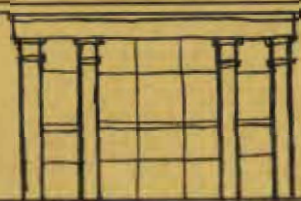


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IN THE AGE OF THE CHARTISTS



by
PETER SEARBY

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COVENTRY POLITICS IN THE AGE OF THE CHARTISTS 1836 - 1848

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FOREWORD

I have been asked, as President of the Coventry Branch of the Historical Association, to write a foreword to this pamphlet. I am particularly pleased to do so, since this is the first publication of a series to be undertaken by the Branch. The purpose of the series is to encourage local members in their research by giving them the opportunity to publish their papers, and to make available to a wider public information which will be of value and interest, but is not easily obtained. It is an honour to be elected President of such an active and forward-looking Branch, and I have great pleasure in wishing this new venture the support and success it fully deserves.

K. J. BALL.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay is based very largely on the books, pamphlets and microfilm of the *Coventry Standard* in the Coventry and Warwickshire Collection. My grateful thanks go to Miss A. Lynes, Librarian of the Collection, for the unstinting help and advice she has given me. I have also consulted material in the Coventry Record Office and the files of the *Coventry Herald* in the possession of the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*. I wish to thank Miss D. Leech, the City Archivist, Mr. J. A. Harrison, the Editor of the *Telegraph*, and Mrs. T. Russell, its Chief Librarian, for their great kindness in making this material available to me.

P.S.

In the 1830s a traveller approaching Coventry from Birmingham would journey through fields for a long time after crossing the present city boundary at Allesley; he would meet the edge of the town at Spon End, and from there to the other edge on the Leicester road at Gosford Green was little more than a mile. In the other direction the town was even narrower; it stretched from Swanswell to the boundary of the Park at Cheylesmore. The new suburb of Hillfields, whose construction began in the 1830s, was at first separated by several fields from the main part of the town. In Coventry lived some 30,000 people, most of whom depended upon the manufacture of silk-ribbons and watches. After 1832 over 3,500 men had votes, which made Coventry into one of the most popular borough constituencies.

Informed interest in affairs was limited to a smaller number, however, since each of the two weekly newspapers had a circulation of between 600 and 800. The Conservative *Coventry Mercury* was renamed the *Coventry Standard* after being taken over in 1836 by the Coventry Newspaper Company. Its principal shareholder, and editor of the paper for the next twenty years, was George Eld. In addition he was successively a corn miller, a silk dealer and a silk dyer; his businesses prospered, as did the newspaper. He was also a painter in oils and water colours of considerable distinction, and a talented antiquary: as last mayor of the unreformed corporation he was responsible for restoring St. Mary's Hall from the dilapidated state which resulted from centuries of neglect. Eld was a devout Anglican and the intellectual leader of Coventry Conservatism. Until the 1840s he prophesied disastrous results from the 1832 Reform Bill and the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. To Chartism, Owenism, free trade, negro slavery, child labour and the cruelties of the New Poor Law his opposition never moderated: nor did it to the Dissenters and Roman Catholics who sought to abridge the privileges of the Church of England, nor to the *Coventry Herald*—on which he lavished his considerable powers of abuse. (1)

The *Herald* supported the Dissenters and the cause of reform; it would be best described as a moderate Radical paper, in favour of advance beyond the point reached in 1832 but hating the Chartists. For most of our period the *Herald* was owned by the Merridew family but in 1846 it was sold to Charles Bray, who became the paper's editor. Bray was the luminary of the left, though not its leader. A silk-ribbon manufacturer with none of Eld's business ability, he neglected trade for politics and intellectual pleasures: he mixed phrenology, determinism, deism, Owenite Socialism and new sciences like psychology and sociology into an original and tedious philosophy. Bray accounted himself a failure in politics and mentioned his indiscretion in telling the truth when it was inexpedient to do so as one of the causes. This characteristic could be better

(1) *Gentleman's Magazine*, December 1862.

described as lack of common sense. Like many rational people, he hoped for far too much from intellectual suasion: this led him into asinine errors, like attempting to get a meeting of Chartists to agree that the time was not ripe for universal suffrage. Yet he was a highly intelligent man, and wrote for the *Herald* farsighted and profound leaders on the condition of England question, on penal reform, on the lessons of Chartism. He also gave as good as he got in the constant verbal battle with the *Standard*.

The differences between the newspapers reflected differences in Coventry society which as so often in the 1830s and 1840s sprang largely from religious conflicts. Protestant Dissent and political Radicalism were closely identified, as were Anglicanism and Conservatism. Many Anglicans were Whigs and a few even Radicals; many Dissenters were Whigs and some even Conservatives—as were usually, for example, most of the Wesleyans. (2) But the political views of the Dissenting and Anglican clergy at least were sharply distinct. As the Vicar of Holy Trinity wrote: 'If the clergy are too much inclined to Toryism, the Dissenting ministers are to radicalism and some of the Dissenting meeting-houses in this city are, every Sunday evening, converted after service into political debating societies'. (3) It is significant, too, that every prominent Conservative was like Eld an Anglican, and that nearly all leading Radicals were either devout Dissenters or had Dissenting backgrounds, even though in some cases they had moved away from them. Charles Bray was in this respect, as in others, an exception, since as a young man he had been an Evangelical Anglican, but even he had been much influenced by a Methodist schoolmaster as a young boy, and wrote 'Before I was twelve the fundamental principles of both my Philosophy and Religion were laid'. (4) His close friend James Sibley Whittam, currier and keen amateur geologist, was described by George Eliot as 'an ultra-Liberal, a man who has never kept rank and file, a lecturer for the Mechanics' Institute, an ardent lover of science, an amiable being as to his fellowmen, the frequent description, strange to say, of one who, from orthodox profession, has apostatized, first to Socinianism, next to an ism that assumes itself competent and commissioned to supply the deficiencies of the Bible if not to supersede it. (She meant Owenism). The whole family are Dissenters.' (5) John Colier Farn was even more Radical: an earnest Unitarian ribbon-weaver with little formal schooling, he worked desperately at educating himself, spending three weeks preparing his first public speech, which was three minutes long and given at a

(2) *Coventry Herald*, 17 June 1836.

(3) W. R. W. Stephens, *The Life and Letters of Walter Farquhar Hook* (London, 1878), ii, p. 261.

(4) Charles Bray, *Phases of Opinion and Experience during a Long Life* (London, N.D.), pp. 3 seq.

(5) *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1954-5), i, p. 90: GE to Maria Lewis, 20 May 1841.

teetotal meeting. He became an Owenite Socialist lecturer, and it seems, a schoolteacher in Liverpool, returned to weaving again in 1843, left it again at the industry's collapse in 1860, became a journalist and edited the *Coöperative News* for a time, and died in Manchester in 1881. (6) Equally prominent in local affairs was William Taunton, a Congregationalist, a teacher in Vicar Lane Sunday School, a market-toll collector, a Chartist who for a time thought of the use of physical force, an Owenite Socialist who never ceased to be a Christian too, the manager of the first coöperative store in Coventry from its foundation in 1840 to its collapse in 1843. (7)

These last two were not members of the town council, but Whittam was among the 28 Dissenters (out of 48 members, including aldermen) in the first reformed corporation in 1836. All 28 were Radicals or Whigs, and mostly Radicals. The other 20 were Anglicans; four of them composed the small Conservative group on the council and the rest were reformers. Prominent among the Anglican Liberals was Abijah Hill Pears, a silkman who married Charles Bray's sister Elizabeth and who was George Eliot's neighbour in Bird Grove.

Pears was for some years accountant churchwarden at Holy Trinity. He thus suffered in a particularly acute form the conflict of loyalties that worried Anglican Liberals: their Dissenting allies resented church rates bitterly, especially since in the parishes of St. Michael's and Holy Trinity the incumbents' stipends were paid by special vicars' rates too. The Dissenters often held meetings in 1836 and 1837 to petition Parliament to abolish church rates, which of course Parliament as yet refused to do. Thomas Stephenson, the Wesleyan minister, declined to join the movement: 'I should feel no objection to join with any class of Christian ministers.....to promote the better observance of the Sabbath—the right use and occupancy of Presbyterian Chapels—the doing away with Gin palaces, Beer shops, etc.—to prevent the support given to Popery by the annual grant to Maynooth College and etc., for the education of Popish Priests—to stop the iniquitous sports of horse-racing, bull-baiting, etc.'. (8) But he would not support the abolition of church rates. All the other Dissenting ministers did and a leader in the campaign was John Sibree, the minister of Vicar Lane Independent Chapel. He was prepared to go beyond mere petitioning and in many speeches and a pamphlet published in 1836 Sibree advocated refusal to pay. (9) He did not carry all his colleagues with him:

(6) *Coventry Herald*, 23 April 1847. *Jubilee History of the Coventry Perseverance Coöperative Society* (Coventry, 1917), pp. 30 seq.

(7) *ibid.*, p. 22. *Coventry Standard*, 28 June 1839.

(8) *Coventry Herald*, 4 June 1836.

(9) *The Law of Church Rates Explained and the Duty of Dissenters Recommended* (London, 1836).

Henry Wreford of the Unitarian Great Meeting House in Smithford Street counselled moderation moderately, and James Pickering of Bond Street Chapel, Nuneaton, replied to Sibree's pamphlet with a very acrimonious one of his own. (10) Sibree perhaps won the intellectual debate but lost the battle. Distress warrants were issued against him and his allies several times, and, for example, four chairs, a table and dozen books were seized from Sibree by the chief constable in person in settlement of a 6s. rate-debt, and 28½lbs. of loaf sugar from Richard Hands, a Radical Dissenting town councillor. (11) But these were isolated moral victories for Dissent. As David Buckney, a ribbon-weaver turned ribbon manufacturer, a Radical Dissenter and a Chartist lamented in 1847, 'not more than six men in Coventry have been distrained upon for non-payment of church rates.' (12) Most Dissenters in Coventry preferred to pay their few shillings and enjoy a quiet life.

The alternative tactic to refusing to pay was to try to vote down the proposed rate at the vestry meeting. Here again the Coventry Dissenters were not usually successful, because they were either insufficiently numerous or insufficiently militant. The attempt to do this at St. Michael's vestry meeting in September 1837 was typical of several. The Dissenting ministers gave notice of the meeting in their chapels and in some cases, it seems, the rate arrears of members of their congregations were paid out of chapel funds to enable them to attend the vestry meeting. When one of St. Michael's churchwardens, Charles Woodcock, a leading Conservative, moved a rate of 6d., J. T. Bannister, minister of Whitefriars Lane General Baptist Chapel spoke against the rate and Richard Hands moved the adjournment, asking for the support of the Radical churchmen present. The 6d. rate went to the poll and despite all their efforts the Dissenters lost by 278 votes to 379. (13)

After 1838 even the militant Dissenters ceased very largely to fight the church-rate battle, but an issue remained to embitter constantly the relations of Church and Dissent. They ran rival cultural establishments in Coventry. The Mechanics' Institution claimed in its constitution to be strictly impartial: all religious and political books and discussions were to be strictly excluded. 'Here no party symbols can be displayed and no political dogmas shall be broached.' (14) But in fact from the first the great majority of its committee members were Radicals and Dissenters. Its ordinary membership was equally Radical—and later in the period Chartist and Owenite. Early in the history of the institution the Anglican minority of its

- (10) *A Letter to the Rev. J. Sibree* (Nuneaton, 1836).
 (11) *Coventry Herald*, 11 August 1837. *Coventry Standard*, 26 January 1838.
 (12) *Coventry Standard*, 3 October 1847.
 (13) *ibid.*, 29 September 1837.
 (14) *Address from the Provisional Committee of the Coventry Mechanics' Institution* (September, 1828).

membership had increased the Radical preponderance by leaving. They had found that the prohibition against political books and discussions was not observed—that, for example, there were books by Robert Owen in the library. (15) So some disgusted Anglican Sunday-school teachers took their complaint to one of the most remarkable Coventrians of the day, Walter Hook, Vicar of Holy Trinity from 1828 to 1838 and then Vicar of Leeds. Mercurial, eccentric, xenophobic ('For all I can see, foreigners are all fools'), Hook was also a cultivated, humane, well-loved man: a High Tory who disapproved of the 1832 Reform Bill but refused to oppose it openly lest he involve himself in party disputes: a keen supporter of the social legislation of the 1830s and 1840s: a High Anglican on the fringes of the Tractarian movement: when he had left Coventry a parishioner said 'He was the beginning of all things here; he set everything a-going'. (16) He started evening services in Holy Trinity, an infant school, the Self-Supporting Dispensary, a savings bank, and, at the request of the disgusted Sunday-school teachers, the Coventry Religious and Useful Knowledge Society in May 1835. This too was said to be entirely neutral in politics and even in religion. There was no doctrinal test for admission and the *Standard* said: 'It offers a banquet where Whig, Tory and truly reforming Radical may intermingle for good'. (17) But in fact by the constitution of the society the committee consisted almost entirely of all the Anglican clergymen of the area, and its lay supporters were nearly all Tory Anglicans. (18) So while the *Standard* attacked the 'violent Dissenters in religion and Ultra-Radicals in politics' who formed the 'head and tail' of the Mechanics' Institution, the *Herald* pointed out that 'there is not a work in the (society's) library of a liberal tendency;.....there is no antidote to the political poison contained in *Blackwood*.' (19)

Unfortunately, soon after the initial enthusiasm complaints about declining membership and subscriptions were heard at the annual general meetings of both societies. The committees had to go no further than their own prospectuses to find the reason. The constitution of the institution announced: 'The members.....will have no sympathy to lavish on fictitious works of sorrow.....they cannot interest themselves in any but the best authenticated facts, and therefore novels and plays will be carefully excluded from the library'. (20) Because of Hook's great love of English literature the religious society was more liberal in this respect and the library contained the great classics. But only an exceptional ribbon-weaver or

- (15) *Coventry Standard*, 5 November 1841.
 (16) W. R. W. Stephens, *op.cit.*, i, p. 174.
 (17) *Coventry Standard*, 1 September 1837.
 (18) W. R. W. Stephens, *op. cit.*, i, pp. 180 seq.
 (19) *Coventry Herald*, 29 April 1836. *Coventry Standard*, 8 October 1841.
 (20) *Address from the Provisional Committee*.

watch-maker would care after twelve hours at the bench to attend a course of twelve lectures 'On the various branches of Experimental Philosophy' at the religious society or six on 'Vegetable Physiology' at the institution. The two societies languished; the Mechanics' Institution fell badly into debt in building new premises in Hertford Street. They were merged in 1855, when the bitter wrangles of two decades before had subsided, under the title of the Coventry Institution. (21)

The Dissenters could at least look to Coventry's two M.P.s to put their case—one with warmth, the other with heat. Since 1818 (with a gap from 1826 to 1830) one of Coventry's two M.P.s had been Edward Ellice, a Whig. He was to sit for Coventry till his death in 1863 at the age of 82. His biography has never been written, despite the presence of 6,000 items of correspondence in the National Library of Scotland. This is perhaps because his tiny handwriting is almost illegible: but it is very unfortunate, since he was an influential politician and it will be regrettable if he continues to be mentioned merely in footnotes in books about other people. Ellice was born in Canada and despite his being educated at Winchester and Aberdeen University and his involvement in British politics and society he always remained a Canadian; early in his career he spent much time colonising his large landed estates in Canada and New York and was a deputy governor of the Hudson's Bay Company till his death. Ellice was a great francophile too—the friend of Thiers, Guizot and Prosper Mérimée; as the *Standard* with justice remarked, 'He is more often in Paris than Coventry'. (22)

Ellice married a Sister of Earl Grey; he soon rose in the Whig party. In November 1830 he was appointed Secretary to the Treasury and Government Whip; he ran the party's campaign in the 1831 general election and helped to steer the Reform Bill through the House of Commons. His business interests forced him to resign his post in 1832 and with one short exception he did not hold office again. But he remained very influential with the Whig leadership, undertaking many of the negotiations which preceded the formation of Whig governments and playing a leading role in the creation of the Reform Club, whose first chairman he was.

Ellice was known as 'the Bear' in the House of Commons, 'for his wiliness', Carlyle says, though others say because of his appearance. He was of medium height and fat, with a round face, a dark brown fuzz on cheek and chin, large hands and a husky voice. He was an ideal whip and politician: intelligent but unintellectual, extroverted, friendly, cheerful, unsnobbish, thick-skinned, tough and rich. (23)

(21) Benjamin Poole, *Coventry: its History and Antiquities* (Coventry, 1870), p. 327.

(22) *Coventry Standard*, 31 March 1837.

(23) *Dictionary of National Biography*.

He needed to have all these attributes—particularly the last two—to fight elections in Coventry. Before the Reform Bill the electorate was one of the largest in Britain; all men who had qualified to be freemen by serving seven years' apprenticeship to one trade and had paid the £1 3s. 6d. stamp duty on admission to the freedom were entitled to vote; there were thus about 3,000 electors. Coventry was also one of the most turbulent boroughs in England, partly because of the unreformed corporation's interference in elections. Thus in 1826 Ellice and his Whig colleague were defeated in a campaign of unexampled violence when a mob openly organised and led by the corporation, including the mayor, attacked them and their supporters and prevented them from voting. It is only fair to add that Ellice's mob gave as good as they got and that the 1832 election, when the unreformed corporation had reformed itself and had ceased to interfere in elections, was the most violent yet, because Ellice and his colleague, Henry Lytton Bulwer, recruited 50 bullies to prevent the Tories from voting. The 50 included bricklayers, navvies and two pugilists—one called the 'Chicken Butcher'. They were paid 5s. a day and given as much to drink as they wanted. One of them said of the Tory voters, 'We cut them down and kicked them about like a football'. Ellice and Bulwer won the election. This was the last violent contest. The details are hidden but Ellice and his allies and adversaries agreed after 1832 not to attempt violence. The corporation took no chances; in 1833 1,000 special constables were sworn in—one for every four voters. (24)

Ellice was a Radical in his youth but a Whig after 1830; he stood near Russell and Palmerston in his political views and wanted no further advance beyond the electoral reforms of 1832. But for a long time there had been many Radicals in Coventry. They were active in the troubled years after 1815 and in the 1820 election William Cobbett polled 517 votes out of 2,016. In the early 1830s a branch of the Birmingham Political Union was active in the cause of reform. After 1832 Coventry remained a popular, working-class constituency; the freeman franchise remained and freemen voters outnumbered greatly the £10 householders enfranchised in 1832. In 1836 there were 3,086 freemen voters and 576 £10 householders; in 1848 the figures were 3,387 and 626. In 1835 the Coventry Radicals brought forward their own candidate, William Williams, in opposition to Ellice. Bulwer pointed out that a third reform candidate would lessen the chances of the other two without standing a chance of winning himself. Bulwer tried to get Williams to stand down but he refused. Ellice could not be asked because he was in Naples recuperating from illness while his brother ran his campaign. Bulwer, sure in any case of a seat in St. Marylebone, therefore stood

(24) T. W. Whitley, *The Parliamentary Representation of the City of Coventry* (Coventry, 1894), pp. 254 seq.

down himself and called upon all Coventry Liberals to work together for the return of Ellice and Williams. A letter from Thomas Attwood, the Radical M.P., praising Ellice as the best of the Whig ministers, argued for the same end. (25) Although Williams and Russell Ellice protested to the end that their campaigns were independent they did not attack each other's cause and it is clear that an 'underhand coalition', as the *Mercury* called it, was made. At the poll Ellice's and Williams's supporters generally voted for the other and by a strange quirk Williams attracted in addition 546 votes from the supporters of Morgan Thomas the Tory candidate; this tactic, springing from their dislike of Ellice and deprecated by both the *Mercury* and *Herald*, placed Williams at the head of the poll with 1,865 votes. Ellice was a poor second with 1,601, beating Thomas by only 35 votes. (26)

William Williams had left school at twelve, and his village in Wales at sixteen to seek his fortune in London. In a few years he had learned French and German at night school; by 24 he was earning £1,000 a year; in twenty years he had amassed a fortune as a cotton broker and began to spend it in politics—entering the Court of Common Council in 1833 as a Radical. Williams was not frivolous. His favourite authors were David Hume and Adam Smith. He never married or became part of London society. He had no sense of humour. His speeches lacked polish. They were, however, cogent and informative, and after he entered Parliament his annual criticism of the budget was carefully listened to. He was a close associate of Joseph Hume and like him pressed continually for financial retrenchment. Reducing the size of the army and other 'enormous establishments for the pauper families of the aristocracy' was always a prominent feature of Williams's election addresses in Coventry. He was also against the Corn Laws, newspaper stamp-duties, the oppressive clauses of the Poor Law Amendment Act, and church rates—though he always emphasised that he was an Anglican. Above all, he stressed the need for further electoral reform: the secret ballot, household suffrage 'at least', limiting Parliaments to three years 'at most'. (27)

This detailed plan of reform contrasted strongly with Ellice's studiously vague addresses, which after promising respect for the 'principles of civil and religious liberty' ended by praising the 'settled institutions of our country' and promising not very much. He was in favour of abolishing church rates—but only if compensation was

(25) *Coventry Herald*, 2 January 1835.

(26) *Coventry Herald*, 9 January 1835. *Coventry Standard*, 10 January 1835. *A Correct Copy of the Poll* (Coventry, 1835).

(27) Daniel Evans, *The Life and Work of William Williams, M.P.* (Llandyssul, 1939), *passim*. This is a work of hagiography: there is no satisfactory life of Williams, and no entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

paid. He declared himself to be 'open to conviction' on the ballot but in fact did not vote for it. Ellice did not visit Coventry from one election to another. Williams did so regularly—to give an annual account of his parliamentary conduct. He promised to resign between elections if his constituents demanded—a promise which really meant very little, since there was no machinery by which they could make their views known.

The chief party organisations were the Conservative and Liberal Registration Associations, which were formed soon after the 1832 act in Coventry as elsewhere to turn to party advantage the very complicated procedure laid down in the Reform Bill for registering voters. (28) Power in the associations lay in the hands of self-perpetuating cliques, subject to little or no popular election or control. Their function was to persuade their own supporters to go through the chore of registering their votes; to pay the 1s. registration fee for them if necessary, and the stamp duty of £1 3s. 6d. which Coventry men had to pay to become freemen before 1838; to support the claims to the franchise of their own supporters, while attacking those of their opponents, at the registration courts which were held in Coventry by two barristers every autumn. The registration associations tried to persuade the barristers that X did or, alternatively, did not, occupy a house of £10 annual value, or that Y, a Coventry freeman, did or did not live within seven miles of the constituency. This task was undertaken by party solicitors—William Wilmot for the Conservatives and Royle for the Liberals. Both men were town councillors. Preparing claims and objections and then fighting them in the revision court was a year-long task; the annual score of each party in the revision courts, in claims for supporters and objections to enemies allowed, was notched up in the newspapers. The revising barristers did not like coming to Coventry; they had to hear too many frivolous claims and objections. (29)

The compact made in 1835 continued in following elections; Ellice and Williams had so much to gain from the support of each other's voters and each other's dedicated party workers. The Liberal Registration Association had been founded in December 1836 to unite 'reformers of whatever shade of opinion'; when William Taunton had attempted to open a discussion on the divisive matter of the ballot the chairman, W. H. Pears, a silkman, had squashed him. (30) The association claimed in the revision courts for both Whigs and Radicals. At elections, however, the two candidates appeared and spoke separately in Coventry—Ellice from the balcony

(28) The Liberal Registration Association was formed in December 1836. *Coventry Herald*, 30 December 1836. The Conservative Association was formed at about the same time but I have been unable to discover the exact date.

(29) *Coventry Standard*, 6 October 1837.

(30) *Coventry Standard* and *Coventry Herald*, 30 December 1836.

of the Craven Arms and Williams usually in the yard of the Half Moon in St. Mary's Street. They mentioned each other rarely but when they did it was to indicate that while they differed in details their hearts were in the same place and that they approved of each other. In effect, they asked their supporters to vote for the other.

In 1837 however the coalition was threatened by a second Radical candidate, John Bell, the Chartist editor of the *London Mercury*, who insisted on standing although Buckney and the other members of Williams's committee begged him not to: they pointed out that if the Radicals gave Bell their second vote the Whigs would not vote for Williams and no Radical would be elected. But in fact Bell attacked Williams most strongly—'He has proved himself a mean, shuffling trimmer'—and asked to be elected to help to destroy 'our present infamous representative and commercial system'. He also asked his constituents to pay all the expenses of his election and a salary when he was a member. (31)

The *Herald*, naturally, was supporting 'the strong manly sense, the great talent, the long-trying and mature principles of Edward Ellice and the zealous, preserving supporter of popular rights, Mr. Williams'. Bell, they hinted, had support from the Tory leaders who were trying to break the Liberal alliance. This is customary election propaganda; it would be unwise to believe it without supporting evidence—and in fact none exists. But it is not surprising that the *Standard* should have played up alternately Bell's hatred of Williams, no doubt to split the Radical vote, and Williams's similarity to Bell, no doubt to break the Liberal alliance. In fact this held firm. Bell came bottom of the poll with 43 votes. The two Conservative candidates also lost. Ellice and Williams got 1,778 and 1,748 votes respectively, and the poll book shows that almost all the supporters of each voted for the other. (32)

The *Standard* attributed the Conservative defeat to 'the corrupt influence of the Treasury' and to 'the undue influence of certain Radical magistrates'. (33) This is the normal reaction of the defeated party in the 1830s and 1840s and there is in fact no supporting evidence for it. The Coventry elections of this period were quite different in tone from earlier contests. The new corporation did not interfere in elections and the agreement to refrain from violence that the candidates had made after the 1832 contest was adhered to. There is no real evidence of bribery either, Williams, like some other Radical M.P.s always declared that he was so pure that he would not even treat his supporters to free drinks. This was too exalted a claim and there was some treating for Radicals, mainly at the Half Moon,

(31) *Coventry Standard*, 7 July and 25 August 1837.

(32) *Coventry Herald*, 21 July 1837. *Coventry Standard*, 25 August 1837. *A Correct Copy of the Poll (Coventry, 1837)*.

(33) *Coventry Standard*, 28 July 1837.

as well as for Whigs and Tories elsewhere. (34) Williams, however, may not have known about the treating; agents were so powerful in these matters. In any case, treating was never so extensive as it had been in earlier days.

In January 1838 came the first sign of a split in the Whig-Radical alliance which had caused so vehement a repudiation of John Bell. A Political Union was formed in Coventry upon the model of the Chartist Birmingham Political Union. At the inaugural meeting in County Hall the Six Points were adopted as the basis for the union, and naturally men who had supported Bell in 1837 joined the union: Joseph Bradley, James Peters and Charles Eyre, who became Secretary. But many men who had worked for Williams also joined: Alderman William Mayo, a watch manufacturer who became the union's chairman, David Buckney, John Farn, William Taunton and John Warden, a plumber and glazier prominent in the anti-church rate movement. Thus men who had been allies of Ellice a few months before now attacked the Whigs: 'those very men from whom we expected so much, and who have promised so much, only to deceive', as Buckney described them. He had, he said, the transported Dorchester labourers, the Glasgow cotton spinners and the New Poor Law in mind. Lord John Russell and Daniel O'Connell 'talk of education but where are the people to get their backs clothed and their bellies filled? You must first give them their political rights and if they don't act, well then it will be their own fault.' (35)

Part of the cause of this new departure was the depression which Coventry like the rest of the country had suffered from in 1837. But after all the slump was ending in January 1838 and when it had been at its height so had the Whig-Radical alliance in Coventry. The beginning of Chartism in Coventry was related less to local conditions (which were not mentioned at the union's first meeting) than to general dissatisfaction with the Whig government's social policy. After January nothing more is heard of Chartism till the summer. Fergus O'Connor came to speak. His visit was preceded by the publication of a handbill entitled *The Righteous Cause of Universal Suffrage* which called on Englishmen 'to arouse yourselves or be degraded. The Grand Struggle has commenced; you must triumph or perish.' But in the event not more than 150 marched behind O'Connor to Greyfriars Green and not more than 500 heard him attack Ellice as 'one of the joints of my Lord Grey's tail' and advance the usual Chartist programme. (36)

In the following year the newspapers do not mention the apparently short-lived Coventry Political Union, but the widespread Chartist activity in Britain aroused enthusiasm in the Coventry leaders. Buckney and Taunton began to talk of the rightness of

(34) *Coventry Watchman*, 7 September 1850.

(35) *Coventry Herald*, 26 January 1838.

(36) *ibid.*, 7 September 1838.

physical force. Taunton would have preferred peaceful methods, but 'the Government never will concede anything till they are obliged through fear. However much I lament the destruction of property and the loss of life, it will always be the case till the working classes are raised up to a high standard of moral feeling, so that all that is to be obtained will be obtained by reason, not by force.' (37) But the audiences they addressed on Greyfriars Green and in the Royal Oak and Bell public houses, Foleshill, were all small. Nobody heeded Taunton's words: 'I recommend you to arm, so that if the government thieves come, they might have a warm reception'. (38)

The two Coventry newspapers and the solid body of opinion they represented, stretching from Tory to moderate Radical, disliked Chartism but detested and feared Owenism; it was the connection between the Chartist and the Owenite movements in Coventry which most angered them. The first mention of millennial Owenism in Coventry came in December 1837, when an Owenite Socialist missionary, Alexander Fleming, explained in the Mayor's Parlour the Owenite system of social organisation. The audience consisted of weavers, railwaymen and watchmakers—the earnest artisans who attended the Mechanics' Institution. There were two middle-class Owenites present—David Buckney and Charles Bray, who despite his antipathy to Chartism was, with some reservations, a follower of Robert Owen. (39) In the New Year several Owenite lectures in St. Mary's Hall drew inquisitive and critical audiences of 400 or 500 each. At length the mayor refused to allow the Owenites to hold any more meetings in St. Mary's Hall because of pressure put on him by Christian ministers of all denominations. (40) At the same time 60 or 70 Owenites, members of the Mechanics' Institution but unpopular with moderate Radicals there, resigned their membership. They called themselves the Coventry Universal Community Society and took rooms over a public house in Gosford Street. They included Buckney, Taunton and Farn and other men of Dissenting background, men like W. Hawkes Smith who regretted that some Owenites in Coventry tended towards deism and even unbelief, but was himself a Unitarian and thought Owenite 'morals are identical with those of Jesus Christ'. (41)

Most Coventrians did not think so, and in 1839 came the establishment's counter-attack on what the *Standard* called the 'filthy, obscene and atheistical tenets of an old sensualist called Owen'. (42) There was a public discussion for three evenings at St. Mary's Hall between Alexander Campbell, an Owenite missionary, and J. T.

(37) *Coventry Standard*, 29 November 1839.

(38) *ibid.*, 26 July 1839.

(39) Charles Bray, *op. cit.*, pp. 61 *seq.*

(40) *Coventry Herald*, 2 March 1838. *Coventry Standard*, 9 March 1838.

(41) *Coventry Standard*, 1 June 1838 and 5 November 1841.

(42) *ibid.*, 29 December 1839.

Bannister. On Bannister's committee were William Mayo and Edward Goode, an ex-ribbon weaver who was the secretary of the Coventry Weavers' Committee, a Dissenter and a keen supporter of Edward Ellice. On Campbell's committee were Farn and Taunton. The text of the debates as printed in the inevitable pamphlet fills sixty pages with minute print. The audiences got progressively larger and on the final evening the hall began to fill two and a half hours before the discussion began. The points at issue were: 'Is man responsible for his convictions, feelings and actions?' and 'Is the recognition of and belief in man's accountableness conducive to the morals and happiness of society?' Bannister advanced the usual arguments on free will and Campbell the Owenite determinist case. The really heated discussion, however, concerned the sexual implications of the Owenite utopia: 'If Robert Owen is to be the God of the New Moral World and his base proposals are reduced to practice, every woman will be a prostitute, every man a debauchee, and the world itself one universal brothel'. Afterwards Bannister was presented with a testimonial purse for £70—£10 more than his annual stipend at Greyfriars Lane—which was partly the profit from a 1s. 6d. tea organised by the wives of the Dissenting ministers of Coventry in St. Mary's Hall—a tea for which, we are told, some Anglicans had been happy to purchase tickets. (43) At the same time another pamphlet was published which tried to prove that both Campbell and Bannister had been wrong: the author called himself 'Jonathan Jonathan' but internal evidence suggests that he was really Charles Bray. Bray always stood alone. (44) Later in the year Anglicans and Dissenters joined together to organise a series of four lectures given in St. Mary's Hall by John Brindley, Headmaster of Oldswinford Hospital, Stourbridge, on the 'Errors of Socialism': the chair was taken alternately by the Vicar of Holy Trinity and Francis Franklin of Cow Lane Particular Baptist Chapel. (45)

There was, however, no permanent political re-alignment. In 1840 Chartism in Coventry abated and Owenism ceased to attract attention. The alliance between the Radicals and the Whigs had been seriously strained by the movement of many Radicals towards Chartism, but now the left was bound together anew by the issue of the Corn Laws. A Coventry branch of the Anti-Corn Law League was formed after two public meetings in St. Mary's Hall had been addressed by the league's lecturer, Acland. Its president was Abraham Herbert, a Unitarian, a Whig and ex-mayor; Charles Bray was vice-president. The secretary was Benjamin Poole, the editor of the *Herald*, chiefly famous for his history of Coventry. Buckney, Taun-

(43) *Socialism: Public Discussion between Mr. Alexander Campbell, Socialist Missionary, and the Rev. J. T. Bannister* (Coventry, 1839).

(44) *Socialism: A Commentary on the Public Discussion* (Coventry, 1839).

(45) *Coventry Standard*, 28 June 1839.

ton and Edward Goode were committee members. (46)

In the general election of 1841 the chief issues in Coventry were the Corn Laws and the related question of the duties on foreign silks. In 1824 the entire prohibition of imports of foreign silks had been altered to a high tariff of 30% by Huskisson. The *Standard* always referred to this tariff as 'free trade' and demanded the return of prohibition. It seized on and stressed throughout the 1841 campaign Bray's admission that after the Corn Laws the duty on silks would have to go too; and argued that anyway cheaper food would be valueless if wages were reduced, using another indiscretion of Bray's to show that the Manchester cotton men—'who work little children till their growth is stunted'—wanted to abolish the Corn Laws so that they could lower wages. (47) Thomas Weir, the Conservative candidate, agreed with the *Standard*. Ellice had not opposed Huskisson's measure of 1824 in principle, and afterwards had always refused to vote for the reintroduction of prohibition. 'We must recollect that Coventry is not the whole country.' (48) Both he and Williams, however, wanted the protective duties retained, and argued in 1841 that the sacrifice of the prohibition upon silk imports should now be followed by a compensating amendment of the Corn Laws: Ellice wanted their relaxation, Williams their abolition. (49) The election was a quiet one. The only excitement was provided by a Conservative who called out, 'Mind your bumps, Charlie', in allusion to Bray's phrenology, when he spoke against the Corn Laws from the balcony of the Craven Arms. A fitting anti-climax to polling day was supplied by the torrential rain that washed out the victory rallies of the Whigs and Radicals. Out of 3,789 electors 3,200 voted: 1,870 for Williams, 1,829 for Ellice, 1,290 for Weir. Once again the poll book shows that the Liberal alliance held firm. (50)

As distress returned, so did Chartism. 1842 was a recession year in Coventry, as elsewhere. There was considerable unemployment by December 1841 and when on New Year's Eve the usual all-party meeting was held to consider the raising of a relief fund David Buckney moved 'That it is the opinion of this meeting that the distress is attributable to the partial and unjust laws arising from the system of class legislation'. James Howells, Vicar of Holy Trinity, refused to put the resolution and the Chartists, attending in strength, prevented any further business by concerted uproar. The Conservatives, Whigs and moderate Radicals then left the meeting to the Chartists. (51)

(46) *ibid.*, 18 December 1840.

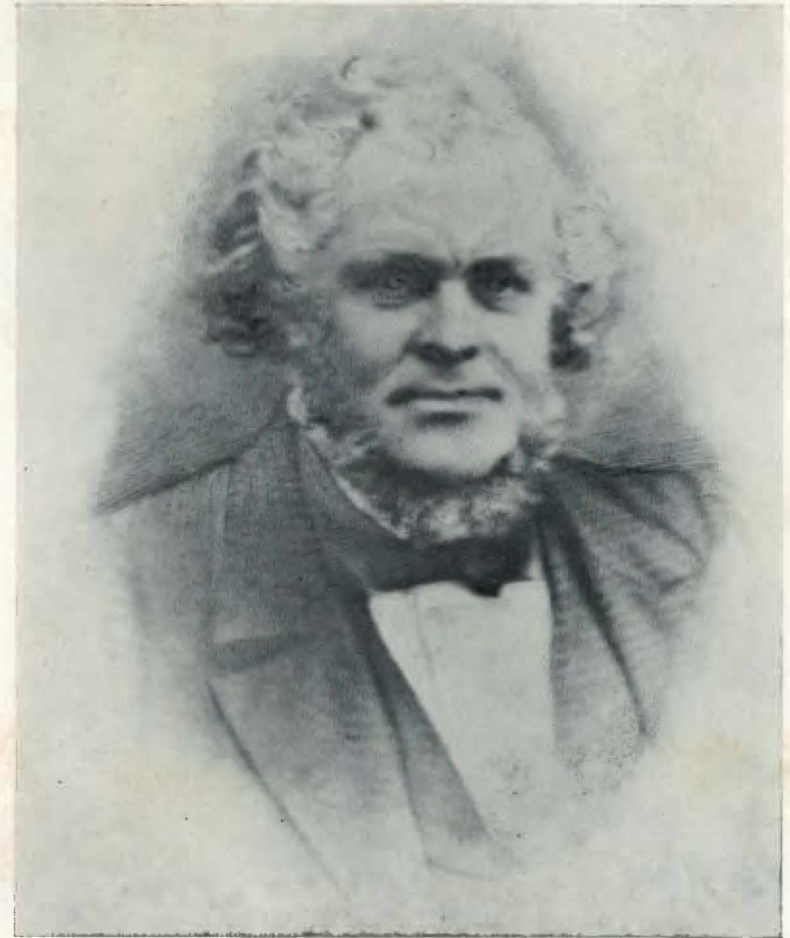
(47) *ibid.*, 8 March 1839 and 14 May 1841.

(48) *ibid.*, 12 May 1837.

(49) *ibid.*, 18 June 1841.

(50) *ibid.*, 25 June and 2 July 1841. *A Correct Copy of the Poll (Coventry, 1841)*.

(51) *Coventry v Standard*, 31 December 1841.



Charles Bray



Edward Ellice, M.P.



Rev. W. F. Hook

TO THE INDEPENDENT

FREEMEN

AND

ELECTORS

OF THE

CITY OF COVENTRY.

FELLOW-FREEMEN AND ELECTORS,

As a firm friend to the Old Blue Flag, that in our ancient city has for so many years "braved the battle and the breeze," I beg to call your attention to the disgraceful attempt that is now being made to form an unholy alliance—a base and corrupt coalition with the selfish and ignorant Yellow Party, who, having been beaten by us, time after time, in the glorious struggle for our local and national rights—our, reptile-like, crawl at our feet, and seek us to unite with them to return Mr. Ellice, (whom they despise but cannot defeat) with any tool they can find with gold enough to spend and power to enjoin the Old Blues into a belief that, like the penitent thief, in the last dying struggle of their existence, as a party, they have suddenly become converts of the base inequality of their political aims; and, with a cringing, fawning, coward-like spirit, imploring forgiveness, when they have no longer the power to sin. Is it possible to trust such men?—Can any reliance be placed in them?—Has not their whole existence, as a party, been marked with deceit, corruption, and every species of political vice and folly? Have they not for more than five-and-twenty years insinuated, misrepresented, abused, and bullied us? Did they not, in 1826, raise a false cry for their own base ends against Ellice and Moore? Did not the drums roll for hours?—Was not the gin-bottle forced into the mouths of hundreds of the poor imbeciles of this wretched faction to prevent the voices of poor old Peter and Mr. Ellice being heard?—Can you forget the men who hired the Navigators—having rank towards themselves—to intimidate you, and, by brute-force, to prevent you from the exercise of your dearest rights?

Is it not a fact, that at the very last election, money was actually subscribed for the base purpose of hiring bullies to bellow "No Ellice! No Ellice!!" when that gentleman was addressing the Freeman and Elec-

tors of this City?—Who can forget their vile and silly cry against any alteration of the Corn Laws? What did it do?—It brought the country to the verge of famine,—it caused thousands of the dear children of your fellow-countrymen to cry for bread; and when, at last, the loud voice of starvation was heard through the land—when the indignant scowls of a famishing people made mountains tremble and Europe stand aghast,—even then did this soulless, heartless, senseless faction raise every obstacle to the abolition of those laws against the admission of cheap food, and thereby proved their utter disregard to every principle of honour, justice, and humanity. Shall the Old Blues, who have fought for a party to establish great principles—to promote National and local reforms—shall they ally themselves with the corrupt rascals of this expiring faction? Shall they join a crew of political pirates, who would never sail on the ocean of politics, but for the purpose of plunder?—Shall they tarnish their honour in the hour of triumph? Shall all the struggles of the last quarter of a century against this hired gang of political miscreants be forgotten, if now we have secured political & commercial reform, by the hearty & disinterested support of such men as Ellice and Williams? Are we, as honest and hearty old reformers to disgrace ourselves in this way? I say, No! let my brother Blues, avoid this shallow trick; treat the traitorous souls of all who aid it with withering scorn, and instead of striving to bring them from life again, join heartily in the cause of Ellice and Williams, and thereby defeat this move to gain power, and prove to the Tories of this City that they are as powerless as they are worthless.

I beg, with great respect,

To subscribe myself,

A firm Friend to Ellice and Williams.

AND AN OLD BLUE OF 30 YEARS STANDING.

NO COALITION WITH THE YELLOWS!

Coventry, July 24, 1847.

S. KNAPP, PRINTER, THEATRE YARD, COVENTRY.

An unsuccessful appeal to the electorate, 1847

There was, too, increased activity by the Anti-Corn Law League. In Coventry as elsewhere, the league was a middle-class organisation. As Miss Lucy Brown has recently shown, the league coöperated only slightly with Chartists before 1841: but the Conservative victory in the general election made many leaguers feel that the support of Chartists would be valuable in the battle for repeal. (52) This was the case in Coventry—all the more understandably in view of the usual moderation of the Coventry Chartists. Buckney and Taunton were on the committee of the Coventry branch of the league, though in common with many other Chartists they believed that repeal had to be preceded by the enactment of the Charter so that the working class could ensure that it, and not only the middle class, gained the fruits of repeal. (53)

The first measure of coöperation between the leaguers and Chartists in Coventry occurred almost by accident and did not go well. Early in February 1842 the Chartists issued a handbill declaring their intention of attending a league meeting in St. Mary's Hall and of pushing the Charter there. The league committee, concerned, met Buckney, Taunton and John Warden. They were promised that if the Chartists would support repeal the league would support some extension of the franchise. Buckney and the others were satisfied with this but on the way home Taunton and Buckney met Peter Hoy, a silk-ribbon printer and one of the most militant Coventry Chartists, in Little Park Street. Buckney told Hoy what had happened and Hoy interpreted it to mean that the leaguers would support the Charter. Hoy told his friends so.

At the meeting the motion for total repeal was put but no mention was made of the Charter. Hoy and his friends at the back of the hall began to stamp their feet and shout. Taunton reprimanded them; he had, he said, completely repented of his wild words on Greyfriars Green in 1839. Hoy called out, 'What did you tell me last night in Little Park Street, David?' The uproar continued. Charles Bray attempted what he called a compromise resolution but in his usual way he only succeeded in making things worse. 'I am', he said, 'for universal suffrage'. Cheers followed. 'Stop, stop, allow me to qualify myself; I would have it so guarded that the masses should not have the preponderance, lest it should be to the discouragement of the distributive or middle classes.' There were cries of 'Oh'. At length the Chartists present would only permit the motion calling for repeal to be passed if another in favour of franchise extension were passed too and if the chairman of the meeting, John Sibree, agreed to join a deputation to the mayor to ask for the use of St. Mary's Hall to discuss the Six Points. (54)

The alliance which thus began so strangely was short-lived.

(52) *Chartist Studies*, ed. Asa Briggs (London, 1959), pp. 352 seq.

(53) *Coventry Standard*, 22 February 1839.

(54) *ibid.*, 18 February 1842.

Nationally, one of the leaders of the movement to establish coöperation between the league and Chartists was Joseph Sturge, the Birmingham Quaker and corn miller. In Coventry two Quaker leaguers were forthright in agreeing with Buckney and Taunton on the need for the Charter: they were Jacob Bright Browett, son of William Browett, a Cross Cheaping draper, and Joseph Cash the ribbon manufacturer. At least two Dissenting ministers declared themselves to be Chartists: John Watts of Cow Lane Particular Baptist Chapel and John Gordon, Wreford's successor at the Great Meeting House. Gordon was a Scot, educated at Dudley Grammar School, who had been successively an Anglican and a Wesleyan and was now a Unitarian. (55) In July Sibley Whitem, prominent in the league, wrote to the secretary of the Anti-Corn Law League in Manchester. 'Do urge upon the League the propriety and policy of leading the people.....the masses will not restrict their efforts to Corn Law repeal. Our language will be denunciation of aristocracy and class legislation, and defiance of the present House of Commons. Above all, impress upon the delegates that if they want the people at their back they must take up the Suffrage question'. (56)

But most Coventry Chartists refused to be led. A meeting in July was intended to unite leaguers and Chartists; Sibley Whitem was in the chair and Buckney and Taunton among the speakers for coöperation. But Peter Hoy argued against: 'My opinion of the Sturgeite movement is this—to get the working classes to come with them, they will tack the Charter to the tail; the Corn Law repeal will be the head, and the Chartist movement the tail. When they have agitated, the repealers expect the honourable house will allow the head to come in, but as soon as the Corn Law was in, the tail will be lopped off'. One of Hoy's supporters denounced Cobden, 'who has made his riches out of the poor in Manchester; how are his men off—starving in filthy cells. You have heard the landed aristocracy abused, but they were never so mean as these political hum-bugs'. In addition, Hoy repudiated the intellectual case for repeal. Buckney and Taunton followed Bronterre O'Brien in wanting repeal; on this topic Hoy and his friends were O'Connorites. Their Chartism was nostalgic, romantic, anti-industrial and in a sense reactionary. Hoy asserted that repeal would be a 'positive injury'; the current distress was the result not of the Corn Laws but of the introduction of machinery. It was vain for Buckney to oppose to this the usual repeal arguments or to stress his own solidarity with the working class: 'I am a manufacturer, a sort of go-between now, though I am with the working men as one of them'. It was useless for Gordon to deny that the middle class were tyrants. The motion calling for repeal was negated while one calling for the Charter was passed.

(55) *ibid.*, 22 July 1842. *Funeral Address by the Rev. Charles Beard, B.A. in memory of the Rev. John Gordon* (Coventry, 1880), pp. 17 seq.

(56) *Coventry Standard*, 10 November 1843.

The hostility to repeal and the league lasted: Hoy and his supporters, for example, were not convinced by the repeal arguments of Rattray, an earnest moral force Chartist chiné printer, in a debate in the Chartist rooms in Well Street early in 1843. (57) For all his dislike of the Tories, Hoy's arguments on the Corn Laws won the approval of the *Coventry Standard*, which praised his attack on the restless, progressive, pro-industry Radicals of the league. (58)

In August 1842, the time of general Chartist agitation in England, the Coventry authorities prepared to meet violence, especially since the Bedworth miners and some Coventry chiné printers struck over pay. Many special constables were recruited; the Warwickshire Yeomanry were mobilised and brought to the city to reinforce the regular cavalry at the barracks. Yet in fact once again there was no trouble. 250 Bedworth miners in column marched down the Foleshill Road to Greyfriars Green while the Coventry magistrates issued a proclamation that any disorder would be put down by force. On Greyfriars Green William Taunton advised non-violence and the miners went peacefully to Stivichall Grove and waited there for an evening demonstration. In the evening, while the magistrates and special constables waited for trouble in Hertford Street, 6,000 miners and Chartists listened to moderate speeches on Greyfriars Green and then dispersed. After this, the Bedworth miners did not come to Coventry again, but the following week a meeting of the chiné printers on Greyfriars Green was dispersed by the chief constable and a dozen assistants. They went to Stivichall Common, near the Six Closes, and their meeting there was entirely peaceful. (59)

Coventry Chartism faded away. A fresh attempt to bring repeal and Chartism together in the Complete Suffrage movement failed. In February 1843 120 turned up at Vicar Lane schoolroom for a Complete Suffrage meeting; by July only 40 could be induced to turn up and the next meeting was cancelled. (60) Mention of Chartism and Owenism disappears from the newspapers. The league too became moribund. Meetings were held in 1843, 1844 and 1845 but they were thinly attended and the league's chief activity was the attempt by one of their local agents, William Worthington of Cow Lane, to get Tory voters removed from the register at the revision courts—an attempt which seems to have been largely unsuccessful. (61)

Despite the lack for some years of Chartist activity the Coventry authorities took no chances in April 1848 when revolutions were occurring all over Europe and violence was feared in Britain. Later, in the town council, Buckney said that the commandant of the

(57) *ibid.*, 22 July and 18 November 1842.

(58) *ibid.*, 17 February 1843.

(59) *ibid.*, 26 August 1842.

(60) *ibid.*, 24 March and 7 July 1843.

(61) *ibid.*, 17 October 1845 and 2 October 1846.

11th Hussars in Coventry barracks, 'a very nervous individual' had been quite unjustified in recommending to the mayor the appointment of 600 special constables: 'not a single inhabitant was of the opinion that the peace of the town was in danger'. The man he slighted was the Earl of Cardigan, against whom many things have been alleged but Buckney is alone in accusing him of nervousness. Cardigan took reasonable precautions in 1848 but in the event they proved unnecessary. (62)

There was one meeting in the Chartist rooms in Well Street to 'receive communications relative to the Chartist movements connected with the Kennington Common gathering'; there were speeches by J. C. Farn and others and readings from the *Northern Star*. Farn was also the chief speaker at a meeting in St. Mary's Hall for 400 Chartists from Foleshill, with others from Kenilworth, Brndon and Bedworth. A gathering on Greyfriars Green was planned to petition the Queen to appoint a Chartist government, but only twelve Chartists turned up. The meeting was postponed but still only 100 quite peaceful Chartists attended. The only excitement came the day before the Kennington Common meeting, when Cardigan received a telegram from Wellington telling him to hold his troops ready to move to London at any time. Cardigan rode to Coventry station and within the hour a special train was ready with steam up to take 300 men and their horses to London. In the evening a second telegram came ordering a stand-down; it provided a suitable anti-climax to end Chartism in Coventry. (63)

Why was Coventry Chartism in general so moderate, so peaceful and so lacking in mass following? Professor Briggs has shown recently that the leaders who remained faithful to the Chartist movement through all vicissitudes were most often intelligent, respectable, self-educated men, frequently connected with Nonconformity and able to cooperate with middle-class organisations. (64) Buckney, Farn and Taunton are almost archetypes of this kind of man. The mass following of Chartism was as a rule drawn from depressed outdoor workers and factory operatives. Undoubtedly one reason for the absence of violent Chartism in Coventry was the paucity of factories there. Watchmaking was carried on exclusively in small workshops and so at this time was the greater part of the silk-ribbon industry. In 1838 4,088 looms in Coventry were owned by 1,868 weavers; 3,145 of these looms were worked by them and members of their families, and the rest by journeymen assistants. Only 598 looms were in factories or loom-shops and many of these were small establishments. (65) The weavers prized the small-scale structure of their industry; they demonstrated their fear by burning down the

(62) *ibid.*, 12 May 1848.

(63) *ibid.*, 7 April and 28 April 1848. *Coventry Herald*, 14 April 1848.

(64) *Chartist Studies*, ed. Asa Briggs, pp. 4 *seq.*

(65) J. Prest, *The Industrial Revolution in Coventry* (Oxford, 1960) p. 53.

first steam-powered ribbon factory in Coventry in 1831. (66) This helps I think to explain the O'Connorite Chartism so prevalent in Coventry in 1842—the dislike of industrialism and the Anti-Corn Law League. The small scale of Coventry's industry had another result: the great majority of Coventry's workmen lacked the incentive to concerted militant action that comes from working alongside thousands in large factories. The very economic independence of the Coventry worker would help to make him politically Radical: but it would also prevent him from demanding that profound change in the structure of society which militant Chartists like George Julian Harney were demanding elsewhere. In Coventry, it was still possible for a worker to become a master, as the career of David Buckney shows. Rattray's words on Stivichall Common at the height of the Chartist troubles in 1842 reflect this social mobility: 'the working classes are not the only meritorious individuals in society; they are working men from necessity, not from choice. There is a deal of credit due to the man who, by his industry, ingeniousness and economy raises himself from the lower ranks to the higher classes of society.' (67)

For the Coventry weavers and watchmakers lacked the economic spur to militant Chartism of other kinds of domestic worker like the destitute nail-makers of the Black Country, the stocking-frame knitters of Leicester or the hand-loom weavers of Manchester. These last were in desperate competition with steam-powered looms. In Coventry at this time the weavers were not suffering in the same way: partly because steam power was so little used, partly because even when it was the looms were not automatic and the skill of the weaver's hands was necessary. Steam power was not used at all in the watch trade. Nor did Coventry face real competition from elsewhere. With London and Prescot in Lancashire she shared a monopoly in the production of English watches—many of which were exported. Few foreign watches were imported. While other English towns helped to provide plain silk ribbons, Coventry had a virtual monopoly in the production of fancy ribbons for the middle and lower-class trade: and apart from the trade in very expensive ribbons the English silk-ribbon industry as a whole was safe from foreign competition. (68) The high tariff on foreign silks made living very easy for Coventry until the Cobden treaty of 1860. As the Handloom Weavers' Commission Report summed up in 1840: 'the great body of the trade is now confessedly exempt from the immediate pressure of foreign competition in the home market.' Though there were grumbles at the ending of complete prohibition, particularly in times of distress, in general the Coventry voters were well

(66) Joseph Gutteridge, *Lights and Shadows in the Life of an Artisan* (Coventry, 1893) pp. 32 *seq.*

(67) *Coventry Standard*, 26 August 1842.

(68) J. Prest, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

satisfied with the protection they got. This is proved by their returning Ellice time after time. In 1847 he got more votes than he had ever had before though in the previous year he had voted for the reduction of the duty from 30% to about 15%. (69) The Manchester hand-loom weavers earned no more than 5s. a week: in Coventry the 1,868 weavers mentioned earlier made between 10s. 6d. and 15s. 6d. a week each from one loom, and of course more if they owned more than one, as the great majority did. Even the journeymen, who were a small minority, earned at least 8s. Watchmakers received between 18s. and 30s. a week, carpenters 23s., masons 21s. (70) The chiné printers who struck in August 1842 were already earning between 20s. and 25s. a week. (71)

These wages—or rather the piece-work rates that effected them—were guaranteed against the fluctuations that caused so much distress elsewhere by the 'list of prices', agreed by the manufacturers and weavers. This price-fixing system, so antipathetic to liberal economic ideas, finally broke down in 1860 and had been in decline for some years previously, but it is clear that in the Chartist period it was still strong—because of the protection of the tariff and because a sense of community and of social obligation softened the asperities of the class relationship. The list was supported by both newspapers, the Conservatives, the Whigs and the Radicals, by the Chartists and even by William Williams, in other respects so much the nineteenth-century liberal. (72)

The ribbon industry suffered of course from the trade cycle as others did, particularly in 1837, 1839 and 1842, but the bitter misery of these years was to some extent alleviated by the same spirit. In times of distress men of all parties contributed towards the fund which usually raised about £800 or £900 for bread. (73) Far more important was the way in which the Poor Laws were administered in Coventry. By an act of 1801 the parishes of St. Michael and Holy Trinity were united for poor law purposes, and the administration of the Poor Laws was reserved to 300 or 400 substantial ratepayers—the Guardians, who chose eighteen of their number to form the Directors of the Poor. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 did not give the Poor Law Commission the power to control in detail the administration of the poor law in places like Coventry which were protected by local acts. The Coventry directors were for years left alone by the commission. Men of all parties, like Bray, Abel Rotherham and William Wilmot were elected to the directorate, left their party allegiances outside, and administered the poor laws compassionately. They were quick to adopt the improvements in the work-

(69) *Coventry Standard*, 20 March 1846.

(70) J. Prest, *op. cit.*, pp. 66 seq.

(71) *Coventry Standard*, 19 August 1842.

(72) *ibid.*, 7 August and 14 August 1840.

(73) *ibid.*, 10 February and 21 April 1837; 31 December 1841.

house régime which the two Coventry newspapers suggested—like the heavier winter clothing and the better dietary which the Foleshill Guardians had introduced at the recommendation of George Eld. (74) Eld in the *Standard* constantly attacked the cruelties of the New Poor Law, as indeed did the *Herald* and leading men generally in the city. Above all, outdoor relief continued to be paid to the Coventry unemployed throughout the Chartist period; in the year that ended in April 1838, for example, one quarter of the total poor law receipts in the united parishes was spent on outdoor relief. (75) Eloquent testimony to the humaneness of the poor law administration in Coventry and to the approval of all parties for it, was provided at a meeting in June 1842 at the height of the distress and shortly before the Chartist troubles. Buckney, Taunton, Goode, William Wilmot and Charles Woodcock (another leading local Conservative) addressed meetings of ratepayers to persuade them to petition Parliament against the current bill intended to place Coventry and similar places under the close control of the Poor Law Commissioners. All speakers praised the Coventry directors and the local payment of outdoor relief, which did indeed continue after the act was passed. (76) In this respect, Coventry was strikingly different from other towns—from, for example, Leicester, where the harsh administration of the Poor Law and the denial of outdoor relief was a prime cause of Chartism. (77)

In the quiet period that followed the Chartist agitation of 1842 all Coventry Radicals, including the Chartists like Buckney, Taunton and Warden, came to support Williams unitedly. Before the 1847 general election, however, the Radical movement split over the issue of education. In the 1830s the Coventry Radicals—Bray, Sibley Whittem, Henry Merridew, John Gulson—and the Dissenting ministers, including Father Thomas Cockshoot of the small Roman Catholic community, had pressed for greater state aid for education; many schemes were discussed but a common one was that the government should build schools and train teachers. (78) In these years it was the Anglicans who distrusted further state aid; they felt that any growth of a government system of education could only be at the expense of the national schools and the special position of the Church of England. (79)

By 1843 however, the Dissenters had come to fear further state interference in education. Sir James Graham's factory bill of that year proposed the establishment of factory schools under the control of the Anglican clergy. As everywhere else, in Coventry the bill was

(74) *Coventry Herald*, 2 February 1838.

(75) *Coventry Standard*, 15 June 1838.

(76) *ibid.*, 10 June 1842.

(77) A. T. Patterson, *Radical Leicester (Leicester, 1954)* pp. 294 seq.

(78) *Coventry Standard*, 3 November 1837.

(79) *ibid.*, 1 December 1837.

opposed by the Dissenters—by ministers and laymen like Buckney and Taunton. John Gordon—still a Chartist, 'he believed in five out of the Six Points'—thought 'the Government were interested in putting down the people of this country'. A. H. Pears spoke against the bill as an Anglican Liberal; the bill 'interfered with the rights of conscience, and the civil and religious liberty of the subject'. But significant for the future was the fact that Charles Bray, though he disliked the bill, was prepared to accept it because it proposed education for children who were not receiving it. (80) Williams and Ellice opposed the bill; owing to the opposition they met from the Non-conformists the education clauses were removed from the bill.

Very soon, however, Williams adopted over the 1847 education bill a stand that displeased many local Dissenters. John Gordon, Sibree, John Jerard and Edward Delf from West Orchard Independent Chapel, Watts from Cow Lane Particular Baptist Chapel, and others, joined in vehement protest against the Government's scheme for increased aid to education. As the *Herald* pointed out, in the previous ten years 'the Dissenters and Churchmen have changed sides'. (81) The Dissenters now argued in principle against all government aid for education: only a completely voluntary education system could guarantee political and religious liberty. These intense fears are to be traced to the 1843 scheme and the apprehensions it had aroused that any education scheme proposed by any kind of government Britain was likely to get would favour the Church of England and harm the Dissenters. Sibree and his congregation at Vicar Lane felt so strongly in 1847 that they returned the £200 government building grant paid for their school in 1835. (82)

But many lay Dissenters in Coventry did not agree with this opposition. Charles Bray widened the split that had been apparent between him and the Dissenting ministers in 1843. The government scheme, the *Herald* declared, was faulty but a step in the right direction. Sectarian differences ought not to prevail, but 'our religious guides, of all denominations, determine that the great majority of the country's children shall continue in a state of practical atheism and real infidelity'. Bray followed this with a savage column entitled *A Leaf from a Nonconformist Notebook*; 'Voluntaryist—a sort of dog in the manger, who will neither move forward himself, nor allow anyone else to. Liberty—everyone to do as he chooses, whether in accordance with the public good or not. It is loudly demanded by thieves and pickpockets. Slavery—to be subject to law, order and system, instead of the chance empiricism of local cliques. Education—teaching the road to chapel, through the Sunday school.' (83) Other lay Dissenters voiced their approval of the government

(80) *ibid.*, 5 May 1843.

(81) *Coventry Herald*, 19 March 1843.

(82) *Coventry Standard*, 16 April 1847.

(83) *Coventry Herald*, 12 February and 19 March, 1847.

scheme: J. C. Farn, Sibley Whittam, David Buckney and Joseph Squiers. Squiers was the headmaster of the school for 100 infants which the Cash family had built in Thomas Street; (84) he was also the secretary of the Labourers' and Artizans' Friend Society which Bray had founded in 1843 to provide Coventry workers with allotments. Squiers had been an Owenite and is said to have invented the phrase 'Christian Socialism'. He pointed out statistically the inadequacies of the voluntary system: 4,000 Coventry children attended no school at all. Arguing for compulsory education he showed that of the 1,590 children whom he had taught in Thomas Street only 90 had attended regularly enough to enable him to move them to an elementary school. (85)

John Gordon took Bray's words very seriously. 'I beg to say that from the hand which threw that dirt, all the water in the baths and wash-houses it might assist in erecting, would not wash out the stain.' (86) He and his colleagues threatened not to support Ellice and Williams at the forthcoming election because they had approved the government scheme. However, the threats were unreal: they would hardly take any action which might lead a Conservative to win the election, and in fact at the last minute the Dissenting ministers issued a handbill calling on all Dissenters to vote for Ellice and Williams in spite of the past differences. (87)

Yet Williams lost the election, coming bottom of the poll. He always afterwards blamed the defection of the Dissenters but this argument can be totally disregarded, since over the education bill they had more reason to turn against Ellice and he came top of the poll with more votes than he had ever had before. (88) Ellice got 2,901 votes, George Turner the Conservative candidate 1,754 and Williams 1,633. An analysis of the voting record given in the poll book reveals that while almost all those who voted for Williams voted for Ellice too, no less than 1,298 voted for Ellice and Turner. (89) The Conservative was far closer in his views to Ellice than Williams was and it was natural for moderate men, whether they called themselves Whigs or Conservatives, to vote for both. Turner was a liberal man, open to conviction on further electoral reform; he went out of his way to praise Ellice and invited all those who voted for Ellice to give their second votes to him. In these circumstances it was useless for Ellice to praise Williams and say that only minor differences divided them, while he was 'totally opposed' to Turner's principles, or for Buckney to say that Toryism and Whiggery were quite distinct because 'Toryism wants to make you

(84) B. Poole, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

(85) *Coventry Herald*, 23 April 1847.

(86) *ibid.*, 19 March 1847.

(87) *ibid.*, 21 May and 25 June 1847. *Coventry Standard*, 30 July 1847.

(88) Daniel Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

(89) *A Correct Copy of the Poll (Coventry, 1847)*.

hewers of wood and drawers of water while the other party wants you to enjoy every blessing'. Buckney himself admitted that 'I have in fact heard persons say that they could not see any difference between the Whigs and the Tories, because the Tories have become liberals—that is, Peel has become as good a reformer as Lord John Russell'. (90) Williams's defeat was symptomatic of the general blurring of the boundaries between parties that occurred in the late 1840s: it is a sign that a new period of politics was beginning.

The history of elections is bound to stress conflict, but as indicated in the section on Chartism, in some respects—perhaps more important and fundamental ones than politics—the city was united. One sees this underlying unity in the way in which leading Coventrians of all parties supported in these years the more important of the two medical dispensaries in the town, the Self-Supporting or Provident Dispensary. As its name implies, this was not intended to provide gratuitous charitable treatment for the poor as the General Dispensary did. This was anathema to the founders of the Provident Dispensary, who believed that those unable to pay for medical treatment should have the services of the poor law doctor only, and that giving free treatment to those who could afford to pay for it was evil. As the physician to the Provident Dispensary, Dr. Nankivell, put it: 'eleemosynary aid.....tends as effectually to pauperise the poor as the mal-administration of the Poor Laws themselves.' (91) So ordinary members of the Provident Dispensary paid regular weekly subscriptions of 1d. for medical care, though many expenses were, it is true, met by the honorary fund to which the well-to-do contributed. It is typical of the way in which the philosophy of Dr. Nankivell was accepted by solid men of all parties that the dispensary, founded by Walter Hook, was supported by George Eld and Dr. Arrowsmith and also Charles Bray, Sibley Whittem and Josiah Cash. (92)

For Coventrians the most significant matter in these years for the future of the city was the boundary dispute with the outlying parishes of the county of the city which in 1842 was settled in the Court of Exchequer against Coventry: thus Foleshill and the other parishes became detached from the town. This topic is too vast to be treated in detail here but it should be pointed out that the dispute united all parties within the town. The members of the council, whether Radical, Whig or Tory were at one in their opposition to the pretensions of the out-parishes, and so were with very few exceptions leading citizens outside the council.

Another issue, the proposal to enclose the Lammas and Michaelmas lands, divided the city: but, it is significant, along lines to which the usual party labels were completely irrelevant. These lands

(90) *Coventry Standard*, 14 January 1848.

(91) *ibid.*, 16 December 1836.

(92) *ibid.*, 14 April 1837.

consisted of about 1,000 acres over which by mediaeval grant the freemen of Coventry had the right to pasture horse and cows from either Old Lammas or Old Michaelmas to Old Candlemas. For the rest of the year the lands were enclosed and farmed by their proprietors, but during the pasture time they had no rights over their land. In the middle ages, when many freemen had had cattle and were unable to pasture them in the winter, the herbage right had been generally useful; but it was much less so in the nineteenth century, when no more than 400 or 500 freemen exercised their right. (93) The *Herald* put it succinctly: 'the paltry amount of benefit derived by a fractional part of the freemen from these lands, is but dust in the balance when compared to the great barrier which they present to the extension of the town as a commercial city'. (94)

It was this last point—the fact that no building could take place on these lands—which led to a serious attempt to extinguish the pasture right in 1843 and 1844 after there had been much abortive discussion of the idea for some years. Charles Bray drafted a bill to extinguish the right and the promotion of the bill was taken over by the town council. (95) Both newspapers, all members of the council, all other men prominent in public life and even a majority of the freemen were in favour of extinguishing the pasture right. Debate turned on the question of what compensation the freemen were to be given. Bray's bill offered the freemen the money to be derived from the sale at auction of a proportion of the land; this money was to be invested in land which would be used partly to provide small allotments. (96) The freemen's leaders knew, however, that after the extinction of the pasture right much the greater part of the Lammas land would quickly be covered with bricks and mortar, and believed that the freemen should be able to share in the vast appreciation in the value of the lands that building on them would lead to. So they contemplated having as compensation part of the lands themselves and letting this land out on lease. Bray argued that it would be impossible to give the freemen part of the land of each proprietor; the portions would be too scattered. The freemen were not convinced and pointed out practicable ways in which the partition could be carried out. (97)

Indeed it is plain that the fundamental difference between Bray and those who supported him on the one hand, and the freemen on the other, was not the practicality of this scheme or that but the

(93) *Reports of the Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations: Parl. Papers*, 1835, XXV, pp. 393 *seq.*

(94) *Coventry Herald*, 20 April 1838.

(95) *Coventry Standard*, 12 January 1844.

(96) *ibid.*, 8 December 1843. The provision of allotments was a favourite scheme of Bray's; he had just founded the Labourers' and Artizans' Coöperative Society for this purpose, and was about to publish a lengthy pamphlet in support of his idea that allotments would improve the health of the labourer and tide him over periods of unemployment.

value they attached to the freemen's rights. To Bray these were a tiresome anachronism holding up the progress of Coventry and the prosperity of all its citizens: the freemen should be compensated but not greatly. To the freemen's leaders the pasture right was an infeasible piece of property to be compensated for as any other piece of property would be. On Bray's side were the two newspapers and nearly all the leaders of opinion in the town, including Eld. The position of the Chartists was odd: Taunton and Warden supported Bray; Buckney after also doing so changed his mind and worked hard against the bill. (98) Buckney thus allied himself with the man whose views on most things were completely opposed to his—William Wilmot, the only real romantic Tory in the city's establishment, the man who was equally opposed to the 1832 Reform Bill and the steam engine, on the grounds that they did not benefit the working man. (99)

It was typical of Bray's lack of ordinary political talent that he drafted his bill without previously getting the real approval for it of either the freemen or the proprietors of the land. Bray afterwards bitterly complained that a majority of the freemen had backed his scheme at first and that a 'clever lawyer' (he meant Wilmot) had persuaded them that they were being robbed. (100) Bray sent round ten agents to collect the signatures of freemen in support of his scheme. They were shown a lot of small print and asked to sign. It is not to be wondered at that the many hundreds of freemen who had signed withdrew their names when the difference between what they had been promised and what they could get was pointed out to them. The great majority of freemen declared for compensation in land. (101) The committee elected by a meeting of freemen fought the bill strongly during its second reading; morale-raising meetings of freemen were held in almost every public house in Coventry. Ellice and Williams could only support the wishes of the great bulk of their constituents in a matter like this and they fought to have the compensation clauses altered in the freemen's favour. At last in an attempt to reconcile differences they organised a meeting in London with the representatives of the freemen and of the landowners, and with the mayor and town clerk for the corporation. The landowners did not like the bill but would if pressed have been prepared to pay compensation in money; they refused to pay it in land. The M.P.s suggested the ending of the conference and the withdrawal of the bill, since Parliament would never compel the freemen to accept money or the landowners to give land against their will. This was done, and the matter closed for the time being with Ellice and

(97) *Coventry Standard*, 26 January, 23 March and 10 May 1844.

(98) *ibid.*, 8 December 1843 and 12 January 1844.

(99) *ibid.*, 4 February 1848.

(100) Charles Bray, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

(101) *Coventry Standard*, 1 December 1843 and 2 February 1844.

Williams expressing support for the freemen and displeasure at the landowners' lack of cooperativeness. The landowners of course did not have many votes. The pasture right was not extinguished until more than ten years later. (102)

The usual party labels are also quite inappropriate and misleading guides to the history of municipal politics in the period, and—a related point—the Municipal Corporations Act changed less than has sometimes been supposed. In the municipal elections of December 1835 the Whigs and Radicals won 32 out of the 36 seats, and though the Conservatives increased their representation gradually the reformers still had a majority at the end of our period. The *Herald* and the party it supported tried to make out that a great change had been effected in 1835. 'Let the reformers of England look at the glorious emancipation which that day has given, from the thralldom of the thoroughly rotten corporations.' (103) The new corporation signalled the departure of an old order by dismissing the town clerk, John Carter, as its first act of public business. The new councillors went to assume the powers that the old Street Commissioners voluntarily relinquished to them and to replace the watch which the commissioners had run with a uniformed constabulary on the London pattern. They also demonstrated their party loyalties by electing as aldermen twelve reformers and by recommending only Whigs and Radicals for the magistracy—a list which the Home Secretary accepted—and only Whigs and Radicals as trustees for the corporation charities—a list which the Lord Chancellor did not accept. (104)

The removal of all power over the city charities from the hands of the corporation was one major change wrought by the Municipal Corporations Act; henceforth the city's charities and its politics did not touch. In other respects the change was not so acute. The report of the Municipal Corporations Commissioners shows that the old corporation had been corrupt and inefficient: its funds had been conflated with those of the charities it administered and the accounts of both were in confusion and incomplete; its moneys had been used to influence elections. (105) The muted savagery of the commissioners' comments on John Carter is substantiated by Carter's own correspondence in the City Record Office, which proves him to have been an exceptionally bad man of business. (106) The commissioners themselves do show, however, how since about 1828 the efficiency of the corporation had considerably increased: the administration

(102) *ibid.*, 24 May and 14 June 1844.

(103) *Coventry Herald*, 1 January 1836.

(104) *ibid.*, 8 January and 8 April 1836. *Coventry Standard*, 9 September and 30 December 1836.

(105) Parl. Papers, 1835. XXV, pp. 391 *seq.*

(106) Coventry Record Office. Miscellaneous Papers: Box 2: Correspondence of John Carter.

of the charities had been regularised, proper accounts started, electoral interference stopped, a new and far more efficient headmaster appointed for the Free Grammar School, and an inspector of the Metropolitan Police appointed to superintend the watch. (107) The man chiefly responsible since 1828 for this programme of reform was George Eld, the Tory leader. As Eld afterwards pointed out in the *Standard*: 'The majority of the late corporation, when dismissed, were honourable men and incapable of speculation.....and it is a fact that the individuals who effected the greatest reforms in the old corporation were Conservatives'. It is even more to the point that the *Herald* paid testimony to the reform of the old corporation from 1828 onwards and to the value of Eld's work. (108)

What is clear is that the old corporation was reformed from within for the same motives which led other men to press for new institutions: the desire for improvement was widely diffused in men of all parties. It is quite impossible to tell from the speeches and votes of town councillors which political parties they belonged to, since the party allegiances in municipal politics were determined by national issues, and these were not relevant to the common issues of civic betterment. A man was a Tory largely because he wanted to preserve the privileges of the Church of England and the agricultural interest: this did not necessarily mean that he wanted to keep the streets of Coventry dirty. A man was a Radical because he wanted to abridge the privileges of the Church and the aristocracy: this did not necessarily mean greater willingness to pay for a new sewer for Smithford Street.

Thus on almost every issue that the reformed corporation faced the voting was either unanimous—as on the boundary dispute—or cut across party lines. One member of the council who was always insisting on the need to put contracts out to tender, to accept the lowest bid and generally to do away with 'jobbery' was the Radical William Browett, the Cross Cheaping draper, a Quaker. As he said about the medical officer in the gaol: 'Even the doctor ought to have been put up, that the Faculty might have sent in tenders'. Yet Browett's constant supporter in this was William Wilmot, who hated what Browett stood for in national politics. (109)

There was in men of all parties goodwill and a desire for civic improvement, but one is struck by how narrowly conceived it was in the early years of the reformed corporation and how little change 1835 really made. A few streets were culverted after 1836—but usually at the expense of the local inhabitants. The streets were abominably dirty and the Sherbourne horrifying. The town council did not before 1848 have at its disposal powers easily to improve the city. Its functions were limited to the administration of the corporate

(107) *Parl. Papers*, 1835, XXV, pp. 385, 395, 397, 407, 423.

(108) *Coventry Standard*, 6 October 1837. *Coventry Herald*, 2 September 1836.

(109) *Coventry Standard*, 4 November 1836.

property and the paving and watching of the streets. Its power to remove nuisances, to raise loans or even levy rates for the essential duties laid upon it was strictly limited by statute. In 1842 the city's police force amounted to one chief constable, one superintendent, one sergeant, and fourteen constables. It was not large enough even to watch Hillfields which in consequence was 'the grand depot of thievery'. The force could not be enlarged because the total cost, £869 a year, already exceeded the product of the 6d. rate that the watching of the city was limited to by statute. (110)

Yet it is highly significant that a full reading of the record of the council debates for the early years of the new corporation reveals no general opinion that the city's powers were inadequate to the needs of civic betterment—and indeed no general realisation of these needs. Only one man added to the general and constant complaints that the streets were dirty and the gas expensive, a demand that the city should seek powers to construct a municipal gasworks and should be 'sewered from end to end'. (111) This was Abel Rotherham, a member of the watchmaking family but himself a draper in Smithford Street: a highly intelligent, vastly industrious, well-informed, far-sighted man: dour, conceited, humourless, obsessively quarrelsome, widely respected and even more widely hated. But it was not the rebarbateness of his character, it was the general lack of civic initiative, which led to his grand schemes of municipal improvement being laughed at.

The change came in 1843, with the visit to Coventry of one of the Commissioners for Enquiry into the State of Large Towns; the questions he asked and the observations he made stimulated in members of both parties a desire for positive sanitary reform: the impetus, that is, to betterment came from outside the city, not from within. (112) Two special acts of Parliament were promoted in 1844 to get the authority to construct the cemetery and the waterworks and to buy the two mill dams that converted the Sherbourne into a stagnant, instead of flowing, mass of sewage. (113) Much remained to be done. As James William Cole, an engineer, wrote in 1847: 'A stranger walking through Coventry would ask, "Is there such a body as a Town Council for this ancient city, and to whom is the state of the streets, the entire want of local as well as house drainage and sewerage, to be attributed?"' (114) In the new mood of the city the powers conferred upon the town council by the Public Health Act of 1848 were widely welcomed by men of all parties for the opportunity they gave to remedy the situation described by Cole.

(110) *ibid.*, 30 December 1842.

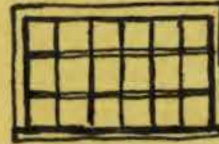
(111) *ibid.*, 25 May 1838.

(112) *ibid.*, 1 September 1843.

(113) 7 & 8 Vict. local and personal, c. lvi and c. lxxvi.

(114) *Coventry Standard*, 17 September 1847.

The city was in many ways united: the Dissenters did not push their quarrel with the Anglicans to extremes; there was only muted conflict between masters and men; the city establishment was humane and paternalist. Yet it was, also, limited in outlook and blind to the squalor of the city until in the 1840s the movement started by Chadwick began the local initiative for sanitary reform. The city was to change greatly after 1848. On the one hand conflicts were to develop between capital and labour, culminating in the great strike and collapse of 1860; on the other hand the newly awakened town council was to use the powers given it by the Public Health Act of 1848 to improve the city immeasurably. If the old comfortable community life disappeared, so did the old parochialism and filth.



This is the first of what is hoped will be a regular semi-annual series. Copies may be obtained from the Secretary of the Coventry Branch of the Historical Association Mr. J. E. Short, 7 Orchard Crescent, Coventry, price 4/- post free.

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