

‘It is the past alone that can explain the present’¹: a comparison between a passage in Disraeli’s *Sybil* and a membership card of the National Chartist Association.

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Abstract: Benjamin Disraeli’s novel *Sybil, or, The Two Nations* was published in 1845. It is both a story of romantic adventure and a manifesto for the author’s unconventional political perspective, set to the backdrop of the Chartist risings. The membership card of the National Chartist Association is decorated with imagery and symbols that represented the concerns of that radical movement. One was the creative output of an educated, literate member of the privileged classes, the other intended for the ill-educated, probably illiterate masses. This article will compare a short passage from *Sybil* with this membership card. It will examine how both artefacts share areas of common concern, despite their originators’ differences in political and social status, and in particular it will argue how they used interpretations of English history to give authority to their demands for change.

This article will compare two artefacts from the mid-nineteenth century; both are concerned with the need for constitutional reform, and both address the enormous problems caused by social change and the rise of industrialisation. The first is an excerpt from Benjamin Disraeli’s novel about the Chartists, *Sybil, or, The Two Nations*, published in 1845. The second is a facsimile of the membership card of the National Chartist Association from 1839. Although originating from different ends of the political spectrum and offering fundamentally different solutions, there are nevertheless areas of commonality between the two.

Chartism was a political movement of the working classes that rose to prominence in 1838 and was the most significant radical force for the next decade. It sought to address the economic hardships and sometimes atrocious working conditions of ordinary people through a programme of parliamentary reform codified into six demands, the six points of the People’s Charter: universal male suffrage, secret ballot, no property qualification for MPs, the payment of these MPs, equal constituencies and annual parliaments.² Chartism flourished in many areas of the country as a highly social as well as political movement,³ and found its most noticeable expression in huge public processions and demonstrations that the organisers claimed numbered up to a quarter of a million people. To bring home their demands for constitutional change the Chartists organised national petitions that were presented to Downing Street and the House of Commons.

Chartist material artefacts are rare; little has survived and membership cards are no exception. The card examined is no longer in existence, but was reproduced in facsimile in *Landmarks of Local Liberalism*, published in 1913.⁴ It was issued to one James Cheetham; in the year of publication it was in the possession of his grandson, but other details such as the dimensions or card quality are not recorded.

¹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or, The Two Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 421.

² Francis Place, *The People’s Charter and National Petition* (Kilmarnock: Kilmarnock Working Men’s Association, 1839).

³ Timothy Randall, ‘Chartist Poetry and Song’, in *The Chartist Legacy* ed. by Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (Merlin Press, 1999), pp. 170-195 (pp. 172-3).

⁴ A. Marcroft, *Landmarks of Local Liberalism* (Oldham: E. J. Wildgoose, 1913) p. 94.



Figure 1: NCA Membership Card ⁵



Figure 2: Royal Coat of Arms ⁶

The membership card displays a set of possibly unconnected symbols that are on first inspection arranged in imitation (critics could say parody) of the Royal coat of arms. There is a central image surrounded by a garter, and a banner underneath. To the left and the right of the garter image there are bearers, with an emblem above it. In the Royal coat of arms the central image is the emblems of England, Scotland and Ireland quartered; on the card this is replaced with a lion rampant. The garter on the Royal arms bears the legend ‘Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense’; on the card it reads ‘This Is Our Charter’. The banners on both the Royal coat of arms and the membership card are decorated with roses, shamrocks, and thistles; but on the Royal arms this banner reads ‘Dieu Et Mon Droit’ (‘God and My Right’), whereas the card banner reads ‘God Is Our Guide’, accompanied by the fasces, a bundle of thin sticks bound together representing strength through unity.

The Royal arms are borne by the lion and the unicorn, replaced on the membership card by a man and woman bearing respectively a spade and a rake. The emblem atop of the chartist ‘garter’ is not the crown but a globe. Either side of this globe is a cap of liberty and an English tricolour, and above them an all-seeing eye between a beehive and a sheaf of wheat.

For the Chartists, each of these symbols had important associative meanings. It was a national movement, at a time when a sense of national identity was still at a formative stage.

⁵ Marcroft, p. 94.

⁶ Reproduction of the Royal Coat of Arms. Author: Sodokan. Under the GNU Free Documentation License, this image adapted from full colour to greyscale.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coat_of_Arms_of_the_United_Kingdom_%281837-1952%29.svg

The centres of Chartism were culturally and geographically diverse, ranging from the industrial cities of Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, and South Wales, to the merchants in London and agricultural regions such as Wiltshire. In the age before mass-communication local dialects and local customs varied greatly; travel by road was slow and the emerging railways were yet to form a national network.⁷ Potent symbolism was its own form of mass-communication; an image could convey a rich ideological theme that would be removed from the constraints of language and understood by all, helping create a sense of shared identity and common purpose that overcame regional variation.

As its subtitle indicates, *Sybil* is a novel about the divided society in Britain in the 1840s. Disraeli portrayed the physical and moral degradations suffered by working people in unflinching detail, relying heavily on accounts from government inspectors who reported their findings in the parliamentary blue books. Disraeli looked for a solution, and the newly-elected Tory backbencher found common ground with a small group of young MPs known as the Young England group. Centred around Lord John Manners, Young England argued for a return to the medievalism of a restored Church and Monarchy. Disraeli's trilogy of novels, *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845) and *Tancred* (1847) can be best understood as emotive manifestos for this ideology, which the author summarised in a General Preface to a reissue of this trilogy in 1870.⁸ Appropriately there are six points to his argument. Firstly, power should be returned to the aristocracy and the crown, who in turn must assume their historic role as the protectors of the people. Secondly, the Church must return to its medieval role as the moral centre of English life and provider of essential relief for the poor and destitute. Thirdly, a new commercial code should be established rejecting the 'Venetian finance' of the Whig oligarchy.⁹ Fourthly, Ireland should be governed 'according to the policies of Charles I and not Oliver Cromwell.' Fifthly, the reformed constitution of 1832 should be freed from its Whiggish 'sectarian bondage', and lastly the duty of those in government should be to 'elevate the physical as well as the moral condition of the people.'¹⁰

The excerpt taken from *Sybil* describes a Chartist delegation visiting one Lord Valentine to ask for his support for the national petition.¹¹ It is an unusual passage. The delegates await the arrival of the lord in his salon, allowing the author an opportunity to describe the lavish interior. The walls are hung with blue satin and mirrors, the ceiling richly painted. The furniture matching this opulence, and there are bookshelves covered in richly bound volumes. An open book is full of costume illustrations. When Lord Valentine arrives he is attractively described: 'slender, broad-shouldered, small-waisted, of a graceful presence', dressed in a small Greek cap and a robe of Indian shawls.

Valentine's refined tastes could be seen as bordering on dandyism, and that such an aesthete would have little sympathy with the bitter realities of Industrial Britain. But such expectations do not reflect the author's very particular worldview. For Disraeli, this lord is an exemplar of the aristocratic ideal; his refined tastes show him to be a man close to the author's heart. In his youth Disraeli shared such dandyish inclinations. There are accounts of him dressed in 'green velvet trousers, a canary-coloured waistcoat, low shoes, silver buckles, lace at his wrists and his hair in ringlets'¹² or 'a black velvet suit with ruffles'.¹³ Indeed, the Young England ideology was described as a form of 'mental dandyism'.¹⁴ But for Young

⁷ Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 11.

⁸ Richard Faber, *Young England* (London: Faber, 1987), pp. 185-6.

⁹ In Disraeli's view, 'Venetian Finance' is an economic system where government is effected in the interests of business, and the powers of the nominal head of state are severely restricted. Originating in Venice, this system was adopted by the mercantile society in Holland. It was then imported into Britain with the Glorious Revolution of 1688: *Sybil*, pp.18-21.

¹⁰ Quoted in Faber, pp. 185-6.

¹¹ *Sybil*, pp. 224-9.

¹² T. A. Jenkins, *Disraeli and Victorian Conservatism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) p. 5.

¹³ Christopher Hibbert, *Disraeli: A Personal History* (London: HarperCollins, 2004) p. 15.

¹⁴ Faber, p. 208.

England and Disraeli, the aristocracy are the natural leaders of the people¹⁵ and Lord Valentine's handsomeness and aesthetic sensibilities prove to the reader, from the author's perspective at least, that Lord Valentine is a striking example of the aristocratic ideal.

His worthiness is proved as the passage continues. In his 'clear and cheerful voice, and with an unaffected tone of frankness which put his guests at their ease' Lord Valentine listens politely to the Chartists' request for a 'respectful discussion' of their claims before stating his position, that he comes from a long line of distinguished noblemen that have quite literally built the country: 'The finest trees in England were planted by my family; they raised several of your most beautiful churches; they have built bridges, made roads, dug mines, and constructed canals.'¹⁶ Yet despite the favourable and personal terms with which Disraeli describes Lord Valentine, he allows his Chartist delegates a response that is both reasoned and persuasive; they argue that these achievements were due as much to the working people as to the nobility who led them: 'What share in these great works had that faculty of Labour whose sacred claims we now urge.' This is an argument often repeated in Chartist media. Banners proclaiming 'Labour, The Source Of All Wealth' and 'The People – The Foundation – The Source Of All Power' were displayed in processions in Manchester.¹⁷ The symbolism on the membership card confirms this. Both the man and the woman hold implements of their industriousness. The sheaf of wheat, representing bounty, sits above the woman. The beehive, representing since classical times industry and organised productivity, is above the man. The claim that the workers are the root of the nation's prosperity was more than a general statement of worthiness. Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* claimed that social prosperity was dependent on population levels held in check, by implication justifying the necessity for disease and high mortality.¹⁸ This assertion was vigorously rejected by the Chartists. They claimed that the world was created with ample sufficiency for all: 'The verdant earth on which we tread / Was by [God's] hand, all carpeted; / Enough for all her freely gave'.¹⁹ It was man, in the form of the ruling elite, that starved the population: 'priests and lords and kings ... / Heedless of our sufferings, / Devour what we produce!'²⁰ Overturning this unfair political order would be a revolution in the true sense of the word, returning society back to its natural state. In this context the beehive too has a more revolutionary implication; tradition also states that bees thrive because the 'idle drones' are driven from the hive.

In *Sybil*, as the Chartist delegates survey Lord Valentine's salon, they notice in the corner of the room 'a figure in complete armour, black and gold, richly inlaid, and grasping in its gauntlet the ancient standard of England.... "That suit of armour has combated for the people before this," claims Lord Valentine, "for it stood by Simon de Montfort on the field of Evesham."²¹ Disraeli's choice of historical reference is illuminating. To a modern reader the most notable example of the medieval nobility resisting tyranny would be Magna Carta. But in the 1840s the revolt by King John's barons had been claimed by the Chartists; their very name, and their 'People's Charter' was consciously reminiscent of the thirteenth-century rebellion. As Disraeli made clear, his Young England manifesto looked to restore medieval prerogatives to the nineteenth-century throne. That de Montfort fought to limit this power, and indeed imprisoned his monarch Henry III, was an inconvenient truth the author seems to have ignored.

¹⁵ Faber, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Sybil*, p. 225.

¹⁷ Paul A. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995) pp. 214-6.

¹⁸ T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: 1807), Book I, pp. 2-5.

¹⁹ Hymn Fourteenth, *The National Chartist Hymn Book*, 1845 online facsimile, URL:

<http://www.calderdale.gov.uk/wtw/search/controlservlet?PageId=Detail&DocId=102253&PageNo=3>

²⁰ Hymn Seventh, *The National Chartist Hymn Book*.

²¹ *Sybil*, p. 226.

The Chartists, too, looked to history as a justification of their claims but unlike Disraeli they recalled a tradition of popular constitutionalism that was for them both radical and patriotic. That the Chartists should perceive themselves as patriots may seem contradictory. Linda Colley in *Britons* is dismissive of such an argument; for her this patriotism was a cynically pragmatic strategy, 'It showed in the marcher's eyes, at least, what they were doing was legitimate and positively public-spirited.'²² This depends on the definition of 'patriotism'. In the years following the French Revolution Tory politicians in particular sought to define it as a loyalty to the establishment structures of Church and State. For the radical movements its meaning was very different: 'England' was a collective term for The People, 'patriotism' a loyalty to those people and a striving for their wellbeing. That patriotic symbols can have widely differing interpretations can be seen in the figure of Britannia. Before the French Revolution she was seen as a British Marianne: 'a national, often libertarian symbol; it was only in the first half of the nineteenth century that she was claimed as a representative of royal and state authority.'²³

The Chartists were very aware of their national history and saw themselves as inheritors of a radical tradition, a struggle for the rights of The People that was more truly patriotic than support of the ruling establishment.²⁴ Patriotic and national symbolism features strongly on the NCA membership card. Garlanding the lower banner, in the same fashion as the Royal coat of arms, are shamrocks, roses and thistles. That patriotism would overcome despotism is shown in the central figure of the lion rampant; it stands on top of a cannon, a sword, and other symbols of the military force which the Chartists reasonably expected would be turned against them, while an antique helm – a common feature in the heraldry of the aristocratic families – is overturned and dangled on a chain.

At the base of the membership card a banner bears the legend 'God Is Our Guide', a sentiment echoed in a Chartist hymn; 'God is our guide / Our cause is just.'²⁵ In the twentieth century Chartist historians were often dismissive of this religiosity. Friedrich Engels described Chartism as among the first mass movements of the British proletariat,²⁶ and from this Marxist perspective many aspects of Chartist culture, such as the tea parties, the hymn singing and the Christian Chartist Churches, were seen as a middle-class Victorian respectability attempting to undermine the movement's true radicalism.²⁷ Yet this Christian perspective is a further example of how the Chartists looked to history as a justification of their cause, in this case the message of the early church. One of the founders of the Scottish Chartist Church, Patrick Brewster, was clear; 'Our politics are the politics of the Bible.'²⁸ Such churches, often decorated with portraits of the movement's leaders together with leading radical of the past, were 'overtly combining political solidarity with a radical social gospel.'²⁹ The founder of the Birmingham Chartist Church, Arthur O'Neill, emphasised how their struggle would mirror the experiences of the first Christians: the first day spent at the altar, the second mingling with the masses, the third at the bar of judgment and the fourth possibly in a dungeon.³⁰

This recourse to the perceived ideals of the early Christians had inspired radical movements before the Chartists. Joseph Rayner Stephens declared that Jesus Christ was 'the

²² Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009) p. 344.

²³ Linda Colley, quoted in James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 78.

²⁴ Angus Hawkins, *Habits of Heart and Mind: Victorian Political Culture* (manuscript) p. 109.

²⁵ Hymn Ninth, the National Chartist Hymn Book.

²⁶ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), p. 133.

²⁷ Trygve R. Tholfsen, 'The Chartist Crisis in Birmingham', *International Review of Social History* Vol. 3 Issue 03 (Dec. 1958), pp. 461-480 (p. 476).

²⁸ Chase, p. 50.

²⁹ Chase, p. 5.

³⁰ *Parliamentary Papers*, 1843, XIII, p. 137, quoted in Tholfsen, p. 476.

prince of Jack Cades' recalling the leader of a popular revolt in the fifteenth century.³¹ Medieval and seventeenth-century radical movements specifically opposed the hegemony of the nobility and the established church, citing the 'communism' of the early Christians as their authority.³² The jailed Chartist 'Radical Jack' stated 'Jesus Christ was the first Chartist ... He taught the doctrines of humility and equality, and even instructed men to sell their garments and buy a sword.'³³ The monk John Ball, one of the leaders of the fourteenth-century Peasants' Revolt, reportedly declared 'Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span, Wo was thane a gentilman?'³⁴ The imagery on the NCA membership card recalls this argument. The man and woman either side of the garter both hold implements of agriculture. In particular the man, the Adam, holds a spade for delving. Noticeably, he is not dressed as a labourer. He wears a fashionable coat and waistcoat rather than the practical fustian of the working man; he wears white stockings and shoes rather than boots or clogs. He is a figure of prosperity and even gentility, but by holding his spade he is identified as one of the producers of wealth, a delving Adam who is truly a gentleman.

The meeting with Lord Valentine concludes in an atmosphere of mutual respect. He tells the delegates that he has brought this ancient armour from his family castle because 'I am to represent Richard Coeur de Lion at the Queen's ball ... and before my sovereign I will not don a Drury Lane cuirass.'³⁵ This noble impulse for authenticity is undoubtedly well meant, but it does not stand up to investigation. The armour of the De Montfort period was largely chainmail, plate armour like that described evolving some hundred years later. As a costume for Richard I it is even less appropriate. Lord Valentine's harness belongs at best to the jousting tournaments at the very end of the medieval period, if not the faux-medievalism of the Eglinton Tournament only five years previously. His description of the armour betrays Disraeli's romanticised view of the medieval past; it is what he would like the facts to be, rather than the facts themselves.

Arguably the same criticism can be levelled at the Young England philosophy as a whole. Critics were often harsh, describing it as 'childish bathos',³⁶ only suitable for hopeless romantics,³⁷ 'their remedy for social distress was to erect maypoles in every village.'³⁸ Contemporary authors such as Dickens, Kingsley and Trollope shared the general perception that the idea of reviving medieval systems of government was nothing short of ludicrous. Yet in *Yeast* Kingsley had one of his characters concede that Young England's 'little finger is thicker than my whole body, for it is trying to do something.'³⁹ In writing his trilogy of novels Disraeli presented his readers with a powerful argument for his unconventional philosophy. When Disraeli first stood for election he did so as a radical; his adoption of the conservative party, and his association with the Young England group, can be seen as a continuation of this radical sentiment rather than a repudiation of it. He took the shocking evidence of working conditions found in the parliamentary Blue Books and, by incorporating it into a work of fiction, brought it to the attention of an audience far wider than the politicians in Westminster. Disraeli's parliamentary career flourished. He became party leader

³¹ Chase, p. 31.

³² Iwan Russell-Jones, *The Relationship Between Theology and Politics in the Writings of John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn* (D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1987).

³³ *Northern Liberator*, 7 Sept. 1839, accessed online through the British Library website URL: <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/news/newspdigproj/ndplist>

³⁴ Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, II 32-3, quoted in R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, 1983) p. 374.

³⁵ *Sybil*, p. 226.

³⁶ Faber, p. 204.

³⁷ Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1996), p. 168.

³⁸ Faber, p. 205.

³⁹ Charles Kingsley, *Yeast* (London: Parker & Son, 1859), p. 98, quoted in Faber p. 211; with appropriate medievalism the speaker's name is Lancelot.

of the Conservatives and on two occasions Prime Minister, while his Young England ideology gained greater resonance, as themes of neo-medievalism found popular expression in the art and literature of the latter half of the century. His call for a responsible aristocracy was taken up by his party, and Tory Paternalism was still a vocal ideology in Conservative politics into the 1980s and the years of the Thatcher government.⁴⁰ The Chartists were also vilified, but likewise five of the demands of the six-point charter have become established principles of modern political life; only the call for annual parliaments remains unheeded. Both Young England and the Chartists were condemned by their contemporaries for their idealism, and even naivety. But as one old Chartist recalled towards the end of his life 'It might now be said we were fools, but I answer young people now have no idea of what we had to endure.'⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Stephen Haseler, *The Battle for Britain: Thatcher and the New Liberals* (London: Tauris, 1989), pp. 11-28.

⁴¹ Benjamin Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist* (Halifax: John Nicholson, 1887), p. 13.
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