassins' and urged 'peaceful Chartists' to distance themselves from the others.⁵⁷

As for the paper itself, its 'long and honourable record of humanitarianism and radical agitation',⁵⁸ as 'a middle class journal with radical views',⁵⁹ ceased in 1870 when the Sutton family merged it with another local paper. Richard Sutton remained radical in politics, being elected to the Town Council. He also remained an active Methodist, holding

numerous offices in that sect and when he died in 1855 following a long illness he was laid to rest in the family vault in Nottingham's Parliament Street Methodist church, now the Methodist Central Mission, to which Charles Sutton had made a generous contribution to its building fund.

Although Charles Sutton preferred to restrict his political opinions anonymously to the pages of his paper, his few separately published essays being religious in character, John Blackner was never one to conceal his, and his outspokenness was to damn his reputation in the opinion of several later Nottingham historians. One such was Robert Mellors, who described him as 'a violent politician' who did 'good service by compiling and publishing in 1815 his *History of Nottinghamshire*'.⁶⁰ This comment can be said, perhaps, to reveal rather more about its writer than about its target, for it shows Mellors to have been an individual incapable of distinguishing between firm opinions strongly expressed and violent language. Blackner was certainly guilty of the former but not of the latter. However, it may also show that he was uncritically repeating the opinion of an earlier writer, W.H.Wylie, who had expressed himself along similar lines. This led to Oldfield concluding that he had never read Blackner's *History*,⁶¹ a conclusion with which I concur.

References and Notes

1. The reference is to Walter Tupman, printer of the *Nottingham Gazette*, the editor and owner of which was Richard Eaton.
2. This refers to the burning of parts of Washington.
3. Nottinghamshire County Archives (NCA) 1001.
4. Aspinall, Arthur. *Politics and the Press, 1780-1850*. London, Home & Van Thal, 1949. p.353.
5. Home Office Papers, 47/6/393, 403, 471.
6. Cited in *The Ilkeston Pioneer*, 11/8/1922.
7. Fraser, D. 'The Nottingham Press, 1800-1850'. *Transactions of the Thoroton Society*. Vol. LXVII (1963). Nottingham, 1964. p.163.
8. Warren, C.J. 'The Life of John Blackner'. *Transactions of the Thoroton Society* (1926). Vol. XXX. Nottingham, 1927. p.163. The manuscript is said to have been written by the Nottingham antiquarian, John Crosby (1775-1846), its present whereabouts is not known.
9. Oldfield, G. Introduction to, Blackner, J. *The History of Nottingham* (1815). Amethyst Press reprint, Otley, 1985. p.viii.
10. Aspinall. *op.cit* p.352.
11. Aspinall. *ibid.* p.135.
12. NCA. M. 1001.
13. *Address to the Electors of Nottingham* Nottingham, 1802.
14. *Handbill, To the Benevolent*. Nottingham, 1802. Including Sutton's name were those of J.Carr, W.Morley, J.Bates, W.Follows and W.Huddleston, all local tradesmen. Sutton is also given as being the printer.
15. *Despard's Ghost's Address to the Jacobins*. Nottingham, 1803.
16. Coke, D.C. *Address to the Electors of Nottingham* Nottingham, 1803.
17. For a discussion of the influence on Paine of Methodism see, George Hind-

- march's paper, 'Thomas Paine: The Methodist Influence'. *TPS Bulletin*. Vol.6. No.3. 1979. pp.59-78.
18. English, J.S. 'John Blackner, A Worthy Son of Ilkeston'. *Derbyshire Countryside* Vol.26. No.5. 1961. p.31. This article appears to be a revised version of a typescript manuscript dated 1957 in the Local Studies Department of Ilkeston Public Library.
 19. English. *op.cit* p.31.
 20. Blackner, J. *The Utility of Commerce Defended...* Nottingham, 1805. p.3. This was printed by Sutton but no publisher is given, so presumably it was self-published by Blackner.
 21. For a criticism of a relatively recent picture of Paine being a drunk, that by Professor Hawke, see the present writer's short article, 'The Character of Thomas Paine', in *The American Rationalist* September/October, 1979. p.37.
 22. English. *ibid* p.31.
 23. Dalbiac, P.H. *History of the 45: 1st Nottingham Regiment* London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1902. pp.18 & 20.
 24. Wood, A.C. *A History of Nottinghamshire* S.R.Publishers, 1971. p.288.
 25. Godfrey, J.T. Ed. *Manuscripts Relating to the County of Nottingham* London, Henry Sotheran, 1900. p.81.
 26. Warren. *op.cit* p.165.
 27. Letter to Charles Sutton, NCA TS6/2/4.
 28. I have been unable to locate a copy of this work, which is not listed in the British Library catalogue.
 29. *Freedom Triumphant over Oppression*. Nottingham, 1803. The words were supposed to be sung to the tune of *Poor Jack*.
 30. Blackner, J. *Thoughts on the Late Change of Administration, containing a Contrasted Table of the Prices of Provisions...* Nottingham, for the author, (1807). p.9. No copy of this pamphlet I examined bears a printed date of publication, but a copy in the Nottingham Public Library's Local Studies collection has the date 1807 inscribed on the cover in an old hand followed by a question mark. The content matter supports that date.
 31. Blackner. 1807 *op.cit* p.12.
 32. Blackner. 1807. *ibid* pp.14-15.
 33. Blackner. 1807. *ibid* p.17.
 34. *Nottingham Journal*. 1/8/1801. In respect to the six year old, this case is mentioned by H.Mayhew and J.Binney in their book, *The Criminal Prisons of London, Scenes of Prison Life*. London, Griffin, 1862. p.246, who received the information from "an old warden".
 35. Blackner, John. *The History of Nottingham* Nottingham, Sutton & Son, 1815. Reprint by Amethyst Press, Otley, 1985. pp. 308-309.
 36. Warren. *ibid* p.161.
 37. *Nottingham Review*. June 16, 1809.
 38. Founded in 1806 and expired in 1824, although another paper with the same name was established.
 39. Wylie, W.H. *Old and New Nottingham* London, Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1853. pp.232-233.
 40. The reference is to the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, who was assassinated on May 11, 1812 at the House of Commons by John Bellingham, who was tried, sentenced and hanged the following week even though considered to have been mentally unstable.
 41. The Bill referred to is 52 George III, c, 16 of February 1812, which made the breaking of machinery a capital offence. In May of the same year another Bill

was enacted against administrating and receiving oaths.

42. NCA. M 297.
43. Bailey, Thomas. *Annals of Nottinghamshire* London, 1853-1855. Vol.4. p.286.
44. Wood. *op.cit* p.287.
45. Henson, G. *The Civil, Political and Mechanical History of the Framework Knitters i n urope and America*. Nottingham, Richard Sutton, 1831. David & Charles reprint, Newton Abbot, 1970. p.10.
46. Oldfield. Blackner. 1815 (1985). p.viii.
47. Blackner. 1815 (1985). p.386.
48. Blackner. 1815 (1985). p.389.
49. The sale of gunpowder in the evening was banned because of the fear of its discharge causing fires.
50. *Nottingham Review*. 18/11/1808.
51. *Nottingham Review*. 4/4/1817.
52. Warren. *ibid* p.165.
53. NCA TS6/2/4.
54. *Nottingham Review*. 27/12/1816.
55. NCA. M24,534/8.
56. Fry, T. *Nottingham's Plaques and Statues*. Nottingham Civic Society. 1999. p.1.
57. *Nottingham Review*, 23/3/1839.
58. Wyncoll, P. *Nottingham Chartism, Nottingham Workers in Revolt During the Nineteenth Century* Nottingham Trades Council, 1966. p.13.
59. Fraser. *op.cit*. p.58.
60. Mellors, Robert. *Men of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire* J.& H.Bell, Nottingham, 1924. pp.69-70.
61. Oldfield. Blackner. 1815 (1985). p.ix.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Letter of September 17, 1816 from John Blackner to Charles Sutton. Some of the words are extremely difficult to recognise and where I have been unable to decide on them I have used approximates or just question marks.

My Dear Sir (and permit me to add, my beloved friend),

Were you not acquainted with the cause of my silence, you would, ere now have concluded that either my head or my heart had received a strange bias, since I have hitherto not acknowledged your two fold enclosure letter of 16th of July, a letter which drew from mine eyes so many tears of affection and

gratitude to you, for having given your honourable assurance on favour of my dear boy, Lucius, in case of my death - and so many thanks from my heart to Divine Providence, for having given you so large a share of Christian benevolence; for certain I am that it must be *Divine interposition*(?) that so many and such worthy friends are raised around me in this my hour of mortal peril and affliction, friends that increase their assiduity (?) and affections the stroke of death seems to approach. How much these circumstances and the reflections arising from them as commending (?) with the propelling care of the Deity on my behalf - how much these things disarm death of its mighty terrors since (? ? ?) till except those that feel as I do. And placing my dear family outside the pale of this question, there is no earthly circumstance dependent on private friendship which would add so much to my satisfaction as that of seeing you! The Almighty will grant the favour if it be according to his dispensation, which would gladden my heart exceedingly, otherwise I shall submit with calm resignation. However you say you pray for me, and I hope that you will continue to do so, for I have great reason to believe that your prayers have been attended to by heaven (?). I must not forget too to say that your Son, on my showing him your letter gave me a verbal pledge respecting Lucius to the same effect as yours, which added greatly to my satisfaction, and assured to him every possible indication of kindness which can flow from a grateful heart.

I will now turn to the more serious part of your letter. You there notice a previous expression of mine, wherein I said *that my life had not been the most Christian!* One position you draw from it is that all men from a principle of common honesty ought to make the same declaration. But you suppose too that I might possibly mean by that representation that I "have doubted or disbelieved the truths of Christianity". And you conclude your observations thereon by saying, supposing this to be my meaning, "I am truly sorry should this be the case because it seems to me to block up the way to happiness - it places a barrier in the way *and leaves not a ray of hope*, as far as we can learn from Divine revelation". Now my dear friend, it is very possible I may mistake your meaning, but if I do not, according to your opinion *I am left without a ray of hope* for here I must candidly acknowledge to my great sorrow that I have been a disbeliever of Christianity as far as the inexperienced and heated passions of early manhood and the (the next word is impossible to read) principles of certain publications could unseat the happy notions under which I was brought up in my younger years if the divine infusions of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. But so far from my having been a persecutor of Christianity I was always its *professed and sincere supporter (unconnected with political establishments)* from a conviction that its influence in necessary to intimidate the more depraved part of society from the confusions of errors(?), and many times during my most disbelieving career, have I protected professors of Christianity when unable by language to defend themselves against the scoffs and taunts of some of my more immediate acquaintances or in indiscriminate company. But the professors of Christianity whose conduct, as well in public as private life, I can most conscientiously declare, that the conduct of people of this description, whose practices I have had so many occasions to examine, had a very great shame in abusing me from a belief in Christianity through a mistaken notion of confounding *principles* with *practices*, guided too by that species of dangerous ambition the triumph of which lies in twisting reasons(?) from the crimes and crimes of others with which to locate those trammels(?) of religion that impede the passions(?) in their progress after short-lived and, I may say, tormenting

gratifications.

But, my dear friend, to the more immediate point in hand when I read the above quoted passages in your letter, I was more *astonished* than *alarmed*, because I knew with the kindest intentions towards my mortal(?), and most anxious solicitude for the welfare of my immortal part it was far more likely that you should err than the Scriptures should, and because it was very likely that I might mistake your meaning, considering myself so inadequate to doctrinal discussion when compared with your life of study and experience therein. However, supposing I have not mistaken your meaning I will proceed to show as far as I am able that my having "disbelieved the divine truth of Christianity", though you will in charity measure this disbelief by my declaration made (unreadable) *I am not left without hope* - Christ says, Matthew V and 6 - VIII and 7 - IX and 28 - XVIII and II. Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled - Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you! - Come unto me *all ye* that labor (sic) and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest - For the Son of Man is come to save that which is lost.

Now, Sir, can anything be more consoling to a poor sinner "hungering after righteousness" that "labours and is heavy laden"? Could it be possible that I might have the choice of a lengthened and healthy and happy old age with prospect of wealth, &c. or of being a partaker of those divine promises with an exclusion of one of the conditions my heart would bounce with the eagerness of expressing my anxiety of seizing the divine promise, without the most distant lingering wish hanging on the mind regardless of life, health, wealth and all the concomitant gratifications in their train. "*Such thanks be given to God, are my settled(?) thoughts*". And would my trembling hand perform its accustomed duty with the pen, I would copy many more scripture passages which assure me of salvation, (unreadable), however, from its peculiar sweetness(?) and its sound having lingered in my ears during twenty-eight years, I will transcribe. It is the last of Revelations and 17th. "And the spirit and the bride say come, and that he that heareth say come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will let him take the water of life freely".

My sins are grievous it is true and were all the good I have attempted to do not to be taken into account by the Almighty, which I think it certainly will, *yet the divine promises are so extensive* and the invitations so universal, that to despair regarding them, in my humble opinion would be insulting the Deity, and adding to the long list of sins already on record against me.

I remain, Dr Sir, yours most
sincerely.

John Blackner

PS. It was my intention to have entered into a short statement of my change of opinion and the *causes thereof*, but the kind anxiety expressed in your letter of the 12th and the great difficulty I have in (unreadable) to write at all have induced me to close this but will resume if possible.

EDITORIAL NOTICE

THE EDITOR WELCOMES PAPERS ON RELEVANT MATTERS, FOR PUBLICATION IN FUTURE ISSUES OF THIS JOURNAL, ALONG WITH REVIEWS OF RECENT BOOKS AND FILMS AND CORRESPONDENCE ON PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED PAPERS.

THE PROSECUTION OF THE AGE OF REASON

Terry Liddle

DESCRIBED by Richard Carlile as '...the first serious and honest attack ever made upon the Christian Idolatry in this country' Paine's, *Age of Reason* was written during his stay in Paris. The second part was penned in the Luxemburg prison where Paine faced a strong possibility of execution. Luckily, he survived and like his earlier *Rights of Man*, *The Age of Reason* had a large scale impact on radical thought, an impact which continues to this day. According to the bishop of London, Cornish miners were reading *The Age of Reason* while a government spy reported its warm reception in Liverpool. It was found in the pockets of rebellious United Irishmen in 1798.

Francis Place, the living link between the Jacobins of the 1790s and the Chartists of the 1830s, read *The Age of Reason* while waiting for his wife to give birth in 1794. So impressed was he that he sought out the book's owner, a member of the London Corresponding Society, and himself joined the society. Such was the controversy provoked by *The Age of Reason* in the London Corresponding Society's ranks that those who opposed Atheism and Deism broke away to form a new organisation.

Another who at this time read Paine and came under his influence was Eton pupil, Percy Shelley. In 1811 Shelley publish his, *The Necessity of Atheism*. In a sense he was lucky, the only penalties he suffered were expulsion from Oxford University and the end of his father's allowance. In 1814 he wrote, *A Refutation of Deism*. Shelley was greatly admired by Carlile who devoted a considerable space in the *Republican* to a discussion of his work. When the High Court condemned Shelley's *Queen Mab* as seditious and blasphemous and the publisher burned his stock, Carlile rushed out his own edition. Sadly, Shelley never saw it, within months he drown in Italy.

Falling on hard times, Place hoped to improve his finances by publishing an edition of *The Age of Reason*. In this he enlisted the aid of an impoverished bookbinder Thomas Williams. Anxious to keep the profit for himself, Williams cut Place out of the deal. Thus it was upon the head of Williams that the wrath of the establishment fell. In June 1797 he was tried before Lord Kenyon for having sold a single copy of part two of *The Age of Reason*, the prosecutor in this case being Robert Erskine who some years before had brilliantly defended Paine's *Rights of*

Man. On the grounds that Christianity was part of the law of the land and any attack upon it was therefore illegal, Williams, a sock man, was sentenced to a year in prison. On hearing the sentence, Williams asked if he might be allowed a bed in prison. Lord Kenyon replied that he could not order that as the publication in question was 'horrible to the ears of Christians'.

The prosecution of Williams had been instigated by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. The society's aim was the imposition of piety upon the poor by outlawing their pleasures, intellectual or otherwise. The ban on Sunday meetings which charged admission was the society's work. The Vice Society, as it was popularly known, floundered when it sought legislation to imprison adulterers. To ban the pleasures of the poor was one thing, to interfere with those of the rich just was not on.

A leading figure in the vice Society was William Wilberforce, a Tory Member of Parliament and friend of William Pitt and an ardent anti-slavery campaigner. William Cobbett launched a furious attack on him for championing slaves in the West Indies while ignoring the wretched plight of labourers at home. Wrote Cobbett; '...what an insult to call upon people under the name of free British labourers; to appeal to them on behalf of black slaves, when these free British labourers, these poor, mocked, degraded wretches, would be happy to lick the dishes and bowls out of which these Black slaves have breakfasted, dined and supped'. He continued, '...it is notorious that great numbers of your free British labourers have actually died of starvation'.

When Erskine discovered that Williams's family was starving and the children suffering from smallpox, he urged the Vice Society to exercise Christian mercy and content itself with the time Williams had spent in Newgate awaiting sentence. It declined. So angered was Erskine that he returned his fee and declined any further contact with the society.

In 1812 the bookseller Daniel Eaton was tried for having published a collection of Paine's essays which he called part three of *The Age of Reason*. This was described as an impious libel representing Jesus as an imposter. Although he was aged sixty and in poor health, Eaton was awarded eighteen months and to stand in the pillory once a month. Such was the public outrage at this that the pillory fell into disuse.

Richard Carlile had *The Age of Reason* during one of his numerous stays in prison and decided to publish his own edition. This appeared in a half guinea edition in 1818. Having exited the ire of the authorities by his reporting the massacre by the yeomanry of demonstrators for reform in Manchester he was brought to trial in October 1819 on a charge of

blasphemous libel for having published *The Age of Reason*. Once again it was the Vice Society which had instigated the proceedings.

The trial lasted three days Carlile defending himself in a marathon eleven hour speech in which he read aloud the whole of *The Age of Reason* thereby ensuring it would be included in the record. He also published the trial proceedings as a two penny [pamphlet. The judge, Chief Justice Abbot, commented that it was no defence to repeat the libel complained of.

Carlile complained that proceedings in the trial were irregular and not in accordance to law and that therefore the verdict was contaminated. He protested the authority of the court to try the charge of blasphemy in that no person had been defamed. It was, he said, alleged that he had incurred the wrath of the Almighty, but no proof of this had been offered. He sought to prove to the jury that his intentions were good, not wicked and malicious as charged, by showing the truth and moral tendency of the book he had published.

Carlile attempted to call as witnesses 'The Archbishop of Canterbury, the High Priest of the Jews and the Astronomer Royal, with the most eminent men in each Christian Sect, to shew to the jury that Christianity could not be part of the law of the land, as Christianity could not possibly be defined and no man could possibly say what it really was...' However, the Lord Chief Justice would not let him do this.

After hearing a discourse on the virtues of Christianity and the demerits of its opponents from the Lord Chief Justice, the jury returned a verdict of guilty. Carlile received three years imprisonment and a fine of £1,500. Unable, and unwilling, to pay the fine, Carlile was obliged to spend a further three years behind bars, remaining in Dorchester prison until 1826. However, such were the peculiarities of the penal system of the time that he was able to continue editing his newspaper, *The Republican*, from his prison cell.

Carlile's place as publisher of *The Age of Reason* was taken by his wife Jane. She, too, was imprisoned, part of the charge against her being the sale of W.T.Sherwin's biography of Paine, receiving two years imprisonment. As a married woman she was considered to have no property and so was not fined. She was followed by Carlile's sister, Mary Ann, who received two years imprisonment and a fine of £500.

Carlile's supporters formed themselves into Zetetical societies, many of them volunteering to keep Carlile's Fleet Street shop, the grandly named Temple of Reason, from which *The Age of Reason* and similar publications were sold. Not a few suffered imprisonment as a result. With the rise of

Chartism and its unstamped press (a stamp duty had been imposed on papers to price them beyond the reach of the poor) some of them would end up behind bars for upholding the freedom of publication. The Carlile case was the last prosecution of *The Age of Reason*, but it would be a long time before radicals could publish and distribute their publications without fear of legal penalty.

In prison Carlile wrote a long biographical essay on Paine. Of *The Age of Reason* he wrote: 'It was written in France expressly to stem the torrent of French atheism... Its purpose was bourgeois and reactionary rather than radical and proletarian. ...it contained truth and truth will not be confined to a nation or to a continent. But it will tend to fail as a standard criticism of superstition precisely because it is not atheistic'.

In 1819 William Cobbett had returned from the United States bringing with him Paine's bones. His aim in so doing was to atone for his youthful attacks on Paine by erecting a mausoleum which would be a place of radical pilgrimage. It did not happen and after Cobbett's death the bones were lost.

It was Carlile who established the tradition of celebrating Paine's birthday. *The Republican* of February 22, 1822, reported a gathering of Stockport republicans to celebrate the 'natal day of Mr. Paine'. Nearly seventy years later the *National Reformer* was reporting a childrens' tea party on Paine's birthday organised by the West Ham branch of the National Secular Society.

Paine was a great influence on the Chartists. When it was founded in 1837 the East London Democratic Association stated its object was: '...to promote the Moral and Political conditions of the working classes by disseminating the principles propagated by that great philosopher and redeemer of mankind, the Immortal Thomas Paine'. Bronterre O'Brian urged Chartists to read Paine along with Locke because 'they will tell you labour is the only genuine property'.

Today we live in an age of fanatical fundamentalism and theocratic intolerance. Even in the supposed democracies there are those who would willingly censor the reading of ordinary folk. Two centuries after its publication, *The Age of Reason* remains necessary reading for freethinkers and radicals. And we should never forget those such as Carlile who strove and suffered to make it available when to do so was extremely dangerous.
