

The later radical career of Thomas Cooper

c.1845–1855

by Stephen Roberts

For most historians of Chartism the radical career of Thomas Cooper, for two and a half remarkable years the fervent champion of the Leicester Chartists, comes to an effective end with his imprisonment for seditious conspiracy in May 1843, or, if not then, with his expulsion from the Chartist conference at Leeds fifteen months after his release.¹ Beyond these points little interest has been shown in his radical activities. The reasons for this are not difficult to ascertain. Cooper's autobiography gives only brief details about his continued radical career in the decade after his release from prison in May 1845.² We learn very little, for example, about his adherence to the ideas of non-resistance, and nothing at all about his interest for a time in what the French socialists were saying or his championing of such causes as the resettlement of the unemployed on the wastelands. Moreover, it is clear that in London, where he lived in the decade or so after his release, Cooper failed to establish for himself anything like a sizeable following amongst the Chartists.

These later years are nonetheless important. Though Cooper made no sustained attempt to set himself up as an alternative leader to Feargus O'Connor, he still continued to call himself a Chartist long after his release from prison and to campaign for the six points. In 1851 in fact he rejoined the National Charter Association (NCA), and, in December of that year, was unsuccessfully nominated for the executive.³ In the years which followed Cooper reaffirmed his belief in the Chartist cause. 'Chartism has a strong hold on my affections', he wrote in the *People's Paper* in 1853, 'and, so long as a plank of the dear old ship . . . can be held together, I should like to remain one of the crew'.⁴ As late as 1858, three years after O'Connor's death, his editorials in the *People* were still calling for the implementation of 'the old programme'.⁵ At the same time as his continued avowal of Chartism, however, Cooper also forged for himself a well defined independent radical identity. He became a prominent advocate of freethought in the metropolis (though not nationally), a clamorous supporter of co-operation with middle-class radicals, a leading member of the Peoples' International League, and the editor of two excellent political journals. Cooper's career as a radical therefore did not come to an end when he left Leicester. What follows is an account of the later radical activities of one of Chartism's most colourful and compelling figures.

There was great disunity amongst the Chartist leaders in the mid-1840s. Cooper, Bronterre O'Brien, Peter Murray McDouall, William Carpenter and William Ashton all quarrelled with O'Connor. Cooper's arguments with O'Connor need to be examined as an important part of this break-up of the Chartist leadership. In his *Letter to the Working Men of*

1. For an account of these earlier years see Stephen Roberts, 'Thomas Cooper in Leicester, 1840–1843', *TLAHS*, 61 (1987), pp.62–76. The issues raised in this article are considered in more detail in Stephen Roberts, 'Thomas Cooper: Radical and Poet, c.1830–1860', unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1986, pp.140–271
2. Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself*. 1872 [hereafter, Cooper, *Life*]
3. See *Northern Star*, 13 December, 27 December 1851 [hereafter NS]. The executive excluded Cooper from the list of candidates
4. *People's Paper*, 8 January 1853. Also see Horace Barks Reference Library, Hanley [hereafter HBRL], Lectures by Cooper on the History of England, 15 October, 29 October 1854
5. *People*, 8 February 1858. Cooper wrote a series of editorials for the paper, 23 January–20 February 1858

Leicester, written towards the end of his imprisonment, Cooper cited O'Connor's rejection of Sharman Crawford's proposals for parliamentary obstruction to gain the Charter and of republicanism in a speech in Newcastle in October 1844 as the reasons for his disillusionment with the Chartist leader.⁶ This explanation, however, must be seen against an important background. In prison Cooper, reflecting on the defeat of Chartism in 1842 and on his own role in the movement, became embarrassed by a realization of the extent of his own hero worship of O'Connor during his Leicester years. Though it was as he sought to rationalize his own past that Cooper came to reject his former leader, O'Connor's repudiation of Crawford's proposals for a new radical strategy and of republicanism were important: they tipped the balance. The timing of a letter from Cooper to John Mason calling for O'Connor to be toppled, just after the Chartist leader's Newcastle speech, confirms this. Unfortunately for Cooper, the letter fell into O'Connor's hands, and, in February 1845, he was denounced as a traitor and money seeker. The dust had hardly settled before O'Connor issued a retraction. At first Cooper accepted this, but his attitude soon hardened. O'Connor had not withdrawn his accusations that he had regularly received letters from Cooper asking for money.⁷ These accusations and counter-accusations over money between O'Connor and Cooper were to resurface, in a variety of forms, in 1846. The tensions which arose between a leader of independent wealth and a leader from the working class, reliant for funds on lecturing and writing, were undoubtedly important in Cooper's break with O'Connor. Bitter at the turn of events, Cooper did not return to Leicester on his release from prison, but went instead straight to London.

1845 did not mark the end of Cooper's Chartist career. He did not find it possible to break with the working class cause. 'I am bent on resuscitating Chartism in earnest in London', he wrote to William Jones, the Leicester poet, two months after his release.⁸ He delivered a series of lectures at the City Chartist Hall, and, in August 1845, attended an anniversary supper for the London Democratic Association.⁹ His speech there, praising Giuseppe Mazzini's role in the struggle for Italian freedom, signalled his first departure from the preoccupations which had helped shape his radicalism in Leicester. The following month Cooper set up two funds to assist those who had either devoted their lives to the radical cause or who had been the victims of government repression, serving as secretary of both.¹⁰ His projected 'Radical Hymn Book', however, which was to be sold to raise money for these funds, was quickly abandoned after his editorial control was challenged.¹¹

The reconciliation which took place between Cooper and O'Connor in summer 1845 proved to be short lived. Cooper himself, on his release from prison, had resolved never again to speak to his former hero. O'Connor, however, motivated both by genuine respect for Cooper and the obvious need to hold together the Chartist leadership, was determined to end the quarrel. It seems likely that Cooper's search for a publisher for his prison poem,

6. See Thomas Cooper, *A Letter to the Working Men of Leicester*. Leicester: 1845, pp.4-7; *NS*, as n.3, 19 October 1844, for O'Connor's Newcastle speech

7. See *NS*, as n.3, 15 February, 1 March, 26 April 1845

8. LRO.; DE 2964, Cooper to William Jones, 30 June 1845

9. See *NS*, as n.3, 5 July, 20 September, 14 October, 18 October, 1845, 25 October, 1 November, 8 November, 22 November, 20 December 1845; Giuseppe Mazzini to George Julian Harney, n.d., in *The Harney Papers* edited by Frank Gees Black and Renee Metivier Black, Assen: Van Gorcum 1969, p.48

10. See *NS* as n.3, 20 September, 15 November, 29 November 1845, 10 January 1846. The two funds were called the Veteran Patriots' Fund and the Exiles', Widows' and Children's Fund. The London undertaker and founder of the Friend-in-Need Burial and Benefit Society, John Shaw, served as treasurer of the funds.

11. See *NS*, as n.3, 3 January, 17 January, 24 January 1846

the *Purgatory of Suicides*, was important in this conciliation, in spite of his denial in 1849.¹² Certainly that is the evidence of a very assured account in his autobiography.¹³ O'Connor agreed to secure the publication of the poem, but was subsequently unable to fulfil his promise. The losses he incurred attempting to do so, however, proved to be a factor in the second, and this time permanent, breach between the two men.¹⁴ Three years later, when Cooper and O'Connor were embroiled in a revived quarrel, the issue of the Chartist leader's expenditure on the *Purgatory* remained a sore point.¹⁵

The final rift between Cooper and O'Connor began as a dispute over Chartist strategy. During February 1846 Cooper had begun to argue at Chartist meetings throughout London a case for absolute non-resistance. These ideas, drew, in part, on earlier interests. He had, for example, read the Revd. Samuel Johnson's *Reflections on the History of Passive Obedience* years before. Cooper's imprisonment was, of course, important in his espousal of these new notions. His regret at the Potteries outbreak, which had ended in his own two-year sentence and not in victory for the Chartists, was deep. Undoubtedly he was also filled with genuine horror at the executions which had taken place during his imprisonment. Also significant was the whole dilemma of Chartist tactics in the second half of the 1840s. There was, Cooper now believed, an obvious contradiction between petitioning for the recall of Frost, Williams and Jones and holding meetings to protest against the enrolment of a national militia, and the continued advocacy by some Chartists of the use of physical force.

Cooper set out his new ideas in two long published lectures.¹⁶ His conversion to the philosophy of non-resistance was important, marking both the first assertion of his new independent radical identity and the first intrusion of such views into the mainstream of working class thought. For all that, he received little support amongst the Chartists. O'Connor and the *Northern Star* regarded Cooper's opinions as little short of idiotic.¹⁷ In Sheffield, where in July 1842 he had been enthusiastically received, his lecture on non-resistance was largely boycotted by local Chartists.¹⁸ Cooper, however, did not shift his ground. He continued to assert his support for the doctrine of non-resistance for at least another four years, and certainly maintained his opposition to any ideas of physical force amongst the Chartists for the remainder of his radical career.¹⁹ It was not until December 1853 that he was to publicly repudiate the main tenets of the philosophy he had set out eight years earlier.²⁰

The second major cause of the fissure between Cooper and O'Connor has long been recognized by historians. Certainly the Land Plan was the only major issue of contention which Cooper himself mentioned in his autobiography.²¹ It is important to understand, however, that, in spite of the impression given by Cooper's own later account, his criticisms at the time did not focus on the probable objectives of the scheme. He concentrated his attacks instead on what he regarded as O'Connor's financial mismanagement of the Chartist

12. See NS, as n.3, 28 April 1849

13. See Cooper, *Life*, as n.2, pp.271-74

14. See NS, as n.3, 13 June, 20 June 1846

15. See NS, as n.3, 7 April 1849

16. Thomas Cooper, *Two Orations Against Taking Away Human Life Under Any Circumstances; and in Explanation and Defence of the Misrepresented Doctrine of Non-Resistance*. London: Chapman Bros, 1846

17. See, for example, the review of Cooper's published lectures in NS, as n.3, 11 April 1846: 'We owe them no respect . . . His mental vision must be shockingly imperfect.' Also see *ibid.*, 14 February, 21 February 1846

18. See NS, as n.3, 27 June 1846

19. For a brief restatement of Cooper's support for non-resistance see in 1849, *Reasoner* 7, p.281

20. See HBRL, as n.4, Lectures by Cooper on the History of England, 11 December, 25 December 1853

21. See Cooper, *Life*, as n.2, pp.273-74, 277

Co-operative Land Society, founded in April 1845. His criticisms were principally threefold: O'Connor's sole financial control which enabled him to support the *Star* from the Land Fund; the nebulous role of William Prowting Roberts as treasurer and his failure to present any proper accounts; and the apparent irregularities surrounding the purchase of the Heronsgate estate for £1,860 in March 1846. This first estate, Cooper informed the Chartists, had been bought by O'Connor 'in his own name, with your money, and without asking your leave . . . Can you get this estate out of his hands when you choose? Echo answers, "Can you?"'.²² Cooper's concentration on financial matters reveals, as indicated earlier, an important problem of Chartist leadership in the 1840s: the strains which arose because of O'Connor's status as a gentleman-leader of financial independence.

The Leeds conference of August 1846, which brought to a head Cooper's conflict with O'Connor, marked a watershed in his radical career. Already branded a traitor by O'Connor and the Chartist rank and file, his expulsion from the conference completed his alienation.²³ Henceforth he took on the role of an independent Chartist. The resolutions which Cooper published ten days before the conference began, calling, predictably enough, for the separation of the Land Society from the NCA, for the repudiation of physical force and for a rejection of O'Connor and his newspaper, set the seal on his fate.²⁴ Even the City of London Chartists, who had sent Cooper to the conference, turned against him.²⁵ The events of the conference itself are well known. Lacking any support, Cooper attempted to move his published resolutions. The subsequent uproar, culminating in Ernest Jones' successful resolution calling for Cooper's expulsion and his refusal to leave, brought about an adjournment of the conference. The following day Cooper was refused admission. In later years Cooper did not look back on events at Leeds as the utter defeat they clearly were. Writing of James Sweet, the delegate from Nottingham, he remembered having 'whipped his toadyism of O'Connor rather severely at the Leeds conference . . .'.²⁶

Cooper did not spend the months after the Leeds conference simply licking his wounds. Instead he began a tour of England for *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*. His articles on conditions of life in the manufacturing districts were probably the first of their kind by a working class radical journalist.²⁷ To his dismay Cooper rediscovered in several of the towns he visited the terrible poverty he had known in Leicester in the early 1840s. Severed from mainstream Chartism he may have been, but Cooper's tour only served to reaffirm his commitment to continued active participation in working class radical politics.

Cooper's interest in foreign affairs did not begin with the revolution in France in 1848. With William Wordsworth, at Rydal Mount in September 1846, he had talked about the prospects for change on the continent, and he had written about it in his verse.²⁸ In April 1847, rejecting George Julian Harney's Fraternal Democrats because of their close allegiance to the NCA and their espousal of revolutionary principles, he had become a founder member of the Peoples' International League, a grouping of miscellaneous radicals gathered around Mazzini, at the time living in England. The purpose of the League, in Cooper's words, was 'to direct . . . public opinion beneficially for the right cause in every

22. *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 28 June 1846

23. See *NS*, as n.3, 13 June, 20 June, 27 June 1846. Condemnation of Cooper filled nearly two and a half pages of these last two issues

24. See *NS*, as n.3, 25 July 1846

25. See *NS*, as n.3, 8 August 1846

26. Bishopsgate Institute [hereafter BI], Cooper to Thomas Tatlow, 20 February 1849

27. See *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, 25 July, 1 August, 15 August, 22 August, 29 August, 19

September, 26 September, 3 October, 10 October, 17 October, 31 October, 14 November, 21 November, 28 November, 26 December 1846

28. See *Cooper's Journal* [hereafter *CJ*] 25 May 1850; *Howitt's Journal*, 1 (1847), pp.41-42

country'.²⁹ It was crucial that with regard to Switzerland, where a civil war had broken out between the cantons, the Foreign Office, rather than be allowed to act covertly, be persuaded by popular opinion to enforce a policy of non-intervention amongst the European powers. Within this general framework of radical internationalism, Cooper believed he could accommodate his own renunciation of physical force. He was especially concerned to deny *The Times's* accusation that the League's 'united design was to revolutionize all Europe . . . Falsehood prevailed in this statement. The design of the League is not what "*The Times*" says it is'.³⁰ Cooper's interpretation of the League's strategy was clearly not shared by either William Linton, its secretary, or Mazzini. Mazzini was in fact author of a League pamphlet supporting insurrection in Europe, and an advocate of British military intervention in Switzerland. As Cooper recalled in his autobiography, however, Mazzini's powerful oratory and passionate justification of revolution stirred his strong romanticism and changed his mind.³¹ At home Cooper remained an advocate of non-resistance, but, inconsistently, after late 1847, he was prepared to support revolution abroad. In October 1849 he publicly questioned Robert Owen's criticism of European revolutionaries.³² For all this, Cooper's participation in the League proved to be relatively limited. Beyond attendance at weekly committee meetings and the delivery of a number of lectures in autumn 1847, he contributed little before the League melted away in 1848.

Cooper nonetheless remained a committed Chartist internationalist. He continued to write of Mazzini in fulsome terms.³³ In 1852, together with a number of other radicals, including Linton, he became treasurer of a fund to help his hero. The objective of the scheme was to collect one shilling each year from sympathizers, and place the sum in a London bank account for the use of Mazzini and Louis Kossuth. Despite extensive publicity, however, these endeavours came to little, raising only £50 7s.6d. before being abandoned.³⁴

The resurgence of national Chartist activity which took place in 1848 can be traced back to O'Connor's election victory the previous summer, but the greatest stimulus was undoubtedly the February revolution in France. Certainly Cooper saw the replacement of Louis Philippe by a republican government committed to universal suffrage as a major source of encouragement for Chartism. Within two weeks of the establishment of the new government in France he joined with James Watson and several other radicals in the formation of a Democratic Committee of Observation on the French Revolution. The Committee issued a manifesto, almost certainly written by Cooper, in which the example of France was extolled, though not her methods. Change in Britain, Cooper argued, was not to be brought about by revolution, but by continued constitutional agitation, enlisting, where possible, the support of other classes.³⁵

Cooper played no part in the revival of mainstream Chartism in 1848, though he was certainly in London on the day of the Kennington Common demonstration. On 9 April he attended a dinner at which Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist and lecturer, was present, and doubtless attracted, on the eve of the Chartist rally, almost as much attention.³⁶

29. *Reasoner*, 3, p.575

30. *Reasoner*, 3, p.574-75

31. See Cooper, *Life*, as n.2, p.301

32. See *Reasoner*, 7, p.281. In 1853 Cooper spoke at a meeting commemorating the Polish uprising of 1830.

33. See, for example, *Cf*, as n.28, 2 March 1850

34. See *English Republic*, 2, pp.25, 75-6, 211-12

35. See *Reasoner*, 4, pp.233-34

36. See Swedenborg Society Library, K124, J. J. Garth Wilkinson to his wife, 10 April 1848. Cooper is the only guest identified [as 'Chartist Poer'], indicating that he was unknown to Wilkinson's wife and therefore suggesting that he was specially invited as a 'dangerous' guest

It seems unlikely that Cooper actually attended the Chartist rally on Kennington Common, but that evening he was elected president of the newly established People's Charter Union (PCU), clearly affirming both his continued advocacy of the Chartist cause and his dissociation from the strategy of the NCA.³⁷ 'Have nothing to do with the Chartists and their Convention', he advised his old Leicester friend, Thomas Tatlow, 'unless you bid for Bedlam or Botany Bay. They are done: done brown'.³⁸ The PCU, whose leaders also included Henry Hetherington, Watson and, briefly, O'Brien, was intended to be a direct rival to the NCA. The new group aimed to organize several thousand individual petitions and to set up grassroots associations, in clear rivalry to the local associations of the NCA. Though attempts to affiliate the PCU to the NCA were successfully resisted, little else was accomplished. There were to be no local associations. 'What is the People's Charter Union?', Joseph Barker asked in Leeds in autumn 1848, 'And what are its objects? And what is it doing?'.³⁹ Membership of the PCU reached perhaps 400. Even in London, where it remained rooted, the PCU made little headway, unable to conform to the post-tenth April mood amongst Chartists in the metropolis after the evening of 10th April. Cooper remained president only briefly, resigning after about one month. Thereafter he played no significant part in the PCU's activities, and in 1849 the new group disintegrated.⁴⁰ The few weeks of PCU leadership nevertheless remain significant. They marked the only occasion on which Cooper, after his expulsion from the Leeds conference, made any concerted or organized attempt to challenge the ascendancy of O'Connor as the national leader of Chartism.

For Cooper the PCU's commitment to a cross-class alliance was very important. Though the PCU was intended to challenge the supremacy of the NCA, Cooper was also willing to fall in behind the leadership of middle-class radicals. He was determined, however, that this would only be on terms which upheld manhood suffrage. His hopes lay with John Bright and Richard Cobden, both of whom, fearing a revolutionary outbreak, were moving towards a new campaign for parliamentary reform. An alliance of middle-class and working-class radicals, Cooper believed, could not fail. 'The new agitation just being begun by Cobden', he wrote to Tatlow, 'will be more stirring, and have more important results, than any agitation since that for the Reform Bill . . . 1849 will be a far more important year for England than any in our lives hitherto'.⁴¹ The National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association (NPFRA), when it emerged in January 1849, however, dashed Cooper's hopes. O'Connor, Thomas Clark and several other Chartist leaders aligned themselves with the NPFRA. Cooper, however, found it difficult to settle for an expurgated version of the Charter, committed only to household suffrage, the ballot, triennial parliaments and more equal electoral districts. Consequently he continued to press for the adoption of manhood suffrage. 'The Charter suffrage must not sleep on the tongues of its friends', he declared, 'The new reformers must be evermore reminded of . . . the full faith'.⁴² He wrote open letters to Cobden and Bright, and attended public meetings organized by the NPFRA, speaking at one in June 1849 where he 'unhesitatingly declared myself a Chartist'.⁴³ Cooper's appeals, however, fell on deaf ears. Though his intentions were undoubtedly sincere, as were those of other Chartists who after 1848 supported a cross-class alliance, he did not understand that

37. For information on the PCU see *Reasoner*, 4, pp.263, 332; 5, pp.329–31; *Cause of the People*, 20 May 1848

38. BI, as n.26, Cooper to Tatlow, 19 April 1848

39. *The People: Their Rights and Liberties: Their Duties and Interests*, 1 (1848), p.239

40. Without Cooper, the remnants of the PCU subsequently evolved into the Association for the Repeal of Taxes on Knowledge

41. BI, as n.26, Cooper to Tatlow, 25 December 1848

42. *Plain Speaker*, 28 July 1849 [hereafter PS]

43. PS, as n.42, 23 June 1849. Also see 20 January, 21 April, 12 May 1849

for the majority of middle-class reformers, including the NPFRA, all-out collaboration with the Chartists was never a serious option.

France, both in 1848 and in the years which immediately followed, exerted a powerful influence on Cooper, as indeed it did on many English radicals. He fell under the spell of the French socialists, particularly Charles Fourier and Louis Blanc, and in May 1849, at the expense of W. E. Forster, was even able to spend a few days in Paris.⁴⁴ Fourier's ideas astonished Cooper, and he made the acquaintance of Hugh Doherty, the most prominent English Fourierist. But, much as he admired Fourier at a first-rate mind, he was never a disciple. In truth he never fully mastered Fourier's ideas.⁴⁵ It was Blanc who exerted a more significant influence on Cooper. He read *Organisation du Travail* as soon as it was translated in 1848. To him the book seemed to offer a simple panacea to the social problems of the time. Moreover, it was Blanc, installed in his 'Ministry of Progress and Work' in Paris, rather than Fourier, eleven years dead, who was most clearly associated with the exciting events of 1848. By June 1848 Cooper was explaining Blanc's ideas to the working men of London in his lectures, describing the national workshops and home colonies, their gradual absorption of capitalist modes of production, and the provisions made for the old and sick.⁴⁶ Cooper's most important contribution to the popularization of the ideas of the French socialists in radical circles in Britain, however, was the publication, in May 1848, of his translation of *Land for the Labourers and the Fraternity of Nations*.⁴⁷ The pamphlet, written by an unknown individual and already circulated in Paris, called for the state ownership of land. Its author believed his proposals applicable to all countries: hence the pamphlet's optimistic translation by Cooper. For Cooper, however, the ideas contained in *Land for the Labourers* were only partly absorbed into his own radicalism: he supported the nationalization of land for only a brief period.

It was not until 1848 that the land question became central to Cooper's radicalism. In that year, however, and those immediately following, he became a strong advocate of the settlement of the unemployed on the wastelands in home colonies. The land question was, of course, indigenous to English radical politics. Though Cooper's initial interest in home colonization was derived from Blanc, he drew on other sources, including, undoubtedly, also Owen, even if his commitment to Owen's ideas in general was never very deep. Cooper's advocacy of home colonization in the late 1840s and early 1850s in fact marked an important break with his own radical past. It was during these years that he began to explain the form of society he saw emerging once the Charter had been attained. 'I was for a long time . . . unwilling to attach any proposition to the Charter', he wrote in 1849, 'but I now see the absolute necessity of something more . . .'.⁴⁸

Cooper gave much thought to the establishment of home colonies, though, generally, this amounted to little more than absorbing and attempting to popularize ideas set out elsewhere. He envisaged a gradual resettlement programme, which would transform society. Three million families, Cooper believed, could be settled on fifteen million acres of wasteland over a period of years, apportioning five acres to each family. Such a massive programme of home colonization, however, could not be accomplished by the individual efforts of those who owned land. Legislation was required to repossess the wastelands.

744. See *PS*, as n.42, 9 June, 30 June 1849; T. Wemyss Reid, *Life of Rt. Hon. William Edward Forster*, 1, p.251. London: Chapman and Hall, 1888

45. See *Reasoner*, 7, p.276

46. See *Reasoner*, 5, pp.225–36

47. Thomas Cooper, ed. *The Land for the Labourers and the Fraternity of Nations: A Scheme for a New Industrial System, Just Published in Paris and Intended for Proposal to the National Assembly*. London: Wilson, 1848

48. *PS*, as n.42, 10 March 1849

'Parliament passes Enclosure Bills every session,' Cooper observed, 'They consider these . . . as the most proper and natural things in the world'.⁴⁹ Those who lived in home colonies would be tenants of the state. An initial loan would be required for agricultural implements and food, but this would be repaid. Home colonies, Cooper believed, would encourage sobriety and a desire for knowledge. 'You would have . . . schools, libraries, lectures, music, conversation, rational amusements and plenty of good food and clothing', he wrote, 'You could be happy then, surely . . .?'⁵⁰

During the years 1849-50 Cooper once again came to the fore of radical politics. The reason for this was his re-emergence, six and a half years after the demise of his last Chartist journal in Leicester, as an editor of radical publications. The *Plain Speaker* appeared first between January and August 1849, and was succeeded, between January and October 1850, by *Cooper's Journal*. The early issues of the *Plain Speaker* sold well. The first issue sold 7,000 copies, 3,000 in its first week; and after one week the second issue had sold 5,000 copies.⁵¹ The publisher of the *Plain Speaker* was Benjamin Steill, who had published the famous *Black Dwarf*. It was Steill in fact who had approached Cooper, and 'would not be said "Nay"'.⁵² Cooper was assisted in writing the journal by T. J. Wooler, but, at sixty-three, the former editor of the *Black Dwarf* turned out to be past his best. Published weekly at the price of one penny, the *Plain Speaker* was always a personal journal, making no attempt to speak generally for radical opinion. In summer 1849, for example, Cooper became, briefly, a parliamentary candidate for Leicester, and published in his journal his own radical programme.⁵³ The chief characteristic of the *Plain Speaker* during Cooper's editorship was a series of trenchant open letters to public figures, a form of journalism he made his own. The *Plain Speaker*, however, in due course encountered difficulties, handicapped by Steill's failure to publish on time. Cooper resigned as editor in August 1849; and within a few months the journal was no more.

Cooper conceived the idea of publishing a new cheap radical periodical soon after his resignation as editor of the *Plain Speaker*. *Cooper's Journal*, when it emerged in January 1850, enjoyed the same early success as his former publication. By early February it was selling over 5,000 copies a week, the first issue reaching 9,000.⁵⁴ Sales fell off thereafter, though by June the circulation was still 3,600 copies a week, sufficient to break even. Suspension of the journal during the summer, however, cost Cooper his readership: when publication was resumed in October sales had fallen to 2,000 copies a week, and Cooper, after just four issues, was compelled to call a halt. None of the small individual journals which sprang up during the late 1840s and early 1850s made a sustained profit. Like *Cooper's Journal*, sales can at best have been no more than a few thousand weekly. Some, such as the *Commonwealth*, published in May 1848 by H. F. Doyle, proved to be extremely short lived. Others, such as Harney's *Democratic Review*, which between June 1849 and September 1850 surveyed the affairs of the continent, survived a little longer than Cooper's publications. Cooper's answers to correspondents provides a small sample of the distribution of his periodical. Certainly it had a national readership, being purchased in over fifty different towns, including several in Scotland. Though *Cooper's Journal* had more contributors than the *Plain Speaker* (including the crippled Frank Grant and Samuel Kydd, a former member of the NCA executive), it was just as much a personal periodical. In

49. *PS*, as n.42, 10 March 1849

50. *PS*, as n.42, 24 March 1849

51. See *BI*, as n.26, Cooper to Tatlow, 1 February 1849

52. *BI*, as n.26, Cooper to Tatlow, 1 January 1849

53. See *PS*, as n.42, 9 June, 30 June 1849. Attempts earlier that year to put Cooper up as a candidate in Lambeth had come to nothing

54. See *CJ*, as n.28, 26 October 1850

the first issue Cooper launched his campaign for a Progress Union, intended to combine radical and educational activities.⁵⁵ His plan, however, caused little excitement in radical circles; and the role he envisaged for *Cooper's Journal* as the instigator of a new movement faded away.

The *Plain Speaker* and *Cooper's Journal* both provide a useful insight into the content of Cooper's radicalism. His dislike of the established church is prominent in his two journals, just as it had been in his writings as a journalist in Lincoln. In particular he attacked Henry Philpotts, Bishop of Exeter, a High Churchman, nepotist and extreme Tory, who had been burnt in effigy outside his own cathedral in 1831. He told the story of a neighbour who had been sold a rotten lobster and concluded: 'Bishop, is your religion like the Billingsgate fishwife's?'.⁵⁶ Another feature of Cooper's radical journalism in 1849-50 was his vituperation of the aristocracy. No longer were middle-class manufacturers identified as the prime enemy, as they had been in Leicester. Cooper's aversion to the aristocracy was based on their ownership of land. The wastelands, so much in need for the establishment of home colonies, were retained by the aristocracy for no better purpose than hunting and shooting. Moreover, this idle aristocracy were also in receipt of unmerited state pensions. Cooper set the radical tone of the *Plain Speaker* in the second issue with a very bitter attack on the Duke of Grafton, owner of several large estates and also in receipt of a pension in excess of £18,000;⁵⁷ and in subsequent issues of the journal and its successor censured other aristocrats.⁵⁸

Like most Chartists, Cooper had a deep concern for Ireland. He often lectured on 'The Wrongs of Ireland', detailing seven hundred years of repression which had begun with Henry II. The readership of *Cooper's Journal* were also confronted with the truth of British rule: in May 1850 Cooper published extracts from Spencer Hall's graphic *Life and Death in Ireland*, a first-hand account written in the wake of the famine.⁵⁹ The following year he visited Ireland himself, delivering nine lectures in Belfast. These did not prove to be very successful. Though the names of Mazzini and Blanc won him applause, the six points were received by his audiences 'with comparative indifference, I thought'.⁶⁰ Cooper's final lecture in fact ended in bitter argument. The cause was his rejection of the long established radical demand for the repeal of the Act of Union. Instead of separation, Cooper called on his audience to support Chartism: independence would lead to bloodshed, and, unlike the Charter, did not guarantee better government. The ultimate solution to Ireland's problems, Cooper believed, lay in the establishment of home colonies on the wastelands. 'Have no fears for a renewal of insurrection', he wrote in the *Plain Speaker*, 'if the means be thus vigorously taken to furnish . . . (Ireland's) inhabitants with profitable labour'.⁶¹ Cooper's opposition to separation for Ireland proved to be long term. In his old age, in an unusual intervention in politics, he made clear his opposition to Home Rule.⁶²

During the decade after his release from prison Cooper was a freethinker. Anti-clericalism had long been a cause he espoused, but in these years he came to believe that Christianity

55. See *CJ*, as n.28, 5 January 1850

56. *PS*, as n.42, 23 June 1849. Also see *ibid.*, 24 February, 17 March, 28 April, 4 August 1849; *CJ*, 5 January, 2 February, 23 March 1850

57. *PS*, as n.42, 27 January 1849

58. See *PS*, as n.42, 2 June 1849; *CJ*, 30 March 1850

59. See *PS*, as n.42, 4 May, 11 May 1850

60. *Leader*, 23 August 1851

61. *PS*, as n.42, 20 January 1849

62. See *The Times*, 16 July 1892: 'I shall not vote at the city election because I agree with neither of the candidates. The Tory candidate knows perfectly well that the old Chartist prisoner cannot vote for him. I cannot vote for the Liberal candidate because, as far as my perception reaches, it would be voting in the dark . . . Lately Mr Gladstone has invented a new phrase. He proposes to give Ireland a "statutory parliament"—but what is that? . . . Why do the Irish want a separate parliament? It will only help to make us more and more of a divided instead of a united kingdom.'

itself ought to be subject to rational scrutiny. The importance of this rejection of orthodox Christianity by Cooper must be recognized. For much of his life he had been very religious. He had experienced religious lapses before, but his advocacy of freethought in the late 1840s and early 1850s amounted to much more. It was a very significant break with his own past, comparable with his conversion to the Chartist cause in 1840. After his return to Christianity in the mid-1850s Cooper identified several reasons for his conversion to freethought: in particular he emphasized his arguments with the Methodists in the 1830s, the terrible poverty he had witnessed in Leicester, and his two years' imprisonment.⁶³ 1843 in fact marked the greatest personal crisis of Cooper's life. His leadership of the Leicester Chartists had ended in his own imprisonment, and the hardship of the stockingers had not been at all alleviated. Moreover, in prison he was at first harshly treated, and he knew that, in Leicester, his wife, like those of so many imprisoned Chartists, faced considerable suffering. The anguish surrounding his imprisonment clearly played a vital role in Cooper's conversion to freethought. It must also be recognized, however, that after 1845 he was sustained in his new views by a growing intellectual conviction that they were correct.

Though Cooper's opinions during the period he aligned himself with the freethought movement did not remain exactly constant, he managed to be reasonably consistent. It is clear that he was never an atheist. For Cooper there could be no certain denial of the existence of God. He made this clear in a lecture delivered in August 1849 on the life of Hetherington who had reaffirmed his disbelief just before his death.⁶⁴ The lack of direct evidence for the existence of God nonetheless was to assume varying degrees of importance for Cooper throughout the years he was a freethinker.

Freethought was predominantly a movement of intellectuals and this must, in part, explain some of the attraction for Cooper. He derived his intellectual justification for his opinions from a variety of sources. He had read the works of such eighteenth-century freethinkers as Thomas Woolston and Thomas Chubb, and had lectured about them. The two men who exerted the greatest influence in shaping the form of freethought however, were Thomas Paine and Owen. Paine was another of Cooper's heroes. The *Age of Reason*, which denied that the Bible was the word of God, assumed great significance for him. The book had superseded the works of earlier writers. 'Why do they cease to be read?', Cooper asked, 'Because Paine put them on the shelf'.⁶⁵ The strength of the *Age of Reason*, he argued, was that in its attack on superstition it was both to the point and easily understood by all: ' . . . it spoke such unmistakable mother English, it grasped the old serpent Superstition by the neck and gave him such a severe handling—that no man disposed to think for himself could be at a loss to understand the meaning & to feel the force of the book'.⁶⁶ It is clear that Cooper saw the freethought movement in the late 1840s and early 1850s as, at heart, a continuation of the Paine tradition. He did, however, also sympathize for a time with the theories of Owen, though, in common with other radicals who were partly influenced by them, he was never a declared follower. The central tenet of Owen's philosophy was that the character of man was formed for him by the power of circumstances. This directly contradicted the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, and for freethinkers such as George Jacob Holyoake and Robert Cooper assumed great importance. Cooper also accepted this view, though not, as he pointed out in a lecture in October 1849, wholeheartedly.⁶⁷

Cooper seems to have placed greater emphasis on the work of the German theologian, David

63. See *Reasoner*, 23, p.234

64. See *Reasoner*, 7, p.153

65. HBRL, as n.4, Lecture by Cooper on Thomas Paine, 29 January 1854

66. HBRL, as n.4, Lecture by Cooper on Thomas Paine, 29 January 1854

67. See *Reasoner*, as n.19, 7, pp.274-82

Freidrich Strauss, than any other working class freethinker. It is true that Robert Cooper drew on Strauss's *Leben Jesu*, translated by Marian Evans (George Eliot) in 1846, when writing his *Infidel's Textbook*, but this was one of many sources: it was left to Cooper to popularize Strauss's arguments in the lecture halls of London. The core of *Das Leben Jesu* was a denial of the historical value of the Gospels, and of the supernatural role attributed to Jesus. Cooper, a former Methodist preacher with a detailed knowledge of the Gospels, read the translation soon after its publication and was entirely won over. In the winters of 1848-49 and 1849-50 he delivered two series of lectures on Gospel History, though these in fact amounted to little more than summaries of *Das Leben Jesu*.⁶⁸ Nonetheless the lectures do confirm Cooper's distinct role in the freethought movement. Unlike some freethinkers, he was convinced of the proven existence of Jesus; and, moreover, to the astonishment of Holyoake, believed fervently in the beauty of his character. 'I care not whether this be language other freethinkers do not like to hear', Cooper declared, 'Let them think in their way, and I will think in mine'.⁶⁹ Cooper's participation in the freethought movement was therefore very much on his own terms. Though well known as a metropolitan freethinker, he never became a leader of national standing. On only one occasion, in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1850, did he lecture on freethought outside London.

Cooper was not, of course, the only important Chartist who quarrelled with O'Connor and who, in the years which followed, ploughed his own furrow. William Lovett and O'Brien were two other Chartist leaders whose careers ran roughly parallel to Cooper's. Unlike McDouall, who a few years after his quarrel with O'Connor was back on the NCA executive, there was, for these three men, no turning back. Lovett in fact was inconspicuous as a Chartist after his break with O'Connor. Declining the post of NCA general secretary in 1843, he devoted himself in subsequent years to educational activities and re-emerged only briefly in 1848 with his People's League. O'Brien, however, like Cooper, remained a staunch Chartist in spite of his disagreements with O'Connor. His journals may have condemned the Land Plan on ideological grounds, but they also continued to argue strongly for the six points (and more). Though Cooper and O'Brien were not in these years mainstream Chartists, they both helped, in their different ways, to keep interest in reform alive into the 1850s. O'Brien in fact remained active in the radical cause almost until his death in 1864. Cooper's radical career, however, came to an end in the mid-1850s. One Chartist who heard Cooper lecture on the Crimean War in 1856, just a few weeks before he announced his rediscovery of Christianity, could not hide his disappointment: 'I soon saw . . . that Thomas Cooper was not the Thomas Cooper of 1842 when he was speaking so energetically for the poor, downtrodden masses . . . Now he speaks not of the working classes at all'.⁷⁰

Abbreviations

NCA	National Charter Association
NPFRA	National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association
PCU	People's Charter Union

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68. See *CJ*, as n.28, 5 January–26 October 1850

69. *Reasoner*, 16, p.375

70. *People's Paper*, as n.4, 5 January 1856