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Chartist Portraits

and

The Chartists

Phillip Weiss
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In Chartist Portraits G.D.H. Cole "tries to tell the story of Chartism by means of biographical sketches of some of its leaders." (page v). Through these biographies Cole shows that these Chartist leaders Some were not from the working class and came to Chartism with their own political or personal agendas. Thus, William Lovett, the founder of Chartist movement, was a radical politician and an Owenite; Joseph Raynor Stephens was a Methodist minister who "hated the Whigs" (page 71); Richard Oastler was an advocate for factory reform; Thomas Attwood was a banker who believed in monetary reform to increase the supply of money; John Frost was a radical politician who was defeated for re-election in 1837; Joseph Sturge was a Quaker who had been involved in the anti-slavery movement; Thomas Cooper was a journalist whose conversion to Chartism happened "suddenly" (page 193); John Fielden was a radical Member of Parliament; James Bronterre O'Brien was a lawyer and journalist who became involved in Radical politics; George Julian Harney was a journalist who had been jailed for selling unstamped periodicals; Feargus O'Connor was a Member of Parliament from Ireland who had "voted ... with the Radicals" (page 309); and Ernest Jones was a "literary journalist" with "a passion against social injustice" who became involved in Chartism after he became "acquainted" with Feargus O'Connor's paper, The Northern Star. (page 340.) Cole also shows that most of these Chartist leaders, such as Stephens, Frost, Cooper, O'Brien, Harney, O'Connor and Jones instigated violence and believed in playing to the mob. For instance, Cole writes that "O'Connor was a demagogue of the highest order ... [whose] ideas were in a jumble." (page 301). If this was the case, then Cole shows that Chartism was a half-baked movement led by a group of opportunistic middle class activists and politicians who were seeking political power through agitation of the people.

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Dorothy Thompson in The Chartists writes that "the purpose of the book is partly to show why so many people believed that political change could bring about an improvement in their situation, and partly to show the scale of the movement which grew up around this conviction" (preface). Thompson succeeds in accomplishing this purpose. Thompson writes that the political radicalism represented "a turning towards political solutions for a variety of activities and problems which hitherto had been dealt with at a local and largely non-political level" (page 12) and that "nearly everyone who supported reform expected it to produce a government which would deal rationally with the country's problems and find acceptable solutions to them" (page 13). "They believed that nearly every problem had a political solution" (page 13). This expectation grew from the hope that the majority of the people in all classes had in a reformed Parliament (pages 13). Thus the people already had the expectation that the political system would be responsive to their needs. Also, according to Thompson, the Chartist press circumvented the government's attempt to price newspapers out of the working people's reach, keeping the working informed of radical activities (pages 37-40); and the Charter fused local agitations into a campaign of national dimensions (page 60). In the chapter "Laborers and the Trades," Thompson shows how workers from numerous trades were active in the Chartist movement. Shoemakers, tailors, smiths, metal workers, mechanics, wood workers, cabinet makers, joiners and carpenters, stonemasons, and workers in many other trades were Chartists.

In conclusion, Thompson shows that the people believed in political change and that numerous workers were active in *the* Chartist movement which was seen as being representative of the interests of the working class.

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