





Songs of the Period

By H. V. MORTON



CENTURY ago, Queen Adelaide, consort of King William IV, was convinced that fate had selected her as a second Marie Antoinette. She, and those around her, mistook the deep mutterings of the Reform Bill mobs for the sound of the tumbrils. And as we look back upon an England lit up by the glare of burning ricks, and loud with the noise of smashed machinery and the yells of furious crowds, it does, indeed, seem that never in history was this country nearer Revolution.

THE BALLADS OF THE PEOPLE

One wonders, as one reads the history of this time, what men like the six Tolpuddle labourers would have talked about could one have met them in the local inn. We know well, from the writings of men like Cobbett, the sort of things which inflamed them to a sense of the injustice which hedged them on every side. Yet, quite naturally, the illiterate labourers of that time have left no account of the struggle as it appealed to them. At first sight, one might say that we have no first-hand record of the

feelings of the downtrodden classes during the years 1800 to 1850. Yet this is not quite true. Buried away among the topical literature of the first decade of the 19th Century are a number of street ballads, and in these one finds some reflection of the mighty emotions that swayed men a hundred years ago. These broadsides and ballads are extremely rare, and they are, I think, of very great social interest. They were composed white-hot on the heels of some event, and sung in the streets, just as you can hear in the inn parlours of Exmoor to-day the old-fashioned ballad "From Bratton to Porlock Bay," and that other ballad, whose name I do not know, which begins gloriously:—

I was born and bred in Boston
In the city you all know well. . . .

Such rhymes are the true voice of the people, and I propose to give some of those that were sung during the period between the Reform Bill and the Chartist agitations. Here is one which reflects the point of view of Loveless and his companions. It was called:—

PRESENT TIMES, OR EIGHT SHILLINGS A WEEK

Come all you bold Britons, where'er you may be
I pray give attention, and listen to me,
There once was good times, but they're gone by complete,
For a poor man lives now on Eight Shillings a week.

Such times in old England there never was seen,
As the present ones now; but much better have been,
A poor man's condemned, and looked on as a thief,
And compelled to work hard for Eight Shillings a week.

Our venerable fathers remember the year,
When a man earned three shillings a day and his beer,
He then could live well, keep his family neat,
But now he must work for Eight Shillings a week.

The Nobs of "Old England" of shameful renown,
Are striving to crush a poor man to the ground,
They'll beat down their wages and starve them complete,
And make them work hard for Eight Shillings a week.

A poor man to labour (believe me 'tis so)
To maintain his family is willing to go
Either hedging or ditching, to plough or to reap,
But how does he live on Eight Shillings a week?

In the reign of Old George, as you all understand,
Here then was contentment throughout the whole land,
Each poor man could live, and get plenty to eat,
And now he must pine on Eight Shillings a week.

So now to conclude and finish my song,
May the times be much better, before it is long,
May every labourer be able to keep
His children and wife on—Twelve Shillings a week!

There is something infinitely touching, to my mind, about the last verse of this ingenuous production. It could never have been invented by anyone outside the stark poverty of the time.

Here is another ballad, this time the cry of the unemployed mechanic:—

THE MECHANIC'S APPEAL TO THE PUBLIC

Give attention awhile to my rhymes
Good people of every degree,
I assure you these critical times
Have reduced me to great poverty.
I'm a tradesman reduced to distress,
Dame Fortune on me long has frowned,
And that is the cause, I confess,
Which compels me to roam up and down.

Chorus

Then good people attend to my rhymes,
And pity a tradesman reduced;
For appealing to you in these times,
I submissively hope you'll excuse.

I once did in happiness dwell,
With my family around me at home,
And little (the truth I will tell)
Did I think I'd have cause for to roam.
But misfortune, she owed me a grudge,
And entered in my cottage door,
And caused me in sorrow to mourn,
And my misery long to deplore.

Mechanics are now at a stand,
And trade in all quarters is bad,
They're complaining all over the land,
And their children are hungry and sad.
Travel Britain wherever you will,
You may behold everything dead,
The tradesmen are all standing still
And their children are crying for bread.

My family now weep in distress,
With cold and with hunger they cry,
Which grieves me to see, I confess,
No food or employment have I.
The weather is cold and severe,
And I do in sorrow lament;
I have no food for my children dear,
And my goods are all taken for rent.

The Martyrs of Tolpuddle

For a tradesman reduced heave a sigh, Who in sorrow and agony grieve, And, good Christians, as you pass him by, With a little, pray, do him relieve. A little you never will miss, To one who in sorrow complain, And our Heavenly Father above, The same will repay you again.	Oh, you that distress never knew, May your breast such affliction ne'er feel, The sufferings that I do endure, I cannot to you half reveal. For subsistence my clothes I have sold, I wander to look for a friend, So now my sad troubles are told, And my tale I am going to end.
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Here is a kind of Chartist "Marseillaise," a more stirring and violent appeal than the helpless and gloomy ballads I have just quoted. It was called:—

THE SONG OF THE LOWER CLASSES

We plough and sow—we're so very, very low That we delve in the dirty clay, Till we bless the plain with the golden grain, And the vale with the fragrant hay. Our place we know—we're so very low, 'Tis down at the landlord's feet: We're not too low the bread to grow, But too low the bread to eat.	Down, down we go—we're so very low, To the hell of the deep sunk mines; But we gather the proudest gems that glow, When the crown of a despot shines. And whenever he lacks—upon our backs Fresh loads he deigns to lay: We're far too low to vote the tax, But not too low to pay.
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We're low, we're low, we're very, very low,
Yet from our fingers glide
The silken flow—and the robes that glow
Round the limbs of the sons of pride.
And what we get—and what we give—
We know, and we know our share;
We're not too low the cloth to weave,
But too low the cloth to wear.

Reform Bill ballads are strangely rare. There are several not very inspiring marching songs, and one known as "The Operatives' March," which has nothing very remarkable about it. I think the most interesting popular relic of the Reform period is a mock biblical effort entitled "The Chronicles of the Pope," which begins:—

THE CHRONICLES OF THE POPE

Now, it came to pass that the land had rest for seventeen years. For the Britons had subdued their enemies, even the French, and restored peace to all the Continent.

Nevertheless, the people groaned by reason of oppression, and the multitude of taxes which was laid upon them to support the rich and the great with pensions and rewards.

And they cried and petitioned for redress, but their prayers were not heard.

And George IV was gathered to his fathers and William IV reigned in his stead.

Now there was at this time a mighty man of renown called Arthur (The Duke of Wellington).

And he gained the confidence of the King, and abused his ear with falsities respecting the people.

And the people were much displeased with the power of this man of war, for he ruled them as he had done his soldiers.

Arthur, feeling that he could rule no longer, resigned his authority, and the King elected that nobleman, even Grey, whose possessions lieth north of the Tyne, to be ruler under him over the people.

And he stood before the King and said, "O, King, live for ever; thy people have been long afflicted with heavy burdens which they cannot bear, and their cries and lamentations ascend to heaven."

And the King was troubled in his mind at these sayings, and he caused the records of the Realm to be brought before him, and then he found that his subjects were not fairly represented; and he was in much agitation of mind, and trembled exceedingly and cried with a loud voice, "What shall I do?"

And the noble, even Grey, said unto him, "We must endeavour to amend these things; and, O King, if thou wilt give me permission, such a law will be framed that all the land will rejoice."

And the King said, "Do as it pleaseth thee best in this matter."

The chronicle, which reveals the touching faith of the Common People, then goes on to describe the drafting and rejection of the Reform Bill, the opposition of the Tories, led by the Duke of Wellington, the Reform Bill riots and, eventually, the passing of the measure on the urgent instruction of William IV, who is made to say: "Get this Bill passed, else we be all dead men."

The hideous penal code of the time is vividly reflected in two ballads in which poachers, with a strange, simple lack of venom, describe the sentence of transportation for "night walking," as they delicately describe poaching, ending on the moral note so dear to the ballad monger. The first is called:—

BOTANY BAY

Come all you men of learning,
And a warning take by me,
I would have you quit night-walking,
And shun bad company.
I would have you quit night-walking,
Or else you'll rue the day,
You'll rue your transportation, lads,
When you're bound for Botany Bay.

I was brought up in London Town
And a place I know full well,
Brought up by honest parents,
For the truth to you I'll tell.
Brought up by honest parents,
And rear'd most tenderly,
Till I became a roving blade,
Which proved my destiny.

My character soon taken was,
And I was sent to jail,
My friends they tried to clear me
But nothing would prevail.
At the Old Bailey Sessions,
The Judge to me did say,
"The Jury's found you guilty, lad,
So you must go to Botany Bay."

To see my aged father dear,
As he stood near the bar,
Likewise my tender mother,
Her old grey locks to tear;
In tearing of her old grey locks,
These words to me did say:
"O Son, O Son, what have you done,
That you're going to Botany Bay?"

It was on the Twenty-eighth of May
From England we did steer,
And, all things being safe on board,
We sail'd down the river clear.
And every ship that we passed by,
We heard the sailors say:
"There goes a ship of clever hands.
And they're bound for Botany Bay."

There is a girl in Manchester,
A girl I know full well,
And if ever I get my liberty,
Along with her I'll dwell.
O then I mean to marry her,
And no more to go astray:
I'll shun all evil company,
Bid adieu to Botany Bay.

The Song of the Lower Classes

By Ernest Charles Jones (1819–1869)

WE plough and sow—we're so very, very low
That we delve in the dirty clay,
Till we bless the plain with the golden grain,
And the vale with the fragrant hay.
Our place we know—we're so very low,
'Tis down at the landlord's feet:
We're not too low the bread to grow,
But too low the bread to eat.

Down, down we go—we're so very, very low,
To the hell of the deep-sunk mines,
But we gather the proudest gems that glow
When the crown of a despot shines.
And, whenever he lacks, upon our backs
Fresh loads he deigns to lay:
We're far too low to vote the tax,
But not too low to pay.

We're low—we're low—mere rabble, we know,
But at our plastic power,
The mould at the lordling's feet will grow
Into palace and church and tower.
Then prostrate fall in the rich man's hall,
And cringe at the rich man's door:
We're not too low to build the wall,
But too low to tread the floor.
We're low—we're low—we're very, very low,

Yet from our fingers glide
The silken flow—and the robes that glow
Round the limbs of the sons of pride.
And what we get—and what we give—
We know, and we know our share:
We're not too low the cloth to weave,
But too low the cloth to wear!

We're low—we're low—we're very, very low,
And yet when the trumpets ring,
The thrust of a poor man's arm will go
Thro' the heart of the proudest king.
We're low—we're low—our place we know,
We're only the rank and file,
We're not too low to kill the foe,
But too low to touch the spoil.

Lord Melbourne Looks Down

THIS Year of Grace, the late Lord Melbourne
Looks from his place among the well-born,
Where by-gone hordes
Of gents and lords
In heaven huddle—
And turns bewildered to his neighbour,
James Frampton, as the Lads of Labour
With song and play
And spirits gay
March to Tolpuddle.

“Dammit!” Lord Melbourne murmurs, “Dammit
Jemmy! they’re honouring James Hammett!
They take the line
That fellow Brine,
Born in the scale low
With the two Standfields, and the Loveless
Brothers (uncoronetted, gloveless,
And badly-shod)
Have earned of God
A First-Class Halo!

“Yet surely I remember, Frampton,
That you and I between us clamped on
The irons which
The Titled Rich
Never degraded?
How *can* these ploughmen, herds and carters,
Whom we called Criminals, be Martyrs,
And now outbid
Our claims, who did
Nothing like they did?

“*We* did not seek in those past ages
Contemptible increase of wages,
Or form a mob
To gain three bob!
We never, demme,
Took oaths, or passed a resolution
Which might have hurt the Constitution
(*Georgius*, see,
Cap. 1 2 3)—
Now did we, Jemmy?

“Yet nobody makes *us* a nation’s
Occasion for great celebrations.
For us nor Art
Nor Sport takes part,
No Poet hails us;
Our names upon no homes are graven
Where we are blessed by those in haven—
Why? Why? I cry
A third time, Why?
The answer fails us.”

So, looking down from heaven, Lord Melbourne
Beholds both humbly-born and well-born
Honour the Six
Whose politics
Thrive in the earthy
Furrows they ploughed about Tolpuddle;
And as Lord Melbourne chews the muddle,
Labour’s reply
Fills earth and sky:
THE CAUSE WAS WORTHY.