

## **Defiant mourning: public funerals as funeral demonstrations in the Chartist movement**

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## Abstract

The popular radical movement that developed in Great Britain after the Napoleonic wars under the leadership of Henry Hunt made the mass-platform its main – and most striking – means of action in the fight for parliamentary reform. Mass-demonstrations became a defining feature of the radical agitation, a tradition also followed by the Chartist movement from the late 1830s to the mid-1850s. Chartist processions have been extensively studied by historians, but a certain type of procession has remained largely absent from the discussion: funeral *cortèges*. Through the study of the funerals of six local or national leaders of the Chartist movement, this article intends to address this issue and to work towards a rapprochement between the political history of popular radicalism and the cultural and social history of death in the Victorian period. The interments of Samuel Holberry, Joseph Williams, Alexander Sharp, Ben Rushton, Feargus O'Connor and Ernest Jones were made public by the radicals in charge of their organisation and gathered several thousand people. This work argues that these funerals can be seen as belonging to the radical repertoire of collective action that developed in nineteenth-century Britain. The way they were organised and advertised, the form and appearance they took, and the numbers involved, and debated, identify them as an integral part of the radical tradition of political agitation.

**Keywords:** Chartism, popular radicalism, mass-platform, funeral, demonstration, procession, collective action.

## I. Introduction

From the very beginning of the nineteenth-century agitation for parliamentary reform, the radical mass-platform was to be associated with controversial deaths.<sup>1</sup> The massacre that occurred on St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819, during which 11 people were killed and 650 wounded, placed death at the core of popular radicalism.<sup>2</sup> In his memoirs, Benjamin Wilson evokes his uncle's stories about the way news of the Peterloo Massacre were received in the village of Skircoat Green, near Halifax, known for its radicalism. Wilson's

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<sup>1</sup> On the emergence of the radical mass-platform, see John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp.37-50.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Poole, "By the Law or the Sword": Peterloo Revisited', *History*, (April 2006), pp.254-276.

uncle, along with other people, took the decision to wear grey hats as a sign of mourning. A great procession was organised, the mourners marching in silence and bare-headed through the streets of Halifax to pay tribute to the victims. The women of the village similarly went into mourning and ‘marched in procession, Tommy’s wife carrying the cap of liberty on the top of a pole.’<sup>3</sup> For the inhabitants of Skircoat Green, mourning for the Peterloo victims was a decision in keeping with their commitment to radicalism, and a way to manifest their political beliefs. As further emphasised by the account published by *Saunders’s News-Letter*, mourning revealingly took the same form as the mass-meeting on St Peter’s Field that had made it necessary.

On Monday, 4 October 1819, ‘[t]he town and vicinity of Halifax were nearly filled with people at an early hour. Nothing was to be seen but white hats, and persons holding banners with various inscriptions.’<sup>4</sup> The march was silent; hats, flags and banners featured black crape and among the inscriptions displayed were the following lines underneath the figure of Justice: ‘With heartfelt grief we mourn for those, Who have fallen victims in our cause; While we with indignation view, The bloody field of Peterloo.’ The people who assembled for the meeting were presented a cap of liberty by Miss Anne Flodder – presumably Tommy’s wife – who also addressed the crowd. In total, no less than 50,000 persons were present to reaffirm their support to the radical resolutions promoted by Henry Hunt’s reform movement. The presence of white hats and a cap of liberty was particularly significant as by the autumn of 1819 they had become symbols of empowerment for radical supporters, participating in the symbolic occupation of public space as well as marking political and class solidarity and allegiance.<sup>5</sup> Katrina Navickas has shown the importance of commemoration in radical collective action following Peterloo. Funerals and mock funeral processions represented a loophole in the anti-seditious legislation of the time, notably regarding the display of political emblems, and became an important feature of radical protest.<sup>6</sup> The nineteenth-century radical ‘repertoire of collective action’, through the demonstrations organised in memory of the Peterloo victims, proved that it could easily accommodate elements borrowed from funerary rites, giving the radical procession the

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist*, in David Vincent, *Testaments of Radicalism. Memoirs of Working Class Politicians 1790-1855* (London: Europa Publication Ltd, 1977), p.195.

<sup>4</sup> *Saunders’s News-Letter*, 11 October 1819.

<sup>5</sup> James Epstein, ‘Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic practice and social conflict in early nineteenth-century England’, *Past & Present*, No.122 (Feb., 1989), pp.75-118.

<sup>6</sup> Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp.82-105.

air of a funeral *cortège* by its mournful solemnity.<sup>7</sup>

In an article published in 1983, Thomas Laqueur set about analysing the funerals of two leaders of the Chartist movement: Samuel Holberry and Ernest Jones.<sup>8</sup> The two ceremonies, he insisted, should be regarded as public representations of the deceased's place in politics and history, but also of the place working men might have in the social order. The latter element is important, for it was also at the core of the radical agitation for parliamentary reform. Demonstrating for the lower classes to be granted political rights was a means to claim another place in society for the emerging working class of Britain. Ascribing this role to the two radicals' funerals consequently calls for the consideration of the meanings and political function funerary rites might have had within popular radicalism, and especially, in the context of this article, within Chartism. The historiography of British radicalism is abundant and varied, but very little has been written on the place of funeral rites within the movement.<sup>9</sup> Taking on the questions raised by Laqueur's pioneering work, this article intends to contribute to the study of the political significance of mourning rites within nineteenth-century British popular radicalism. This research focuses on the burials of six Chartist leaders and militants: Samuel Holberry († 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1842), Joseph Williams († 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1849), Alexander Sharp († 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1849), Ben Rushton († 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1853), Feargus O'Connor († 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1855) and Ernest Jones († 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1869). Made public and funded by the radical movement, these funerals gathered tens of thousands of people – although estimates varied from one source to another – and found their place in the nineteenth-century radical repertoire of collective action extensively used by Chartism in its agitation for the Charter. They constituted, in the words of Charles Tilly, contentious performances making visible the worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment of Chartist supporters, and doing so also addressed some of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Charles Tilly, 'Les origines du répertoire de l'action collective contemporaine en France et en Grande-Bretagne', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, n°4 (Oct., 1984), pp.89-108.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, No.1 (Feb. 1983), pp.109-131.

<sup>9</sup> For a bibliography of existing works on Chartism, see Owen R. Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Robert (eds.), *The Chartist Movement: a new annotated bibliography* (London; New York: Mansell, 1995). More recent works on popular radicalism includes: Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*; Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: a new history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Paul Pickering, *Feargus O'Connor. A political life* (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2008); Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones, Chartism and the romance of politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The work of Antony Taylor, 'Radical Funerals, Burial Customs, and Political Commemoration: The Death and Posthumous Life of Ernest Jones', *Humanities Research* (Australian National University), No.10 (2004), pp.29-39 is noteworthy for its political analysis of the funeral of Ernest Jones.

concerns of everyday life of Chartism's working-class base.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Funeral rites, collective action, and the politics of everyday life

Paul Pickering lays stress on the necessity to pay attention to the public – in the sense of physical presence in public space – dimension of the radical agitation. From small public meetings organised in halls to mass-meetings paralysing an entire town, the radical movement manifested a preoccupation with visual communication in addition to newspapers and the verbal communication of addresses.<sup>11</sup> The language and decorum involved in popular protest have led historians to emphasise the theatrical character of nineteenth-century politics, and in particular the influence of melodrama in the radical political rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> For the Chartists, Mike Sanders underlined, the efficacy of the mass platform was based on the idea of a dramatic confrontation between the virtuous people and a corrupt state, eventually leading to the restoration of lost rights.<sup>13</sup> Banners, symbols, songs, speeches and the order of the processions were the results of conscious and careful arrangements making radical public meetings real moments of political theatre. Chartist meetings like the torchlight processions of 1838, Feargus O'Connor's appearance in fustian after his release from prison, or the mass-meeting on Kennington Common in 1848, reveal the extent to which these demonstrations constituted public performances for the attention of the authorities as well as of those who took part in them.<sup>14</sup> For the time of these meetings, the streets, squares or parks of towns or cities were turned into a stage on which was performed a radical play promoting universal suffrage and parliamentary reform. Chartist meetings were the theatrical performance of Chartism's claims,

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Robert G. Hall, 'Hearts and Minds. The Politic of Everyday Life and Chartism, 1832-1840', *Labour History Review*, Vol.74, No.1 (2009), pp.27-43.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Pickering, 'Class without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement', *Past & Present*, No.112 (August, 1986), pp.144-154.

<sup>12</sup> On the 'performative turn' in history, see the introduction to Peter Yeandle, Katherine Newey and Jeffrey Richards (eds.), *Politics, performance and popular culture. Theatre and society in nineteenth-century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp.1-15; Robert Poole, "'To the last drop of my blood": melodrama and politics in late Georgian England', in Yeandle et al., *Politics, performance and popular culture*, pp.21-43 demonstrates the importance of the melodramatic mode in the movement for parliamentary reform.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Sanders, 'The platform and the stage: the primary aesthetic of Chartism', in Yeandle et al., *Politics, performance and popular culture*, p.45.

<sup>14</sup> The notion of theatrical drama and its importance on these various occasions is notably underlined in Chase, *Chartism: a new history*.

legitimacy and aspirations.<sup>15</sup>

Central in the orchestration of radical collective actions, theatricality was also a key feature of the funeral rites that came to be associated with the Victorian age.<sup>16</sup> The ‘Victorian celebration of death’ has often been studied for its lavishness and extravagance, but there is more to be seen in Victorian funerary rites than a mere display of wealth.<sup>17</sup> In nineteenth-century Britain, funerals were ‘theatrical events’ in which the notion of ‘showing off well’ played a central part.<sup>18</sup> They were performed for both the players themselves and an audience outside of the mourning community. The theatrical dimension, central to both nineteenth-century collective actions and nineteenth-century funerals, linked the two kinds of public rites through a common role of representation and communication, making possible the combination of the mourning function of burials with the protest nature of radical public performances. The decision to make the burials public, and to cover the expenses by public subscription – a means Emmanuel Fureix has qualified as a ‘catalyst of public protest’ – gave radicals the opportunity to arrange ceremonies evidently bearing the marks of popular radicalism and inscribing them in the continuity of the radical agitation of the time.<sup>19</sup> The public subscription, moreover, filled the function of institutions at the core of the life of the working classes: the friendly societies and burial clubs. For working men and women, death was indeed a matter of lifelong savings and one of the main reasons to join a trade union, a friendly society or at the very least a burial fund.<sup>20</sup> Through the organisation of these funerals, Chartism was enacting a ‘politics of everyday life’; it was appealing to the emotions as well as the reason of its followers and linking parliamentary reform to everyday concerns.<sup>21</sup>

All the elements at the core of what made radical meetings, from the way processions were formed and the importance of radical orators, to the display of banners and numbers, also

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<sup>15</sup> Sanders, ‘The platform and the stage’, p.53.

<sup>16</sup> See John Wolffe, *Great Deaths: Grieving, Religion and Nationhood in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); James S. Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000); Laqueur, ‘Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals’. Ruth Richardson more recently challenged the periodization of this phenomenon, notably exposed by James S. Curl, arguing that lavish funerals already existed in the Georgian era. See Ruth Richardson, ‘Why was death so big in Victorian Britain?’, in Ralph Houlbrooke (ed.), *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*.

<sup>18</sup> Laqueur, ‘Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals’.

<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Fureix, *La France des larmes. Deuils politiques à l’âge romantique (1814-1840)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2009), p. 366.

<sup>20</sup> Peter H. J. H. Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England 1815-1875* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p.58.

<sup>21</sup> Hall, ‘Hearts and Minds’.

appeared on the occasion of the public funerals analysed here. Apart from the particular circumstances that originally motivated their organisation – namely the death of a Holberry or a O'Connor – the burials strongly resembled the public meetings then held by popular radicalism to support its demand for parliamentary reform. The tension existing between the need to perform the funerary rite and the wish to organise a radical demonstration appeared especially in the two placards announcing Holberry's funeral:

Death and Interment of Samuel Holberry. The inhabitants of Sheffield are respectfully informed, that the funeral of Samuel Holberry will take place on Monday, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1842, at the Sheffield Cemetery. The members and friends of the National Charter Association, meeting in the Political Institute, will meet in the above room, at half past twelve o'clock, for the purpose of joining the procession to attend his remains to the grave. By request of the bereaved widow of the deceased patriot, Mr. W. Thomason, from the vale of Leven, and delegate to the late London Convention of the industrious classes, will deliver an address over the victim's grave, at the conclusion of the usual service. A collection will be made on the ground, for the benefit of the widow.<sup>22</sup>

Funeral Procession of Samuel Holberry, the Martyr to Liberty. – 'Peace to his soul!' – The Friends of Freedom will assemble on Monday, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1842, in Paradise square, at one o'clock, for the purpose of forming into procession, with band, banners, &c. ; and from thence will march to Attercliffe, to meet the body of the departed Samuel Holberry, previous to its interment in the Cemetery. Marshals are appointed to form the procession and direct the route. It is particularly requested that all parties attending the funeral will abstain from intoxicating drinks, observing our motto of 'Peace, Law, and Order', and all will observe that strict decorum which the solemnity of the occasion demands. Mr. G.J. Harney and Mr. S. Parks will deliver appropriate addresses after the burial service.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Placard issued by the Political Institute and reproduced in *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>23</sup> Placard issued by the Fig Tree Lane Chartists and posted in the streets of Sheffield; quoted in *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

If the placard issued by the Political Institute soberly invited Sheffield's inhabitants to take part in the burial of the dead Chartist, that published by the Fig Tree Lane Chartists directly targeted the radical elements of Sheffield's population to urge them to partake in a *cortège* which, although introduced as a 'Funeral Procession', was to be made up of all the defining and politically significant elements of radical processions.

The very way the public funerals were organised contributed to turn them into radical demonstrations. It relied on a radical experience of arranging public meetings and consequently imprinted a distinctively radical mark on these burials. The parallel with the radical mass-platform was moreover often conscious on the part of both the committees in charge of organising the funerals and those who witnessed them. Contrary to the ambiguity that characterised the advertisement of Holberry's funeral, the Halifax Chartists published in 1853 a placard announcing the 'Public Meeting and Funeral' to be held following Ben Rushton's death, and during which it was originally intended to adopt a petition upon the remains of the deceased radical.<sup>24</sup> In 1849 the parallel with radical public meetings was made very clear by the *Northern Star's* comment on Williams's funeral that '[t]he excitement equalled, if not surpassed, the "great Trades' movement", the procession of the "National Petition" &c.'<sup>25</sup> The London correspondent of the *Belfast News-Letter* started his report of Feargus O'Connor's interment by referring to the 1848 mass-meeting on Kennington Common, these 'recollections forc[ing] themselves on [his] mind' at the vision of the people assembled in Kensal Green Cemetery.<sup>26</sup> In 1869 in Manchester, it was similarly obvious to many newspapers that 'the occasion [of Ernest Jones's burial] was taken advantage of by the members of the Reform League to have a large public demonstration'.<sup>27</sup>

The proceedings of public funerals organised by the radical movement indeed mirrored those of the nineteenth-century mass-platform.<sup>28</sup> Previously informed by the committee in

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<sup>24</sup> Programme of the funeral reproduced in *Halifax Courier*, 25 June 1853.

<sup>25</sup> *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>26</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 September 1855.

<sup>27</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 1 February 1869. A similar article was published in other newspapers throughout the country.

<sup>28</sup> The descriptions of each funeral on which the following discussion is based can be found in: *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842 (Samuel Holberry); *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849 (Joseph Williams); *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849 (Alexander Sharp); *Leeds Times*, 2 July 1853 and Benjamin Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist*, pp.219-221 and *People's Paper*, 2 July 1853 (Ben Rushton); *London Daily News*, 11 September 1855 (Feargus O'Connor); *Manchester Times*, 6 February 1869 (Ernest Jones).



charge of the funeral, people gathered at precise times and places to form into processions which made their way towards the location where the body had been kept to then escort it to the cemetery where it was to be buried. The designated places where the mourners were invited to assemble were noticeably those usually selected to arrange radical processions or to host radical activities. Fureix in his study of 'political mourning' in France has already noted the possibility for opponents to make use of the tolerance due to funeral rites to honour their dead in public space.<sup>29</sup> No special constables were mentioned in the accounts of the public funerals, although policemen were present on almost every occasion with the exception of Holberry's and Rushton's funerals. Their number, however, was small, and their action, rather than interfering with the procession, helped its progress through the city, a feature that certainly differed from the usual interaction between radicals and police detachments. This element is all the more noteworthy when compared to the almost 4,000 policemen deployed in March 1848 on the occasion of a Chartist meeting on Kennington Common; or to the 85,000 special constables enrolled a month later to police the Chartist mass meeting organised on that same location to present the third national petition to Parliament.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, despite funeral orations that fervently promoted the radical cause, the eulogists were not at risk of being arrested and convicted for seditious speech. The radical processions seemed to have control of the streets.

Sheffield's Paradise Square, which hosted Holberry's funeral procession in 1842, had been used on various occasions in the 1810s, and again during the Chartist agitation of the late 1830s, leading the authorities to prohibit public meetings in the square.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of this interdiction, Holberry's *cortège* was able to assemble on the site and obtain control of a space from which they had been banned. The itinerary followed by the funeral was the occasion for the Chartists to both defy the establishment and reaffirm their domination over specific parts of the town. Provocatively passing right in front of the Town Hall – which then also housed the Police Office – the procession challenged the control of public spaces usually associated with Sheffield authorities, before making its way through the Sheffield Moor – a working-class area where the upper classes probably seldom ventured – to reach the New Road to the Cemetery.

In London, 28 Golden Lane from where both Joseph Williams's and Alexander Sharp's

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<sup>29</sup> Fureix, *La France des larmes*, p.321.

<sup>30</sup> David Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.114-115; 130.

<sup>31</sup> Navickas, *Protest and the Politics*, p.64; Bill Moore, Sam Holmes and John Baxter, *Samuel Holberry – 1814-42. Sheffield's Revolutionary Democrat* (Sheffield: Holberry Society Publications, 1978), p.11.

*cortèges* departed was home of the Cripplegate Chartist locality while Russell Square – where O'Connor funeral procession was organised – had already been used as a convenient *rendezvous* by the Chartists, notably on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1848 for the presentation of the third national petition.<sup>32</sup> The interments of the two Chartist prisoners in 1849 strikingly revived the spatial memory of the intense agitation of 1848 through the itineraries followed by the processions. These itineraries, although their starting point and destination were the same, were different. Departing from 28 Golden Lane immediately inscribed the funerals in the spatial history of popular radicalism in the metropolis, while passing through Finsbury Square acted as a reminder of the agitation of 1848 during which the site often held radical meetings.<sup>33</sup> Both funeral routes were located at the centre of a zone delimited by the Thames and important radical venues. Lincoln's Inn Fields south-west of Finsbury Square, Clerkenwell Green north-west, Stepney Green south of the Victorian Cemetery and Bethnal Green with Bishop Bonner's Fields and Nova Scotia Gardens were the sites of important radical meetings in the turmoil of 1848; and as such the focus of the struggle opposing the Chartists and the authorities for control of London public space.<sup>34</sup> As the choice of Finsbury Square and Bethnal Green gave a radical mark to these funeral rites, the funeral processions simultaneously reasserted the importance of these contested sites and successfully – if temporarily – claimed their control by the Chartist working classes.

Information regarding the itinerary followed during O'Connor's funeral is more fragmented but the gathering of the bits and pieces published in various newspapers permits its reconstruction in part.<sup>35</sup> There again the geographical similarities with previous radical processions are striking. A first group of mourners started to gather in Finsbury Square, later heading to Smithfield. This time going West rather than East, O'Connor's procession began its journey almost exactly following the way taken by Williams's and Sharp's mourners six years before. As the symbolic significance of the venue was reactivated again, the funeral rites also echoed each other, reviving a radical memory associated with this public space. The Chartists then proceeded to Russell Square where the funeral procession was finally organised.<sup>36</sup> From Russell Square, the procession headed to Albert Terrace, Notting Hill at O'Connor's sister's

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<sup>32</sup> *Northern Star*, 15 April 1848.

<sup>33</sup> It was for example the case during the riots of 29 May - 1 June 1848. See Goodway, *London Chartism*, pp.116-119.

<sup>34</sup> Goodway, *London Chartism*, pp.68-96.

<sup>35</sup> *The Times*, 11 September 1855; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 12 September 1855; *Sheffield Independent*, 15 September 1855.

<sup>36</sup> The detailed itinerary between Smithfield and Russell Square is not known.

house where the body awaited. The *cortège* which marched through London without being questioned was thus first and foremost a radical one, and it remained so until it reached Notting Hill where it took all the attributes of mourning as the hearse and mourning coaches joined in. The procession then finally departed in the direction of Kensal Green Cemetery. Beginning in an area which had been the stage of a vivid Chartist agitation contesting the control of public space, the radicals thus made their way through an area of the metropolis from which they had been largely absent towards a cemetery in which none of the working men and women assembled to mourn the departed leader could afford to be buried. The itinerary followed by O'Connor's funeral *cortège* manifested, symbolically and spatially, his status of gentleman leader.

The Nicholls Temperance Hotel in Halifax, from where a first procession left for Northgate Hotel Field on the day of Ben Rushton's funeral, was one of the usual places of meeting of the local Chartists.<sup>37</sup> Having proceeded to the house of the departed radical in Ovenden, the *cortège* then made its way back to Halifax and towards the cemetery, passing through streets that had witnessed radical processions in the 1840s on the occasion of McDouall's and O'Connor's visits to the town.<sup>38</sup> The West Hill Park, moreover, where a public meeting took place immediately after the funeral, was the location already chosen in 1850 to hold a meeting celebrating Ernest Jones's release from prison.<sup>39</sup>

Leaving from Ernest Jones's house in Higher Broughton, north of Manchester, the procession that escorted the late radical leader to his grave in Ardwick Cemetery followed an itinerary marked by memories and reminders of his life.<sup>40</sup> The *cortège* passed in front of Manchester Assizes – where Jones defended the labouring poor – and traversed Cross Street where he settled to run his legal practice after 1860 to reach Piccadilly. This area was also that of Mosley Arms Hotel, where the Chartist leader was arrested for sedition in 1848, later presided the 'Labour Parliament' and survived an assassination attempt in 1854.<sup>41</sup> From Piccadilly, the procession then made its way through London Road and Downing Street to finally reach the cemetery. The celebration of Jones's involvement in Manchester radicalism also meant that these biographic elements mingled with episodes of the radical life of the city.

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<sup>37</sup> 'Chartism', *From Weaver to Web. Online Visual Archive of Calderdale History* <<http://www.calderdale.gov.uk/wtw/sources/themes/chartism.html>> [accessed 20 July, 2017].

<sup>38</sup> *People's Paper*, 2 July 1853; *Northern Star*, 19 September 1840; *Northern Star*, 4 December 1841.

<sup>39</sup> *Northern Star*, 20 July 1850.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *Ernest Jones*, pp.1-2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

The itinerary followed by the *cortège*, Antony Taylor argued, ‘recalled the mythologies of Manchester radicalism, and the monopoly of public space that had characterized the Chartist agitation in its heyday.’<sup>42</sup> The procession skirted open spaces traditionally controlled by Chartist congregations such as New Cross and Stevenson Square, acknowledging their importance in the geographical radical history of the city. Stevenson Square, in particular, was associated both with the Chartists and the Reform League's revival of the mass demonstration.<sup>43</sup>

In these public funerals, the coffin replaced the National Petition and the graveside turned into a platform from which radical orators addressed the crowd. As it was the case for meetings or public lectures organised by radical communities, orators were promoted as if their presence were another – if not the main – reason for radicals to attend the burial. One of the Chartist placards announcing Holberry's funeral thus advertised the names of George Julian Harney – a prominent orator of the movement – and Samuel Parks.<sup>44</sup> The placard issued to organise Ben Rushton's funeral conspicuously informed that Robert Gammage would perform the funeral service, and that the funeral oration would be delivered by Ernest Jones.<sup>45</sup> The eulogy of the latter, in 1869, was delivered by the equally well-known President of the Reform League Edmond Beales.<sup>46</sup> Commenting on O'Connor's burial, Karl Marx rightly captured the key role played by orators on the occasion of radical public meetings as well as political funerals. ‘All the requirements for a great demonstration were at hand,’ he reported, ‘but the finishing touch was missing because Ernest Jones was prevented from appearing and speaking by the fatal illness of his wife.’<sup>47</sup>

As was customary in eulogies, each of the orations praised the virtues of the deceased in an attempt to imprint on the mourners a positive image of their departed friends. The focus on their political engagement gave the image of individuals almost exclusively defined by their radical political beliefs. Holberry, Williams, Sharp, O'Connor and Jones were all honoured for their integrity, honesty, incorruptibility, courage and self-sacrifice. Through these qualities what was being enhanced was no less than the patriotism of the deceased radicals. ‘Not that he

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor, ‘Radical Funerals, Burial Customs, and Political Commemoration’.

[[http://gerald-massey.org.uk/jones/c\\_misc\\_letters\\_etc\\_3.htm](http://gerald-massey.org.uk/jones/c_misc_letters_etc_3.htm)] [accessed 22 July, 2017]

<sup>43</sup> See for example the monster meeting organised in late September 1841 for the visit of O'Connor to Manchester in *Northern Star*, 2 October 1841; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 3 June 1867, Reform Leaguers also assembled on the square in June 1867 to hold a mass-demonstration.

<sup>44</sup> Chartist placard quoted in *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>45</sup> Programme of the funeral reproduced in *Halifax Courier*, 25 June 1853.

<sup>46</sup> *Manchester Times*, 6 February 1869.

<sup>47</sup> *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, 15 September 1855.

respected the law less, / But that he loved his country more' William Dixon proclaimed over Sharp's grave when recalling his imprisonment.<sup>48</sup> This declaration could have similarly been made for Holberry, the 'heroic patriot', or Williams, who compromised himself 'for the sake of his country'.<sup>49</sup> As for Feargus O'Connor, his 'disinterested patriotism' was only to be matched by Ernest Jones in whom 'England [had] lost one of her truest and purest-hearted patriots'.<sup>50</sup> The term was important, for in the context of the post-Napoleonic radical culture 'patriot' denoted 'allegiance to 'universal principles of reason, liberty, and human fellowship'.<sup>51</sup> By describing the five radicals as dedicated patriots, their eulogists contributed to the process of creation of political martyrs described by historians Giordano and Fureix.<sup>52</sup> Their patriotism implied a fight against an abstract and tyrannical power, that 'corrupt system of class misrule' persecuting the supporters of parliamentary reform.<sup>53</sup> It also meant that they were fighting for a greater cause, that political transcendence alluded to by Fureix – freedom, democracy, human progress –, and for which they were ready to sacrifice their lives. Just as Jones 'preferred martyrdom to dishonour', O'Connor's 'self-sacrificing devotion' was acknowledged, Holberry's death became the embodiment of the 'sacrifice of the sons of freedom', Williams and Sharp would be remembered as 'our martyred friends'. Devotion, self-sacrifice and persecution for their political beliefs made the deceased radicals worthy of being 'numbered with the patriots who [had] died martyrs to the cause of liberty before [them]'.<sup>54</sup> In that respect, the funerals as a whole were deeply marked by, and contributed greatly to the 'democratic idiom' identified by Peter Gurney as being at the centre of Chartism.<sup>55</sup> They were

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<sup>48</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

<sup>49</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842; *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>50</sup> *A Funeral Oration delivered over the grave of Mr. Feargus O'Connor's by William Jones also, A Brief Memoir of the late Mr. Feargus O'Connor, M.P., by Thomas Martin Wheeler* (London: Holyoake & Co., 1855); *Wellington Journal*, 6 February 1869.

<sup>51</sup> James Epstein, *Radical expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.8.

<sup>52</sup> Christian Giordano, 'Gérer l'exemplarité en (re)mettant l'histoire à jour : les saints, les héros et les victimes', in Pierre Centlivres (dir.), *Saints, sainteté et martyre. La fabrication de l'exemplarité. Acte du colloque de Neuchâtel, 27-28 novembre 1997* (Neuchâtel : Editions de l'Institut d'ethnologie ; Paris : Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001), p.128 ; Fureix, *La France des larmes*, p.436. The process by which the deceased radicals studied here were instituted as martyrs to the democratic cause is extremely interesting and could make the object of a separate article in itself. It is unfortunately impossible to discuss this topic at length here.

<sup>53</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

<sup>54</sup> Harney's address over Holberry's grave, in *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>55</sup> Peter J. Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom: Languages of Democracy in the Chartist Movement', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol.83, No.3 (2014), pp.566-602.

also occasions to observe the invention of tradition in action by adding new narratives to the recent radical past invented by the Chartists, and new heroes to commemorate.<sup>56</sup> The eulogies delivered by Gammage and Jones over Rushton's grave stood out, in comparison, as more directly similar to political speeches.<sup>57</sup> The deceased Chartist veteran was celebrated as a working man who maintained 'a life of consistent, unshaken, unwavering constancy and devotion' to the radical cause. He too was a 'noble patriot'. Unlike a Holberry or a Sharp, however, he was not singled out as a martyr. He was an example of how working men suffered, and of how they should act politically, but the real subject of praise and devotion was undoubtedly the Chartist cause and its principles. 'There dies a patriot – but here a movement lives.'<sup>58</sup>

The eulogies were meant to have an effect on their listeners by exhorting them to be true democrats and to continue the fight for which their departed friends had given their life.<sup>59</sup> For martyrs are not only to be pitied and venerated, they are first and foremost "examples" given to the living community so as to arouse ethical dispositions such as loyalty, devotion, even sacrifice'.<sup>60</sup> Their deaths were tragic events, but they should strengthen the determination of the supporters of universal suffrage to fight for that 'glorious cause' whose glory was rendered manifest by the defunct radicals' sacrifice. If Samuel Holberry, Joseph Williams and Alexander Sharp, men of great virtues and spirit, had not hesitated to give their lives for the democratic principles of the People's Charter, then it had to be a cause worth fighting and even dying for. The path followed by the six men had led them to the grave, but it had 'secured immortality, if not for the victims, at least for their principles.'<sup>61</sup> In the course of a speech, the eulogists managed to transform the funerals into a manifestation of allegiance to radicalism and its democratic principles, inviting their hearers to take an oath by which they would swear to unite and fight against despotism, and thus avenge the 'thousands martyrs and ten thousands of patriots' slain by tyrannical powers.<sup>62</sup> The commemoration of the deceased patriots hence

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew Roberts, 'Chartism, Commemoration, and the Cult of the Radical Hero, c.1770-c.1840', *Labour History Review*, Vol.78, No.1 (2013), pp.3-32.

<sup>57</sup> *People's Paper*, 2 July 1853.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, Ernest Jones's address over Rushton's grave.

<sup>59</sup> Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom', p.579 notably emphasises that the identity of democrat implied a readiness to suffer and die for one's beliefs, linking the democratic idiom with the development of a martyrology in popular radicalism.

<sup>60</sup> Fureix, *La France des larmes*, p.18.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Clark's address over Williams's grave, in *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>62</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842

gave way to a hint of the future in which the radical movement was finally victorious.<sup>63</sup> Orators, officers and rank-and-file Chartists who opposed one another on the platform or through the pages of radical papers could appear side by side at the graveside of a departed brother, and be remembered that if they mourned the same man they also served the same cause. There lies the ‘emotional potency of ritual’ that helps developing a political solidarity expressed in the ritual as it provides a ‘mechanism for people to express their allegiance to an organization or to a movement without requiring a common belief’.<sup>64</sup>

The presence of renowned radical orators charged with delivering the funeral orations, and the message delivered, contributed both to the identification of the funerals as radical demonstrations and to making these radical demonstrations successful meetings. Along with the general proceedings of the interments – to which were added the unavoidable elements of the burial service – the addresses delivered over the graves demonstrated their function as contentious performances displaying unity in protest.

### III. Public funerals and radical decorum

These public burials also manifested their connection to a radical political tradition in the very appearance of their processions. Very early in the *Northern Star*'s account of the demonstration for the National Petition, a sharp criticism was made of a certain ‘class of men’ who had raised their voices to denounce what they saw as ‘useless expenditure of money’.<sup>65</sup> Those men attacked the use of bands and banners in Chartist meetings, an attack ironically mocked by the Chartist newspaper. The *Northern Star*, on the contrary, made of this ‘tinselled glitter and idle pomp’ the very ‘weapons’ of the people’s fight for the Charter. Bands, flags, banners indeed ‘mark[ed] the working-class presence on the streets of early nineteenth-century Britain’.<sup>66</sup> They manifested visually, but also musically, the working-class and radical identity of the demonstrators, and thus participated in the theatrical dimension of Chartist politics and

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<sup>63</sup> Roberts, ‘Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero’, p.17 underlines the link between past, present and future created by commemorative events and that helped mobilising supporters.

<sup>64</sup> David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp.72-3.

<sup>65</sup> *Northern Star*, 7 May 1842.

<sup>66</sup> Nicolas Mansfield, ‘Radical banners as sites of memory: the National Banner Survey’, in Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrell, *Contested Sites. Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), p.81.

in what Pickering has described as ‘the language of the face-to-face interaction in public’.<sup>67</sup> This common language of radicalism was also used on the occasion of the public funerals analysed here. The vision of a great number of people marching four or six abreast, gathered by identifiable districts, towns or political bodies, and led by musical bands in the streets of Sheffield, London, Halifax or Manchester – four towns which had an important radical tradition and witnessed a continuous radical agitation during the Chartist years – could certainly not fail to bring to mind the image of radical public meetings.<sup>68</sup>

The comparison was all the more obvious in the case of Holberry as his coffin was carried to the cemetery on the air of Pleyel’s *German Hymn* which had already been played two months before to escort the National Petition to the Commons.<sup>69</sup> As a consequence of the mournful occasion, the people who formed into processions to escort the coffins of the deceased radicals were asked to observe a ‘strict[er] decorum’<sup>70</sup> than that which usually prevailed in the excitement of radical mass-demonstrations. There was however still a decorum, and a decorum deeply marked by radical traditions. The ‘unadorned simplicity’ befitting the mournful ceremony of Williams’s burial did not prevent the display of the tricolour banner of the Finsbury Chartists, a banner that could be seen again a week later on the occasion of Sharp’s funeral, this time joined by the ‘magnificent flag’ of the Emmet brigade featuring the ‘harp of Erin’ and the slogan ‘What is life without liberty’.<sup>71</sup> Banners and flags were also present during Holberry’s and O’Connor’s funerals. In Sheffield, Holberry’s hearse was accompanied by the black banner of the Fig-tree Lane Chartists – inscribed ‘Vengeance is mine, and I will repay it, saith the Lord’ and ‘Clayton and Holberry, the Martyrs to the People’s Charter / Thou shalt do no murder’ – as well as the white banner of the Political Institute displaying the same message with the inscription ‘Political Institute, Birks – Clayton – and Holberry, Martyrs to the Charter / The Lord hateth the hand that shed innocent blood’.<sup>72</sup> Dorothy Thompson notably remarked that quotations from the Bible were commonly used on banners and placards during radical public meetings.<sup>73</sup> Contributing to inscribe the ceremony

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<sup>67</sup> Pickering, ‘Class without Words’, p.144.

<sup>68</sup> See Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (London: Temple Smith, 1984), Appendix, p.350, 354, 357 and 364 on the presence of Chartism in British towns and cities.

<sup>69</sup> *Northern Star*, 7 May 1842.

<sup>70</sup> Chartist placard quoted in *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>71</sup> On Williams’s funeral, see *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849. Robert Emmet was an Irish nationalist arrested while he was planning an attack of Dublin Castle, convicted and finally executed. On Sharp’s funeral, see *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

<sup>72</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, *The Chartists*, pp.118-119.



into a radical tradition of public agitation, this tendency appeared in Holberry's funeral too. The radicalism of the funeral rite was also highly visible in London in 1855, where a large black flag inscribed with white letters 'He lived and died for us' escorted O'Connor – made an almost Christ-like figure – to Kensal Green Cemetery, his pall-bearers carrying small white banners with the same inscription in black letters.<sup>74</sup> Other banners and flags, surmounted with black crape and inscribed 'Disobedience to tyrants is a duty to God' and 'Woe to the oppressor' could be seen, as well as a 'gigantic red flag' inscribed 'Alliance des peuples' and a banner that – it was believed – was present on the Parisian barricades in February 1848 showing the words 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ! République Démocratique et Sociale !'<sup>75</sup> To these was added another very significant visual element – a red cap of liberty carried on the top of the main standard.<sup>76</sup> The banners and mottos displayed at each funeral thus contributed to the performative character of the funerals as rites of institution establishing new martyrs to the democratic cause.<sup>77</sup>

Flags, banners, caps of liberty, but also bands of music and hymns sung at the graveside, acted as visual and aural mnemonics of the radical agitation for democracy.<sup>78</sup> The presence of the French red flag and banner at O'Connor's funeral, moreover, is indicative of the transformation of the Chartist democratic idiom incorporating elements of the European revolutionary movements of the late 1840s.<sup>79</sup> The slogans displayed and hymns sung conveyed the democratic message through the use of words such as 'the Charter', or 'liberty' opposed to 'tyrants'. At Williams's funeral, the pall covering the coffin bore the inscription 'He asked for freedom with his breath / Merciless tyrants gave him death', two verses that also figured on the hearse carrying Sharp's coffin a week later, to which had been added 'No man should be a felon for his political opinions'.<sup>80</sup> The same mnemonic function should be given to the platform erected on the occasion of Rushton's burial to enable Ernest Jones to address the crowd

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<sup>74</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 12 September 1855.

<sup>75</sup> These various elements can be identified through the accounts by *Sheffield Independent*, 15 September 1855; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 12 September 1855; Marx in *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, 15 September 1855; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 16 September 1855.

<sup>76</sup> *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, 15 September 1855

<sup>77</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Les rites comme actes d'institution', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, Vol.43 (June 1982), pp.58-63.

<sup>78</sup> On the 'mnemonic force' of the cap of liberty see Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty', p.86. Kate Bowan and Paul A. Pickering, "'Songs for the Millions": Chartist Music and Popular Aural Tradition', *Labour History Review*, Vol.74, No.1 (2009), pp.44-63 similarly emphasise the importance of music in Chartist political activities and as a powerful mnemonic.

<sup>79</sup> Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom', p.590.

<sup>80</sup> *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849; *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

assembled to commemorate the deceased Chartist.<sup>81</sup> In Jones's funeral, the radical tradition was made visible in the very identity of the mutes – four veterans of the Peterloo Massacre – and of the coffin bearers – four old Chartists of 1848.<sup>82</sup> The colours displayed in the *cortège* were another important element, all the more noticeable as they differed from the black of mourning. The red of radicalism flew high on the occasion of Feargus O'Connor's funeral, and it similarly marked individual affiliation to the movement in the form of 'a scarlet band, the insignia of Chartism' the members of Chartist lodges wore on their left arm.<sup>83</sup> At the funeral of Joseph Williams, the pall itself was of a conspicuous red which gave it the appearance of another banner.<sup>84</sup> Alexander Sharp's pall of scarlet velvet was bordered with white and green 'thus forming the Chartist tri-colour'.<sup>85</sup> From Holberry's funeral in 1842 to Ernest Jones's in 1869, the radical presence was thus marked through a complex system of visual, textual and musical elements directly taken from the repertoire of collective action associated with popular radicalism.

Another important function of the radical decorum of the funerals was to demonstrate the unity and respectability of the working-class supporters of Chartism, two elements that figure prominently in Tilly's definition of the demonstration as a contentious performance.<sup>86</sup> At the core of the democratic claim was 'a belief in the worth and dignity of every individual in the country, a belief that provided an acceptable credo for the popular democratic movement which no other principle could have united'.<sup>87</sup> The emphasis on order and discipline was as important in the organisation of the funerals as on the occasion of mass meetings. The placard issued by the Fig-tree Lane Chartists in Sheffield stipulated that it was 'particularly requested that all parties attending the funeral will abstain from intoxicating drinks, observing our motto of "Peace, Law, and Order"'.<sup>88</sup> Such a demand went in the sense of the solemnity required at interments, but it also coincided with the radicals' wish to give a positive image of popular

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<sup>81</sup> Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist*, pp.219-221.

<sup>82</sup> *Manchester Times*, 6 February 1869

<sup>83</sup> *Sheffield Independent*, 15 September 1855.

<sup>84</sup> *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>85</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

<sup>86</sup> Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p.72; p.121.

Such use of funerals was also largely made by trade unions in that period, see Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism. Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2012), p.133.

<sup>87</sup> Thompson, *The Chartists*, p.96.

<sup>88</sup> Placard reproduced in *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

radicalism.

Marshals were appointed for all six funerals. O'Connor's mourners were reminded to observe the greatest decorum; Joseph Williams's were exhorted to leave the Cemetery peacefully, a directive 'strictly followed' by the mourners; and Ernest Jones's were praised by the *Western Daily Press* for having patiently waited outside of the Cemetery before the gates were opened to them.<sup>89</sup> It is striking that at Jones's funeral the press was ready to acknowledge the 'respectful silence' observed even by the 'roughest of those present', whereas a couple of months later the alleged presence of the same 'roughest' elements at the demonstration organised in London in memory of the late Chartist leader was the focus of some metropolitan papers' harsh critique of the event.<sup>90</sup> Order and dignity being expected at interments, it seems that non-radical observers were more willing to recognize the good behaviour of the grieving lower classes. Some nuances nonetheless appeared in the way the press reported the funerals, illustrating middle class reluctance to give the Chartists too much credit. While admitting that Holberry's mourners 'behaved with the utmost decorum', the *Sheffield Independent*, for example, also made a great deal of reporting that some people 'forgot the exhortations to preserve order, and raised several fights as the procession advanced'.<sup>91</sup>

The wish to demonstrate the respectability of the mourners echoed and supplemented a more fundamental role of the burial regarding the image given of the departed himself. In nineteenth-century Britain, what was manifested through the arrangements of an interment was the respectability of the person being buried. Each detail, each ornament, from the type of nails used to the number of mutes accompanying the hearse, contributed to granting the departed a greater or lesser respectability by its presence or absence. The 'respectable funeral' consequently came to be defined in opposition to the pauper funeral which became a locus of anxiety for the lower classes and pervaded the rhetoric of popular radicalism.<sup>92</sup> For radicals, the pauper's grave was the ultimate indignity and the ignominious manifestation of the injustice endured by the labouring classes of Great Britain. Robert Hall notably emphasises the central role played by the New Poor Law and the Anatomy Act in politicising everyday life.<sup>93</sup> The

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<sup>89</sup> *Sheffield Independent*, 15 September 1855; *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849; *Western Daily Press*, 2 February 1869.

<sup>90</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 2 February 1869; see for example *The Times*, 27 March 1869 or *London Daily News*, 27 March 1869.

<sup>91</sup> *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>92</sup> Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals', p.114. See also Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in England, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>93</sup> Hall, 'Hearts and Minds', p.29.

basic pauper funeral comprised a plain pine coffin, four bearers and a pall of rough woven cloth rented for the occasion. The features most commonly added, which reveal what was necessary to a 'minimally respectable funeral', were a coffin plate bearing the name of the deceased, and elements to make the *cortège* finer: a mute, a better pall, more expensive wood for the coffin.<sup>94</sup> All six Chartists studied here died poor, but the movement, organising public subscriptions to pay for their funerals, did not skimp on the material trappings.

The *Northern Star* proudly described Holberry's 'beautifully decorated' hearse and his 'splendid oak coffin' and on which figured a breast-plate.<sup>95</sup> The *cortège* comprised a band of music, two undertakers, two mutes, and two mourning coaches as well as an open carriage following the hearse. The radical paper likewise admired the 'plate glass manufacturers van' forming a raised dais on which Sharp's coffin was placed, covered with a pall of scarlet velvet, and followed by several cabs. Williams's funeral comprised a red pall of glazed calico, a hearse also decorated with a piece of calico, and a mourning coach for the deceased's relatives as well as five cabs following it.<sup>96</sup> Benjamin Wilson remembers in his memoirs the elegant *double* coffin, carried by six bearers and covered with black cloth, of Ben Rushton, and the 'splendid pall' also carried by six mourners.<sup>97</sup> As for Feargus O'Connor, the late leader was carried to his grave in a hearse with four horses loaded with feathers and followed by two mourning coaches also drawn by four horses each.<sup>98</sup> Up to sixty carriages were said to be present in Ernest Jones's *cortège* in addition to the hearse preceded by a band of music and mutes.<sup>99</sup> His coffin, figuring a brass plate inscribed with his name, was covered with black cloth and a pall of black velvet also covered the hearse.<sup>100</sup> It is striking that in the cases of Holberry, Williams and Rushton – that is to say working men as opposed to gentlemen leaders – the radical account of the funerals put a much greater emphasis on these features than the other non-radical available sources.<sup>101</sup> The exact cost of the funerals is difficult to assess, although we know that O'Connor's funeral

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<sup>94</sup> Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals', p.114.

<sup>95</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>96</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849; *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>97</sup> Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist*, pp.219-221.

<sup>98</sup> *The Times*, 11 September 1855.

<sup>99</sup> *Manchester Times*, 6 February 1869.

<sup>100</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 February 1869.

<sup>101</sup> The funeral of Alexander Sharp seems not to have been reported by any other newspaper figuring in the database of the British Newspaper Archive than the *Northern Star*.

cost the radicals just over £66.<sup>102</sup> These elements do suggest that they were expensive enough to give the deceased a degree of respectability at least as important as that granted to eminent members of the middle classes.

The dignity that was being conferred on the dead radicals was a claim understood by all. When it came to the celebration of departed friends or relatives, respectability was a shared language between all classes. By giving working men and radicals respectable funerals, the radical movement granted them what many considered a ‘right of citizenship’.<sup>103</sup> In opposition to the exclusion represented by the pauper's burial, these ceremonies echoed radical agitation by claiming for the working classes social and political inclusion in the body politic.<sup>104</sup> Even more than banners, colours and bands, however, what made the core of the nineteenth-century radical decorum was the display of numbers.

#### **IV. ‘Ye are many – they are few’: the battle of numbers<sup>105</sup>**

[T]he Chartists’ only outstanding strength’, Dorothy Thompson underlines, ‘[was] their numbers’.<sup>106</sup> The whole strategy of petitioning and organising mass platforms was based on this concern for ‘the mass showing of numbers.’<sup>107</sup> The number of mourners who took part in the public funerals was more than the mere manifestation of a desire to commemorate departed friends. It was an integral part of the preoccupation with making these funerals successful radical demonstrations. Although the impressive size of the *cortèges* made this characteristic hard to ignore, the various ways in which the question was addressed by contemporaries remain revealing of the stake it represented. The vocabulary used by the *Northern Star* is especially interesting.

Reporting on Holberry’s funeral, the paper underlined the presence of ‘thousands’ of people assembling to form a ‘dense mass’ ordered in an incessantly growing procession as

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<sup>102</sup> *People’s Paper*, 1 March 1856. This sum included the cost of the grave, the undertaker’s bill (just over £42) and the expense of the procession, but not the cost of the monument later erected over O’Connor’s grave.

<sup>103</sup> Strange, *Death Grief and Poverty*, p.100.

<sup>104</sup> See Navickas, *Protest and the Politics*, p.152 on the radical resistance to the break of boundary between the self and society represented by the New Poor Law and the Anatomy Act.

<sup>105</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy* (1819).

<[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Mask\\_of\\_Anarchy](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Mask_of_Anarchy)> [accessed 20 June 2015].

<sup>106</sup> Thompson, *The Chartists*, p.77.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p.324.

‘immense numbers continued to swell the mass’.<sup>108</sup> Seven years later, it similarly described the ‘dense-moving body’ that gathered in Golden Lane for Williams and the ‘immense concourse of persons’ that followed the hearse to the cemetery where they joined ‘many thousands awaiting the arrival of the funeral *cortège*’.<sup>109</sup> The next Sunday, a ‘vast concourse of persons’ once again crowded the streets of London, despite the rain, to pay a last tribute to Alexander Sharp.<sup>110</sup> The route to the cemetery, ‘in consequence of the immense concourse of persons – was rather more than two hours and a half’ and at Whitechapel ‘the immense width and length from Aldgate to Mile End gate, presented a forest of densely crowded human beings’.<sup>111</sup> What appears through the accounts of the *Northern Star* is a radical lexicon of vastness and density that was used on the occasion of mass meetings as well as of the funerals of the three Chartist prisoners.<sup>112</sup> The disappearance of the *Northern Star* in December 1852 makes such a lexical analysis impossible to carry out for the funerals of Rushton, O’Connor and Jones. It nevertheless gives a hint of the conscious parallel that existed in the minds of radicals, regarding the importance of numbers, between these funerals and the mass platform.

Counting had become a key element of the radical strategy on both a national and a local scale. The very choice of the day on which to organise the funerals might be an indication that such a concern was also present on these mournful occasions. Just as the Second National Petition, the interments of Holberry and O’Connor took place on Mondays, an unusual day to present a petition, but deliberately chosen by the National Convention because the custom of ‘Saint Monday’ meant that workers commonly did not work on Mondays.<sup>113</sup> The observance of Saint Monday depended on the economic situation of each and on the state of trade, but reports in 1842 still stated that the masters ‘often have great difficulty in getting their men to work on Mondays, unless by that time they have expended the earnings of the previous week’.<sup>114</sup> Despite a serious decline during the nineteenth-century, the custom survived well into the 1860s and was still largely observed in some areas and trades.<sup>115</sup> It is interesting to

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<sup>108</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>109</sup> *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>110</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> For a comparison with the language used in the accounts of the presentation of the national petitions in 1842 and 1848, see *Northern Star* 7 May 1842; 15 April 1848.

<sup>113</sup> Chase, *Chartism: a new history*, p.205.

<sup>114</sup> *Local Reports on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of England* (1842), quoted in Douglas Reid, ‘The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766-1876’, *Past & Present*, No. 71 (May 1976), p.79

<sup>115</sup> Reid, ‘The Decline of Saint Monday’, pp.76-101.

note that the *Sheffield Independent* established a causal relation between '[b]eing St. Monday' and the fact that Holberry's procession 'drew together a large concourse of people'.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, the burials of Williams, Sharp and Rushton took place on Sundays, a holiday for the working classes, and that of Ernest Jones on a Saturday afternoon at a time when the 'Saturday half-holiday' had been implemented in Manchester since 1843.<sup>117</sup> No rules seem to have applied in Britain regarding the day of funerals. The Duke of Wellington was buried on a Thursday in 1852; Lord Palmerston on a Friday in 1865.<sup>118</sup> We lack the sources that could have given us traces of debates regarding the practical aspects of the organisation of the funerals, but the fact that they all took place at moments when the working classes were able to attend in great numbers is noteworthy.

Essential to radical politics, numbers were the object of a struggle between the various newspapers. The same battle of numbers took place in July 1842 when the estimate of 20,000 people attending Holberry's funeral given by the *Sheffield Iris* - 'a Whig paper and no friend to the Chartists' - was challenged by the *Northern Star*.<sup>119</sup> Relying on non-Chartist sources to impart these numbers a greater legitimacy, the paper gave the estimate of 50,000 people present at the funeral. Even if the latter estimate was exaggerated, to gather more than 20,000 people in a town that counted 111,090 inhabitants in 1841 - and whose contribution to the National Petition was estimated at 25,000 signatures - was quite an achievement.<sup>120</sup>

When it is possible to compare several sources, the importance given to numbers to decide whether the funeral could be considered a success or not was manifested by two elements. Either the estimates provided by the radical press were significantly more important than those reported in most papers, or some papers hostile to radicalism symmetrically gave deliberately low figures to describe the procession. The second case notably applied to O'Connor's funeral. Most papers agreed on the very impressive size of the Chartist leader's funeral. *The Times* itself estimated that 'no less than 15,000 to 20,000 persons were present in the cemetery, and probably there was an equal number of spectators in the road through which the procession passed', a statement corroborated by both Marx and George W.M. Reynolds, although Ernest Jones's *People's Paper* more than doubled that estimate, stating that at least

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<sup>116</sup> *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>117</sup> Reid, 'The Decline of Saint Monday', p.86.

<sup>118</sup> Wolfe, *Great Deaths*.

<sup>119</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>120</sup> Thompson, *The Chartists*, Appendix, p.364; *Northern Star*, 7 May 1842.

100,000 people were present.<sup>121</sup> The contrast with the overall picture given by the *Newcastle Chronicle* is striking.<sup>122</sup> The interment was judged a political failure, and the paper reflected on the number of people present to support this assessment. According to its columnist, less than 300 people from the eastern districts of London assembled on Russell Square, and while the paper admitted that the *cortège* gathered strength along the way to O'Connor's sister's house, its final estimate of the crowd was a mere '3,000 persons in all [who] mustered round the house at Notting Hill'. The very existence of an article relating such a different version of O'Connor's funeral suggests how numbers were regarded as a decisive element in determining the ceremony's political significance.

As for estimates given by the radical press itself, the most striking example is certainly that of Rushton's burial. In his autobiography, Benjamin Wilson gave what he thought to be the numbers displayed by the Tory *Halifax Guardian* at the time, i.e. 6,000 to 10,000 people attending the funerals.<sup>123</sup> To these, Ernest Jones opposed the considerable estimate of 'a quarter of a million of people'.<sup>124</sup> Wilson's remark that five extra trains had to be engaged to convey people from Bradford alone, and that he 'saw more people in Halifax that day than [he] had ever seen before or since', does suggest that the *Guardian* underestimated the attendance at Rushton's funeral.<sup>125</sup> A quarter of a million people, however was probably also an exaggeration.<sup>126</sup> The gap was smaller in 1848, but the *Northern Star's* estimate of 20,000 people gathered around the grave of Joseph Williams still doubled the estimate of 10,000 of the *London Daily News* and many other newspapers reporting the funeral.<sup>127</sup> Reporting on the burial of Alexander Sharp, the Chartist paper was also anxious to explain the seemingly fewer number of people than in Williams's *cortège* a week ago by the poor condition of the roads following a very rainy morning.<sup>128</sup> The shortage of mourners did not last, however, and the paper estimated, based on 'the assurance of an inspector of police', that 30,000 persons were

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<sup>121</sup> *The Times*, 11 September 1855; *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, 15 September 1855; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 16 September 1855; *People's Paper*, 15 September 1855.

<sup>122</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle*, 14 September 1855.

<sup>123</sup> Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist*, p.221.

<sup>124</sup> *People's Paper*, 2 July 1853.

<sup>125</sup> Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist*, p.221.

<sup>126</sup> As a comparison, Chase, *Chartism: a new history*, p.302. 150,000 Chartists were present to escort the National Petition to the Commons in 1848.

<sup>127</sup> *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849; *London Daily News*, 17 September 1849. The article figuring in the *London Daily News* was republished in various newspapers throughout the country such as *Bradford Observer*, 21 September 1849; *Bristol Times*, 22 September 1849 and *York Herald*, 22 September 1849.

<sup>128</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.



present in the cemetery alone. And who would challenge the testimony of a police inspector?

The debates surrounding the size of the crowds attending the funerals suggest that the radicals managed to impose, at least partly, their definition of these events upon their opponents and detractors. This was also visible in the intentions sometimes ascribed to the spectators of the funerals. In 1842, the *Sheffield Independent* characterised Holberry's funeral as a 'demonstration in favour of [Chartist] principles', thus acknowledging the political character of the ritual.<sup>129</sup> Not giving any precise figures, the Liberal paper spoke of 'a large concourse of people', but immediately added that 'the Chartists forming the procession [were] comparatively few in number in relation to the indifferent spectators'. The use of the adjective 'indifferent' was certainly not innocent. It suggested an entirely different interpretation of the event, where a limited group of radicals offered themselves in spectacle to an indistinct mass of onlookers not necessarily sharing the radicals' political ideas. At O'Connor's funeral, numerous papers similarly acknowledged the presence of 'an immense concourse of persons' in Kensal Green Cemetery, but immediately suggested that their presence should be attributed to mere curiosity and a desire to enjoy the nice weather rather than to any sympathy for the political principles of the late Chartist leader.<sup>130</sup> One columnist further insisted on this aspect by distinguishing between those in Russell Square who 'formed themselves into a procession' and the 'crowd of several thousands being collected there to witness the spectacle, besides those actually engaged in it'.<sup>131</sup>

Disputing claimed number of participants was a common tactic to downplay the impact of a contentious performance.<sup>132</sup> Describing the 'anxious gazers' met by Holberry's procession, the *Northern Star* thus directly contradicted the *Sheffield Independent* by laying emphasis on those 'men and women watching with seemingly intense interest the melancholy sight'.<sup>133</sup> The windows, balconies and other available places on the line of the route followed by William's *cortège* were similarly 'crowded with anxious and sympathising spectators.'<sup>134</sup> The same 'sympathising spectators' at Sharp's funeral were spectators rather than marching in the

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<sup>129</sup> *Sheffield Independent*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>130</sup> The same sentence appeared in more than a dozen newspapers, the earliest issue in which it figured being that of the *London Daily News*, 11 September 1855 which was probably the original source for the other – provincial – papers.

<sup>131</sup> *London Daily News*, 11 September 1855.

<sup>132</sup> Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, pp.122-3.

<sup>133</sup> *Northern Star*, 2 July 1842.

<sup>134</sup> *Northern Star*, 22 September 1849.

procession only because of the poor state of the road, the *Northern Star* suggested.<sup>135</sup> For the opponents of radicalism, questioning the political identity of the people lining the roads and crowding the windows was easier than challenging the conspicuous presence of thousands of persons. For the radicals, ascribing feelings of sympathy to those who did not join in the procession was an easy way to ‘enrol’ new members and claim the control of the streets and public space of the city.

The organisation of the funerals of Samuel Holberry, Joseph Williams, Alexander Sharp, Feargus O’Connor, Ben Ruston and Ernest Jones drew on the radicals’ expertise in holding open-air meetings. The various elements displayed – verbal and non-verbal, visual and musical – linked these funerals with a radical tradition of agitating and occupying public space. As contentious performances, they demonstrated the fitness of the working classes for the franchise and protested against their exclusion from the body politic. As commemorative rituals, they contributed to the invention of a Chartist tradition based on the celebration of radical heroes and martyrs. Matthew Roberts has defended the idea that the emphasis put on a pantheon of heroes by Chartism corresponds, to a certain extent, to a desire to ape the ritual practices of the establishment.<sup>136</sup> Public funerals were not, of course, the prerogative of popular radicalism, and the government organised its fair share of state and royal funerals over the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>137</sup> However, I would argue that the six burials studied here partly challenge Roberts’s allegation. If lavish funerals were organised by the elites, mass demonstrations were largely the reserve of the working classes, and that is the form these six funerals took. They were made possible by a network of radical solidarities and relied on a rich working-class culture in which self-help often took the form of burial clubs and friendly societies. More importantly, four of them commemorated working men, therefore showing that Chartist heroes could be found in the ranks of the working class.

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<sup>135</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 September 1849.

<sup>136</sup> Roberts, ‘Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero’, pp.31-2.

<sup>137</sup> Wolfe, *Great Deaths*.