

- 4 Compare and contrast the economic thinking expressed in Sources D  
F. (9 marks)
- 5 Analyse Sources G-L and suggest reasons why historians differ so  
widely in their views of the impact which industrialisation made  
upon the working-class standard of living. (12 marks)

Economic

J.R. STEPHENS  
GAMMAGE  
C.D.H. COLE

Political

E.P. THOMPSON  
DOROTHY THOMPSON

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CHARTISM – THE  
HISTORICAL DEBATE

Historians have posed five major questions relating to Chartism:

1. Was it an economic and social movement or a political one?
2. Was it a national movement?
3. Was the Chartist movement well led?
4. Was it a revolutionary movement?
5. Was it a success or a failure?

A review of the debate follows, dealing with each question in turn.

*1 Was it an economic and social movement or a political one?*

J.R. Stephens asserted that Chartism was a response to economic deprivation, a socio-economic view which was also held by Gammage. Later historians accepted this assumption with little question; G.D.H. Cole continued to do so in the 1940s. However, Cole guided the study of Chartism in two different directions: the Chartists themselves and the localities where Chartism flourished, rather than their ideas. A number of historians took up this challenge in the 1950s and significant local divergence among the Chartists began to emerge. In the 1960s E.P. Thompson stressed that the masses were capable of creating Chartism from their own intellectual resources, and this hastened a reassessment of the origins and nature of Chartism. Historians intensified their analysis of sources which related more to local Chartists rather than national Chartism, and Dorothy Thompson's thesis, that it was political rather than socio-economic in origin, seems to be well-established [A-G].

**A J.R. Stephens at Kersal Moor, Near Manchester (September 1838)**

This question of Universal Suffrage was a knife and fork question after all; this question was a bread and cheese question, and if any man asked him what he meant by Universal Suffrage, he would answer that every working man in the land had the right to have a good coat to his back, a comfortable abode in which to shelter himself and his family, a good dinner upon his table, and no more work than was necessary for keeping him in health, and as much wages for that work as would keep him in plenty, and afford him the blessings of life which a reasonable man could desire.



must be political or six pair political

## 2 Was Chartism a national movement?

A number of features gave Chartism the appearance of a national movement. Early historians, such as Mark Howell, assumed that it was so and by treating it as such drew general conclusions which distorted Chartist history: for some years. In the 1950s when *Chartist Studies* was published it became clear that wide regional and local variations had existed within the movement. Since the 1970s attempts have been made to reconcile this local diversity with the view that Chartism was a national movement, and what seems to have emerged is that both dimensions, the local and the national, must be borne in mind for a full understanding of the movement [H-P].

### H Mark Howell with a National Perspective

The Chartist Movement was a movement whose immediate object was political reform and whose ultimate purpose was social regeneration. Its programme of political reform was laid down in the 'People's Charter'. Its social aims were never defined, but they were sufficiently, though variously, described by leading men of the movement. It was a purely working-class movement, originating exclusively and drawing its whole following from the industrialised and unpropertied working class which had recently come into existence. For the most part it was a revolt of this body against intolerable conditions of existence. That is why its programme of social amelioration was vague and negative. It was an attempt on the part of the less educated portion of the community to legislate for a new and astounding condition of society whose evils the more enlightened portion had been either helpless or unwilling to remedy.

From Mark Howell: *The Chartist Movement* (1918)

### I Local Variations

A study of Chartism must begin with a proper appreciation of regional and local diversity. Some of the elements of diversity are measurable - rents, wages, prices, the incidence of unemployment, the degree of dependence on foreign markets. Some however, cannot be measured quantitatively. Variations in local class structure, in the content of local grievances, in the traditions of political leadership and mass agitation, and in the adaptability and persistence of the Chartists and of their opponents require detailed investigation.

From Asa Briggs: *Chartist Studies* (1959)

### J Manchester

<sup>earlier</sup> Society in early industrial Manchester was centred almost exclusively on its cotton industry. It lacked all the usual gentle gradations of <sup>status and of wealth:</sup> masters and men faced each other almost alone. At all times such social cleavage tended to social tension. But in the late 1830s this tension was much increased by the general prevalence of economic distress. This was the background of Manchester Chartism. Operatives went hungry, while their employers patently did not. Class conflict between cotton masters and cotton operatives became the basis of the Chartist movement in Lancashire.

From Donald Read: 'Chartism in Manchester'. In *Chartist Studies*

### K Leeds

Leeds Chartism was determined largely by its origins in earlier Radical and working-class movements. But underlying these were distinctive economic and social factors which also helped to give a somewhat different basis to Chartism in Leeds, from that found elsewhere in the West Riding. It did not have any large numbers of depressed handworkers, and in this it was markedly different from other West Riding towns such as Halifax and Bradford. <sup>handworkers in the West Riding</sup> Leeds Chartism became a movement of Radical small tradesmen and artisans with its influence centred in the newer working-class areas of the town. It was not a proletarian movement based on handworkers, as at Bradford, nor a base for power of new national leaders like Ernest Jones at Halifax. The existence of Chartist councillors gave to the Leeds organisation a certain stability and weight.

From J.F.C. Harrison: 'Chartism in Leeds'. In *Chartist Studies*

### L Leicester

The close connection between Chartism and framework knitting is shown clearly in two respects. First, there is a high degree of correlation between the main centres of the industry and the places from which there were reports of Chartist activity. Second, many of the local Chartist leaders were framework knitters. . . . Among the leaders of this type there [were] three marked characteristics. They were all self-educated working men and small tradesmen; a majority of them had a strong Nonconformist allegiance. And many of them had had experience in Radical and working-class movements of various kinds before 1838. <sup>(see below)</sup>

From J.F.C. Harrison: 'Chartism in Leicester'. In *Chartist Studies*

From J.F.C. Harrison: 'Chartism in Leicester'. In *Chartist Studies*

mixture of supporters

## M London

During the 1840s metropolitan Chartist culture appears to have been much the same as that of the major centres of Chartist activity in other parts of the country: with one outstanding exception. The Londoners tended to be non-religious or actively anti-Christian. Metropolitan rationalism was a deep-rooted characteristic both preceding and postdating Chartism. Chartism inherited another metropolitan tradition dating from the 1790s, that of insurrectionary conspiracy, with disastrous consequences in 1848.

## N Birmingham

The Birmingham district, though it included some big factories, was still mainly a region of small working masters, half independent and half subject to merchants who contracted to take their wares. Between these small masters and the skilled artisans who worked with them there was no sharp division of class. They could be combined, as they had been in the Reform struggle, under a common leadership; and this leadership was most likely to come from the Radical middle class.

From G.D.H. Cole: *Chartist Portraits* (1941) *Small scale piece / skilled artisans - move go back to region*

## O Local and National Tensions

The pull between local and national activity was a central feature of Chartist politics. Although some associations followed the directives of the NCA executive with remarkable equanimity, others complained of neglect or interference.

From David Jones: *Chartism and the Chartists* (1975)

## P Chartism – a Local and a National Movement

With the publication of *Chartist Studies* (1959), there has been a serious attempt to get back to the local roots of Chartist protest. As Briggs noted that a proliferation of local Chartist histories was a prerequisite to any new narrative history of Chartism. Since then there has been such a proliferation. At its best, such local work has provided valuable insight into the character of rank-and-file Chartist activity; however, all too often, such studies have suffered from the lack of a national framework to which to relate local protest. Without losing sight of the locality as the centre of activity for most Chartists, an understanding of Chartism must take into account the attempt to transcend local diversity, to create a sense of national class consciousness and to establish a national political party of the working class.

From James Epstein: *The Lion of Freedom* (1982)

## 3 Was the Chartist movement well led?

The Chartist leaders themselves argued heatedly over this and therefore to a degree created the problem. Their admiration for each other was often tempered by bitter rivalry [4.A.L]. R.G. Gammage certainly allowed his personal feelings to affect his judgement. Chartist leaders naturally gave partisan views of the leadership quarrels. Unfortunately this suited the preconceptions which early writers held about the leaders; they preferred Lovett to O'Connor, because the former was balanced, moderate and respectable, and appeared to have his position of leader usurped by the unscrupulous, egocentric rabble-rouser. This led to a distorted interpretation of O'Connor's leadership. The universal distaste with which Feargus was depicted began to undergo modification in the early 1960s and the reassessment of him is continuing. Recent opinion has described him as the personification of Chartism, without whom the national aspects of the movement would have been unsustainable for as long as they were [Q.V]

### O R.G. Gammage Discusses the Chartist Leaders

#### Brontë O'Brien

Of all the democratic leaders of the Chartist movement, he was undoubtedly the man with the greatest breadth of vision. His veriest foes bore testimony to the greatness of his intellect. The *Weekly Chronicle* described him as a man having more in his little finger than all the other Chartist leaders put together.

#### William Lovett

He was the life and soul of that body [the LWMA]. Possessed of a clear and masterly intellect and great powers of application, everything he attempted was certain of accomplishment; and, though not by any means an orator, he was in matters of business more useful to the movement than those who were gifted with finer powers of speech.

#### Ernest Jones

Jones maintained an attitude of dignified respect towards O'Connor; but it was only the prudence of the hypocrite which dictated his conduct. While Jones had not the courage to speak or write openly his real sentiments, he went about plotting in the dark to secure his [O'Connor's] overthrow.

#### Feargus O'Connor

If ever men deserved to be classed among cowards and poltroons, and to meet with the scorn and derision of mankind, it must be frankly confessed by all readers of Irish history that the kings of Ireland were entitled to that distinction, and none more so than the ancestors of O'Connor.

He showed himself to be either cowardly or treacherous towards those whom he styled his friends. A love of popularity was the

besetting sin of the latter [O'Connor]. To win and retain that popularity, with O'Connor all means were justifiable.

From R.G. Gammage: *History of the Chartist Movement 1837-1854* (1854)

#### **R. Hovell Finds O'Connor Unlikeable**

The immense exertions of O'Connor in the cause of the poor, vain, futile, and self-glorifying as those exertions were, were nevertheless a passport to the affection of many thousands of followers.

There is a repulsive aspect in the manner in which O'Connor exploited this. That [it] did not exhaust the affection is a witness to the intensity of feeling and the blind ignorance of the followers...

It would be idle to suppose that O'Connor in no way deserved this fidelity; men do not gain such homage without cause or merit. But O'Connor's character was such that no man of independence, talents, and integrity could long cooperate with him.

From Mark Hovell: *The Chartist Movement* (1918)

#### **S. An Objective Assessment**

O'Connor's egocentricity can be conceded at once. He wanted to be the unquestioned leader. Yet as soon as the Charter was launched a demagogue leader was needed. Lovett could not play the part: O'Connor was excellently equipped to do so...

In creating the Chartist movement as a popular agitation, O'Connor contributed little original philosophy, although he often liked to pose as a theorist. But [he] was not the first, nor the last, politician to advocate foolish policies.

Another charge against O'Connor has been that his language was exaggerated. Three lines of defence are open here. Firstly all popular movements require loud language to keep them going. Secondly, we must not forget the terrible conditions of the time. Finally, up to a point at least, it was deliberate bluff. O'Connor knew, as Lovett did not, that government would never concede the Charter to a quiet movement. He hoped to frighten them.

From Read & Glasgow: *Feargus O'Connor. Irishman and Chartist* (1961)

#### **T. O'Connor's Leadership Qualities**

As Chartism's most prominent national leader, O'Connor played a central role in maintaining the movement's national challenge. He was able to unite the forces of Chartism behind his leadership. [His] popularity was based on his unrivalled talents as an agitator, his brilliance as an orator, his indefatigable energy in the radical cause; but his standing within the ranks of Chartism was also founded upon the consistent and intelligent leadership which he had provided since

the mid-1830s. He came to symbolise the independence of working class political struggle.

From James Epstein: *The Lion of Freedom* (1982)

#### **U. The Importance of His Leadership**

Of the importance of Feargus O'Connor as a national leader, there can be no question...

O'Connor has been seen as the evil genius of the movement. In fact, so far from being the exploiter and distorter of the movement, O'Connor was so much the centre of it that, had the name Chartism not been coined, the radical movement between 1838 and 1848 must surely have been called O'Connorite Radicalism. Remove him and his newspaper and the movement fragments, localises and loses its continuity.

From Dorothy Thompson: *The Chartists* (1984)

#### **V. His Superiority over His Rivals**

No one matched O'Connor in the qualities demanded of a national leader. He was a superb platform speaker with a splendid presence, wonderfully racy and vivid in his language, and wildly funny both on the platform and in his writings. Many historians have seen only his braggadocio, the bombastic expression of prophecies and claims that could never be fulfilled. But much more important was the confidence that [he] generated among the poor and down-trodden. It was this crucial belief in the righteousness of the cause, and his ability to communicate it in unqualified terms, that allowed O'Connor to tower above his fellow Chartists.

From John Saville: *1848* (1987)

## **4 Was Chartism a revolutionary movement?**

The contemporary fear of Chartism suggests to us that it sought a violent revolution [8.C-J]. Leading speakers of the day seem to confirm this with the extreme language which they used, but historians experience some difficulty with this question. The 'moral' force and 'physical' force split indicates that the movement had its violent side, but historians tend to differ on its importance. The current consensus is that the Chartists sought a bloodless revolution, though a revolution nonetheless [W-Bb].

**W Dorothy Thompson Considers the National Conspiracy**  
After the ending of the Convention [in 1839] an underground movement developed, meeting secretly, gathering arms, and planning either an insurrection or armed resistance to an anticipated government attack. Such work as has been done on this 'underground' has of course met with difficulties greater than even those involved in recording the public or semi-public activities of the Chartists. Much remains to be discovered. Much may never now be discovered. Of the existence of a national conspiracy there can be little doubt, although its extent and the involvement of national leaders remain to be teased out from a mass of contradictory evidence. The one event which has entered all the records was the Newport rising of November 1839.

From Dorothy Thompson: *The Chartists* (1984)

**X Hovell Had Seen It Differently**  
It was not a revolutionary movement, nor were its leaders. It is true that there were real revolutionaries among them, but their time had not yet come. The true revolutionary does not give way to rhetoric. Mere words will not satisfy him, and we have no evidence that either Stephens, Caster or O'Connor was prepared to go beyond mere words. Their business was protest.

From Mark Hovell: *The Chartist Movement* (1918)

**Y The Menace of Armed Chartist**  
Beyond the Convention, many Chartists had for months advocated recourse to physical violence. Up and down the country reports spread of militant groups hoarding pikes, spears and muskets for the coming revolution. After making all allowance for the exaggerations, it is certain that considerable numbers of men had taken anti-Poor Law and Chartist militants at their word. And declining industrial conditions enhanced urban militancy in some areas. As a result, in many places Chartist took on the menacing aspect of a terrorist organisation.

From J.T. Ward: *Chartism* (1973)

**Z The Limits of Insurgency**  
Certainly, the extent of open insurrection was remarkably small. Chartists took up arms only in exceptional circumstances. One obvious source of political militancy were communities with a long tradition of violent action. When Chartism reached these 'hell-holes', and invaded the out-townships of large cities, violent language and the shooting of firearms were an immediate and natural accompaniment. Here

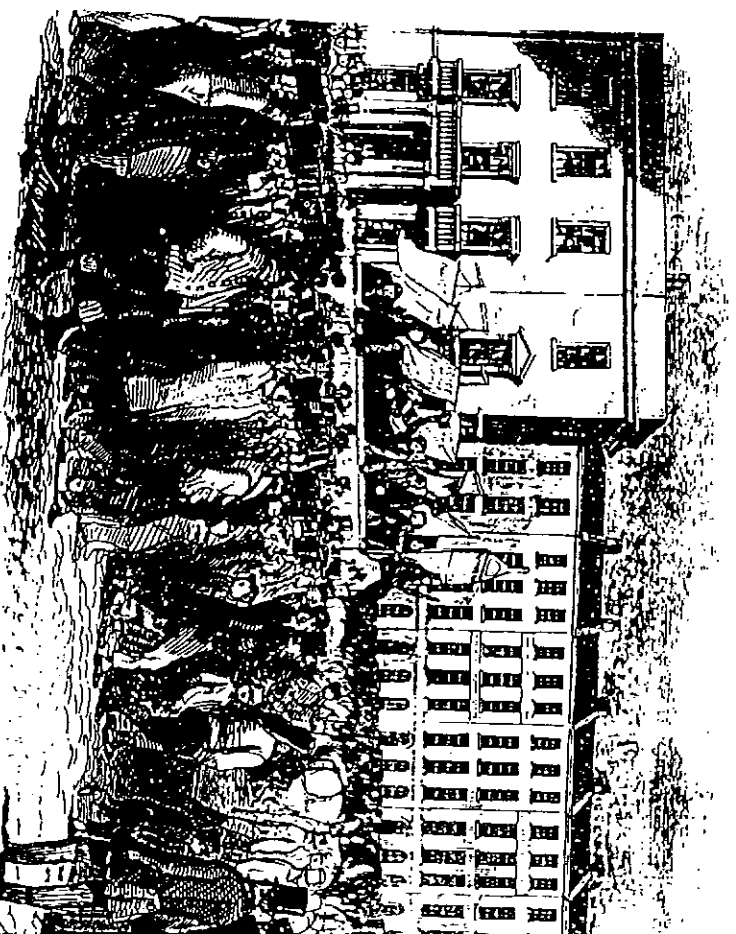
sufficient sanctions and underground organisations existed to make a concerted rising possible. The great fear was that Chartists would become acknowledged spokesmen for these violent communities.

From David Jones: *Chartism and the Chartists* (1975)

**As The Chartist Belief in a Bloodless Revolution**  
All assumed that the necessary changes in class legislation would follow working-class representation at Westminster. The institutions of the state, so it was believed, could and would respond to the people's representatives. At the same time, the Chartist movement took it for granted, that the achievement of the Six Points would be the first major step towards a new kind of social order.

From John Saville: 1848 (1987)

**Bb Part of the Chartist procession to Kennington Common, April 18**



## 5 Was Chartism a success or a failure?

It was certainly in the interests of the authorities to depict it as a failure, and public condemnation and ridicule was used to great effect to suggest it was so in 1848. The later nineteenth-century view accepted that verdict although early twentieth-century commentators suggested different criteria for assessment. They argued that whether the Chartists won their Six Points or not, was of less importance than the creation of a mass movement through which working men and women perceived that their conditions could be improved. More recently, the Chartists' formation of the movement has been acclaimed as their outstanding and singular achievement [Cc-F].

*Reduce - strong Gov*

**Cc The Official Verdict after 1848**  
Chartism was finally broken by the physical force of the state, and having once been broken it was submerged, in the national consciousness, beneath layers of false understanding and denigration. What was quite forgotten was the strength that continued in Chartism and even the mass arrests and jailings were wiped from public memory. The contemporary media were extraordinarily effective in traducing this greatest of all mass movements of the nineteenth century.

From John Saville: 1848 (1987)

### Dd Hovell Questions that Verdict

Contemporaries had no hesitation in declaring the movement fruitless. The judgement of its own age has been accepted by many later historians, and there has been general agreement in placing Chartism among the lost causes of history...

In the long run Chartism by no means failed. On its immediate political side the principles of the Charter have gradually become parts of the British constitution. If on its broader social aspects there was no such vindication, this is due partly to the fact that the Chartists had no social policy in the sense that they had a political platform.

From Mark Hovell: *The Chartist Movement* (1918)

### Ee A Contemporary of Hovell Uses Different Criteria

The Chartist movement was the first organised effort to stir up class consciousness on a national scale. Judged by its crop of statutes and overlooked purpose, Chartism was a success. It achieved not the Six Points, but a state of mind ← *Chartism socially achieved*

From Julius West: *A History of the Chartist Movement* (1920)

### Ff The Chartists' Achievement - Chartism

Indeed Chartism did make a powerful political impact, bringing a new urgency to the philanthropic impulses of private individuals and the reforming tendencies of those in government - though to a list of social reforms should be added the introduction and implementation of legislation extending police forces to many parts of the provinces, a Chartist achievement but never a Chartist aim! The quest for Chartist achievement has also led sometimes to a listing of enactments of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by which many points of the Charter were granted, but this seems fallacious. Those Acts cannot even remotely be attributed to Chartist pressure, and the real spirit of democracy which lay behind the points of the Charter remains unrealised even in the later twentieth century. The positive achievements of the Chartists are to be found not in legislation, passed at the time or in the remoter future, but in the mobilisation of the considerable mental, spiritual and emotional capacities of the working men and women of early industrial Britain. The Chartists' greatest achievement was Chartism, a movement shot through not with despair but with hope.

From Edward Royle: *Chartism* (1980) *The excitement of Chartism*

## Questions

- 1 Examine Sources A-G and explain why the view expressed in Source E might be regarded as a turning point in the study of the origins of the Chartist movement. (12 marks)
- 2 In what respects do Sources I-P challenge the assumption of Source H? (12 marks)
- 3 Study Sources Q-V and explain why the assessment of P (shown in Sources Q-R has been modified in Sources S-V. (12 marks)
- 4 'For historians of the Chartist movement the term "revolution" is a major pitfall.' Examine this statement in reference to Sources W-Aa. (12 marks)
- 5 What are the different criteria used in Sources Cc-Ff in assessing the success or failure of the Chartists? (12 marks)

*well an achievement, took on the gov't - 1st we Gov't - 1st we were never to be taken*