

Trends and new departures in the historiography of British protest movements (1811-1914)

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Protest Movements in Britain, 1811-1914: Historiography and Debates

Mouvements protestataires en Grande-Bretagne, 1811-1914 : historiographie et débats

Edited by **Fabrice Bensimon and Rachel Rogers**

Fabrice Bensimon and Rachel Rogers

Introduction. Nineteenth-Century Protest Movements in Britain: A Survey of Historians'

[Approaches](#) [Full text]

Introduction. Les mouvements protestataires en Grande-Bretagne au XIX^e siècle : panorama historiographique

Delphine Frasch and Marion Leclair

Écrire l'histoire des luttes en Grande-Bretagne : *people's history* et *history from below* [Full text]

Writing the History of Protest Movements in Britain : People's History and History from below

Carl J. Griffin

[Luddism, Machine-Breaking and the Swing Riots](#) [Full text]

Le luddisme, le bris de machines et les Swing Riots

Rémy Duthille

[Le radicalisme en Grande-Bretagne de 1815 à 1830](#) [Full text]

Radicalism in Britain, 1815-1830

Emmanuelle de Champs

[La crise du Reform Bill, 1830-1832](#) [Full text]

The Reform Bill Crisis, 1830-1832

Matthew Roberts

[Chartism](#) [Full text]

Le chartisme

Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique

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Ophélie Siméon

[Le mouvement owéniste ou la formation du socialisme britannique \(1800-1845\)](#) [Full text]

The Owenite Movement, or the Making of British Socialism (1800-1845)

Yann Béliard

[Anti-esclavagistes et anti-impérialistes dans la Grande-Bretagne du XIX^e siècle : les paradoxes de la solidarité](#) [Full text]

Abolitionists and Anti-Imperialists in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Paradoxical Solidarities

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Le mouvement syndical, 1850-1914

Myriam Boussahba

[La citoyenneté des Anglaises, 1850-1914. À la conquête de l'opinion publique](#) [Full text]

English Women's Citizenship, 1850-1914. Conquering Public Opinion

Alexandra Sippel

[Les socialismes en Grande-Bretagne, 1850-1914](#) [Full text]

Socialism in Great Britain, 1850-1914

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière

["I am a Suffragist and a Socialist": The Relationship between the British Socialist and Suffrage Movements, 1884-1914](#) [Full text]

« Je suis suffragiste et socialiste » : *relations entre les mouvements suffragiste et socialiste britanniques, 1884-1914*

What is a movement?

“Sustained, intentional effort to foster or retard broad legal and social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels endorsed by authorities”

James Jasper, *Protest: A Cultural Introduction to Social Movements*, 2014.



William Edward Kilburn, ‘The Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, April 10th 1848’. Source: [Wikipedia](#), Public Domain.

Protest movements 1811-1914



Logo of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union.
Source: [Wikimedia](#), Public Domain.

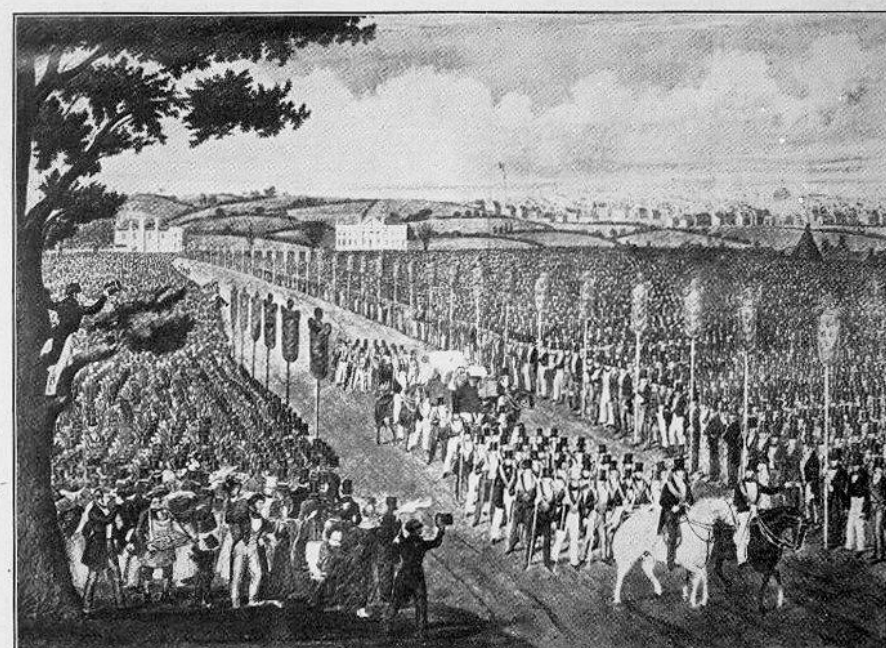


Suffragette Dora Thewlis arrested
on 20 March 1907.
Source: [Wikimedia](#), Public Domain.



Top: Colored engraving of the 1819
Peterloo Massacre, by Richard Carille.
Source: [Wikimedia](#), Public Domain.

Bottom: Meeting of the trade unionists
in Copenhagen Fields, April 21, 1834.
Source: [Wikimedia](#), Creative
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MEETING OF THE TRADE UNIONISTS IN COPENHAGEN FIELDS, APRIL 21, 1834, FOR THE PURPOSE OF
CARRYING A PETITION TO THE KING FOR A REMISSION OF THE SENTENCE PASSED ON THE
DORCHESTER LABOURERS

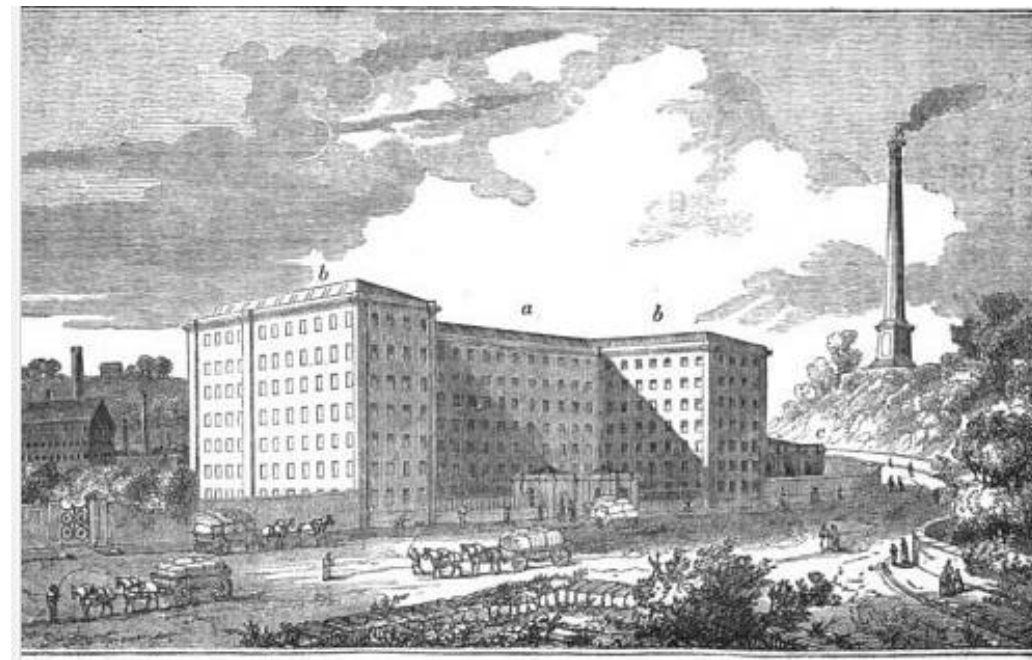
Today's talk

- 1) The groundwork of the social history of protest
- 2) Reactions: trends in protest studies since the 1970s
- 3) Current departures and contemporary challenges

1) The groundwork of the social history of protest

1811-1914: a period of flux

- political norms
- role of the state in the economy
- working methods and ways of living
- mobility and migration, demographic growth
- new social categories
- growth of empire
- literacy, leisure, the press
- nonconformity
- remits for men and women



Orell's Great Mill, Stockport, 1836, Andrew Ure.
Source: [Wikipedia](#), Wikimedia Commons.

High watermarks of protest?

Popular radicalism 1790-1848?

Popular liberalism 1850s-1870s?

Resurgence of mass protest 1880s-1914?

Whig history

“By a gradual transition towards democracy, seldom hastening and never turning back, political rights were extended to all without a catastrophe. This great manoeuvre was safely accomplished because all classes and all parties showed, upon the whole, sound political sense and good humour, because the Victorian age was a period of peace and external security for Britain, and because its middle years were years of unexampled prosperity.”

G. M. Trevelyan, *History of England* 1st ed. 1926, pp.615-616.

HISTORY OF ENGLAND

BY

GEORGE MACAULAY TREVELYAN

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

WITH MAPS

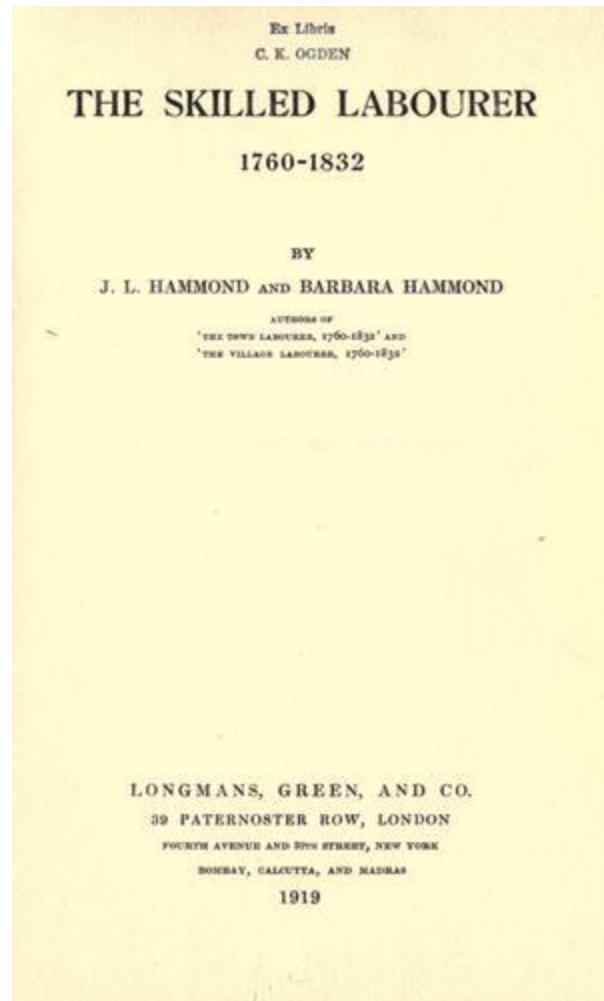
SEVENTH IMPRESSION

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
LONDON • NEW YORK • TORONTO
1929

Late 19th, early 20th centuries: Liberal social history



Beatrice and Sidney Webb, social researchers and Fabian historians. They wrote *A History of Trade Unionism* (1894). Source: [Flickr](#), no known copyright restrictions.

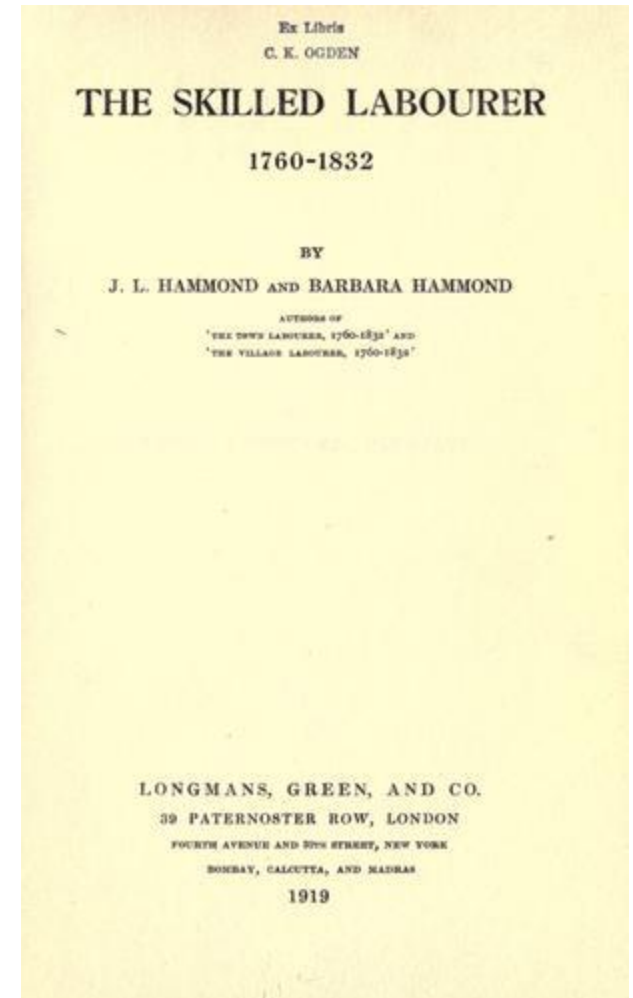


“The feelings of this sinking class the anger, dismay, and despair with which it watched the going out of all the warm comfort and light of life, scarcely stir the surface of history. The upper classes have told us what the poor ought to have thought of these vicissitudes; religion, philosophy, and political economy were ready with alleviations and explanations which seemed singularly helpful and convincing to the rich. The **voice of the poor themselves does not come to our ears.** [...]. This world has no member of Parliament, no press, it does not make literature or write history; no diary or memoirs have kept alive for us the thoughts and cares of the passing day.”

[J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, 1911, 243-244].

“The story of this rising which was to embrace the North and the Midlands is soon told. In only two places were there persons foolish enough to translate words into action, first at Huddersfield, and secondly in the Derbyshire villages round Pentridge.... Never was war levied against the King in more spiritless fashion.”

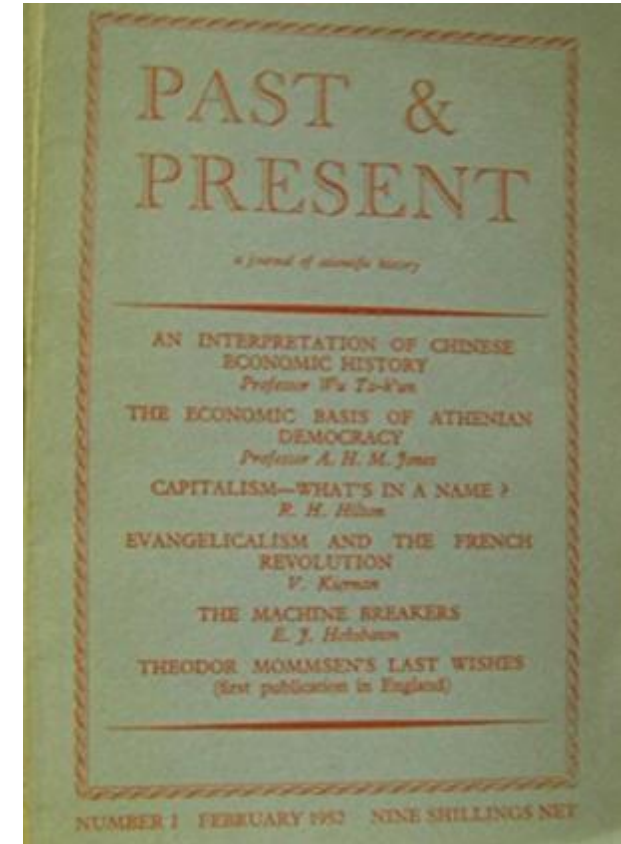
J.L. & B. Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer 1760-1832*, ch. “Oliver the Spy”, pp. 361-362.



New social history

“the whole change in the social relations of production.”

Eric Hobsbawm, “The machine-breakers”,
Past & Present, Feb 1952.

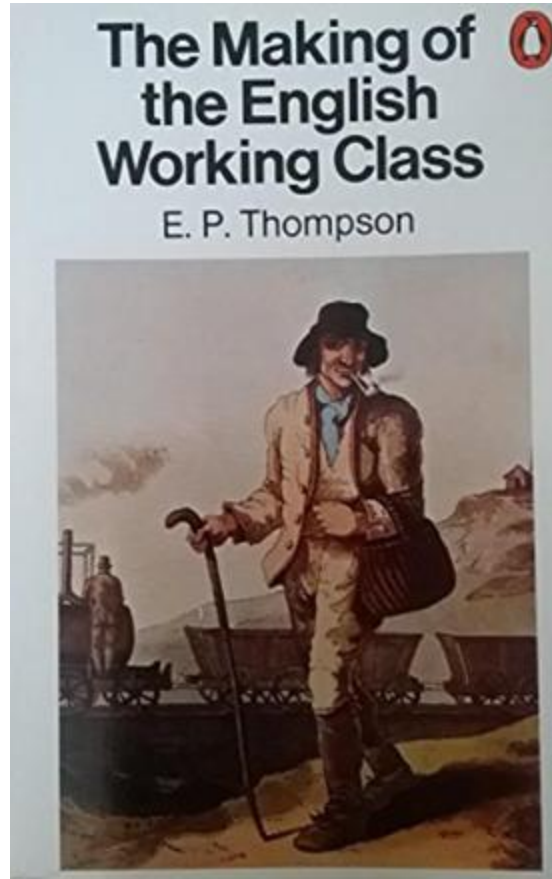


Past & Present, a journal of scientific history. First issue, February 1952

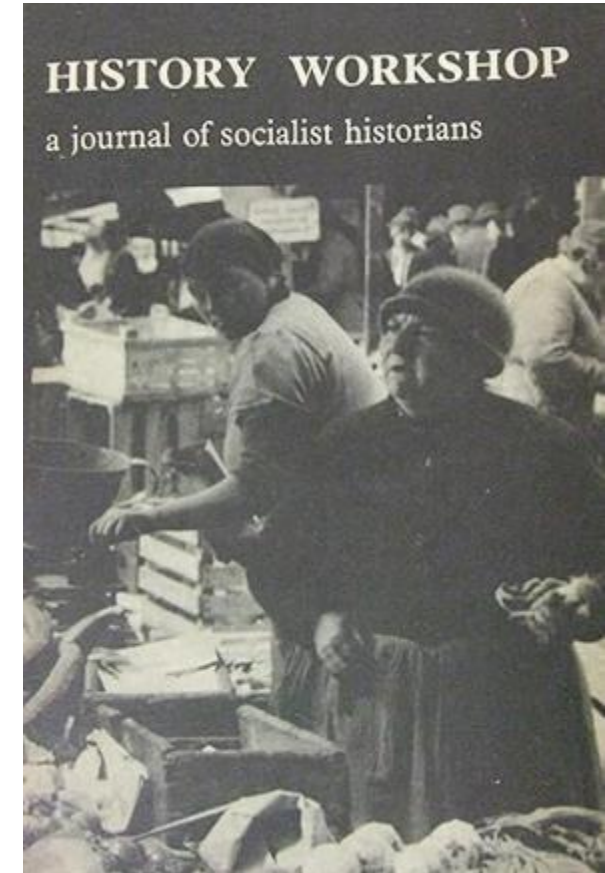
‘History from below’

“the enormous
condescension of
posterity”

Thompson, *The Making of the
English Working Class*, 1963, p.12.



First published 1963



First published 1976

2) Trends in protest studies since the 1970s

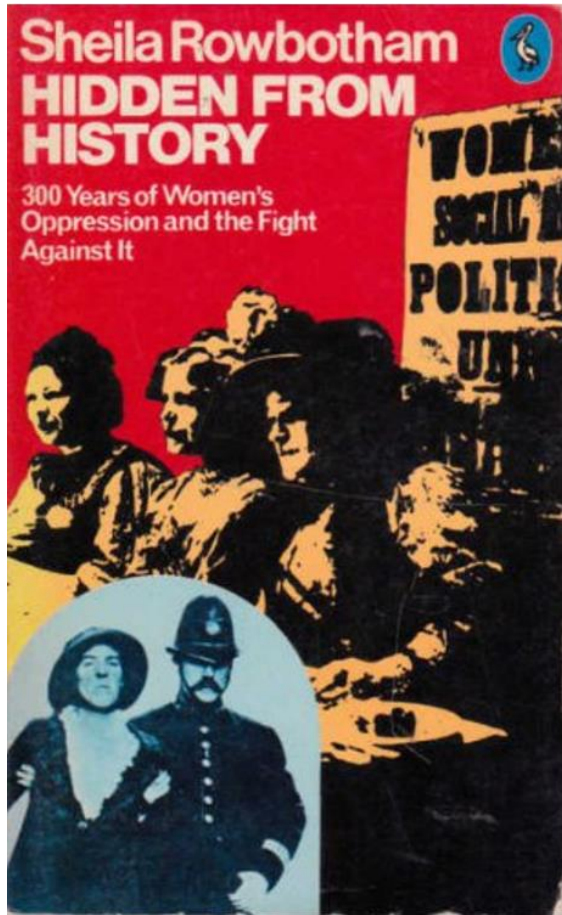
“Women on the page”

Aurora: Your earlier work was oriented to the male working class. Has the work of feminist historians changed some of your perspectives on the overall experience of working-class life in Britain, in the nineteenth century in particular?

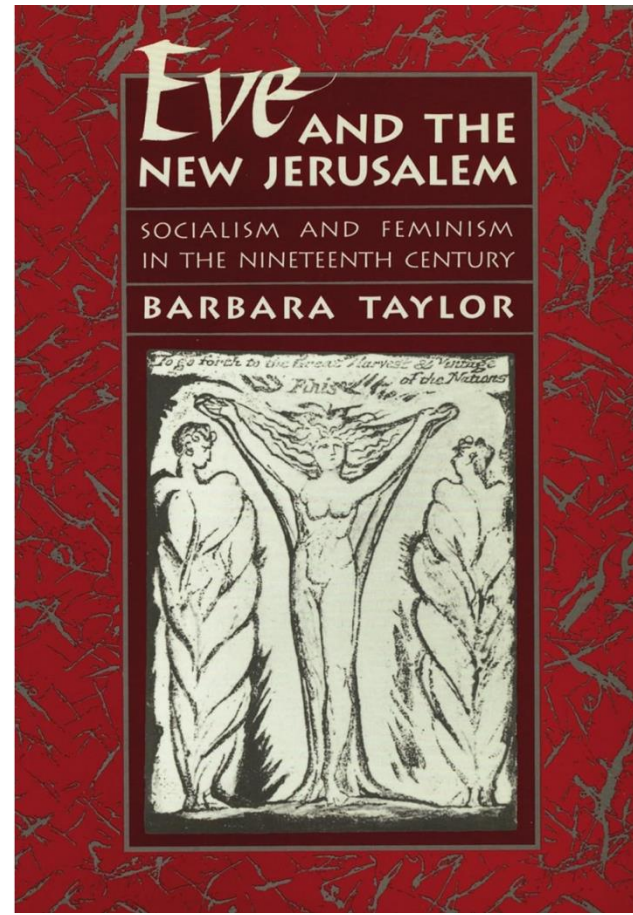
Thompson: Well, I've been told that my work is so oriented. However, I've many times opened *Making of the English Working Class* at random, and **I've always found women on the page**. The problem is that the actual organization of many institutions is male dominated; therefore, to write the history of them you write a male-dominated history. [...]

Extract from a 1988 interview with E. P. Thompson, reproduced in E. P. Thompson and the 'Woman Problem', Barbara Taylor, 14 May 2024
(<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/womens-history/e-p-thompson-and-the-woman-problem/>)

1970s & 80s: women's history and feminism



1973



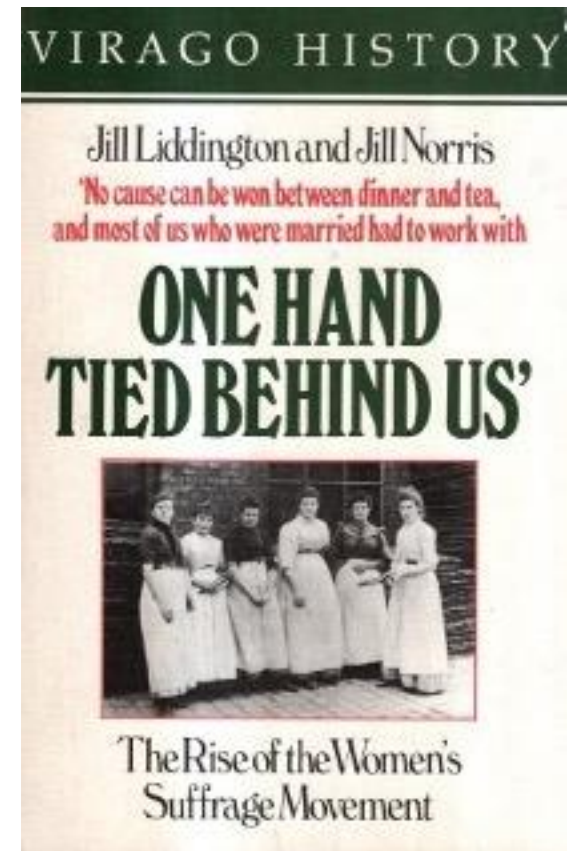
1983

“class identity, once theorized as essentially male or gender-neutral, is always articulated with a masculine or feminine subject.”

Catherine Hall, “The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century England” in *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* [1986]; 1990, p.82.

“We wrote this book because we felt that an important aspect of the women’s suffrage story had never been told. Living in Lancashire, we had become increasingly aware that tens of thousands of working women in the cotton towns had supported a campaign to win the vote. Yet this vital contribution has been largely neglected by historians.”

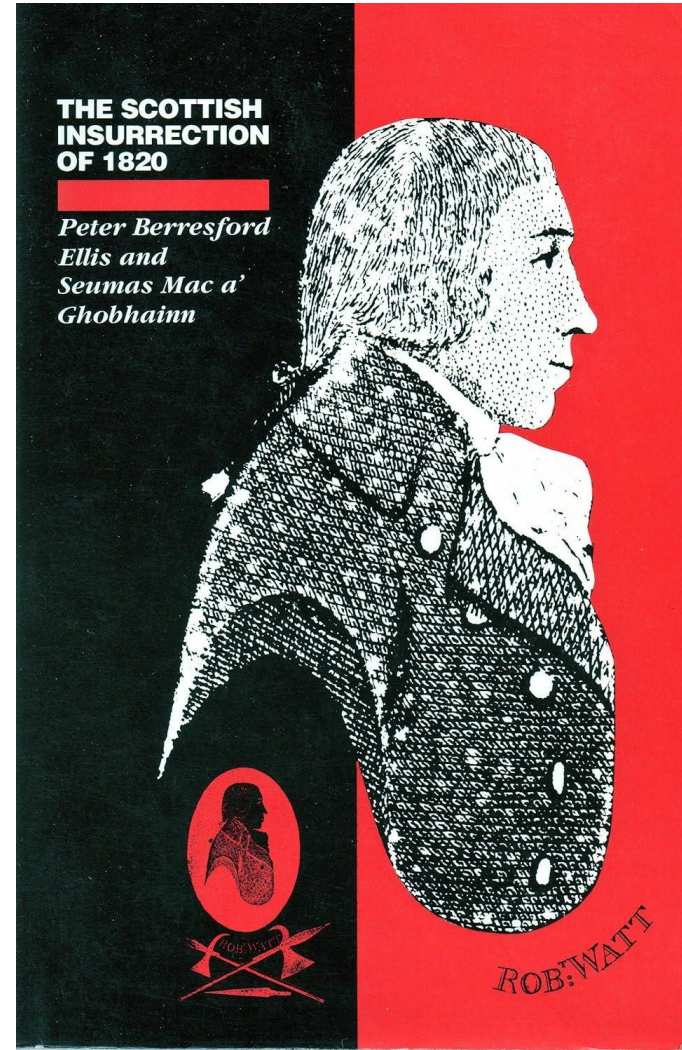
Opening of *One Hand Tied Behind Us* by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, Virago, 1978.



The Britishness of protest?



Elspeth King, pamphlet on the Scottish Women's Suffrage Movement, published in 1978 on the 50th anniversary of the 1928 Representation of the People Act. King was curator at the People's Palace Museum in Glasgow.



“The events of 1820 were conceived as a British rising and are fully intelligible only in that light.”

Malcolm Chase, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom*, Manchester University Press, 2013, p.118.

1980s & 90s: the 'linguistic turn'

Languages of class

*Studies in English working class history
1832–1982*

GARETH STEDMAN JONES



1983

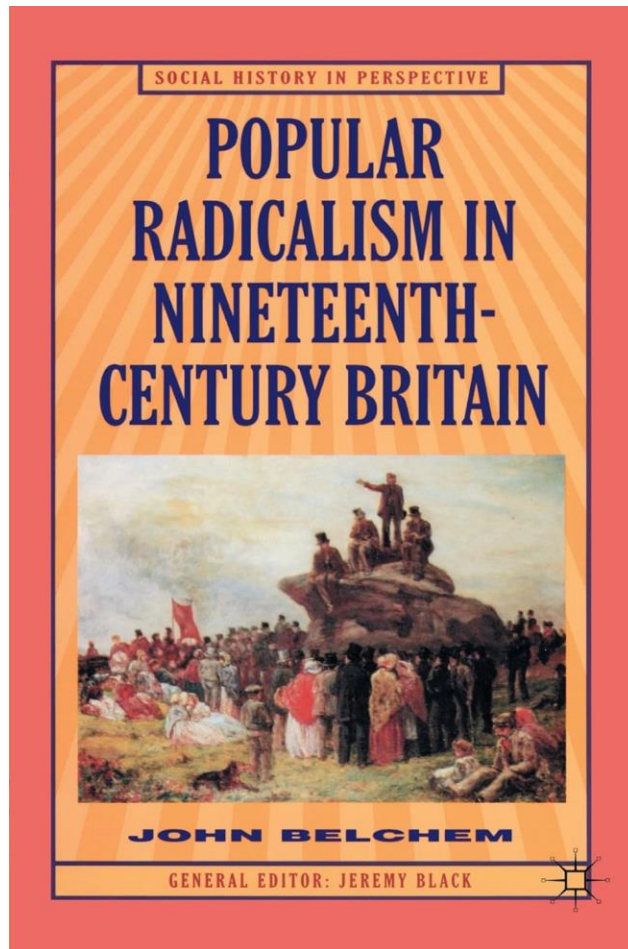
We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place (“Rethinking Chartism”, chapter 3, p.22).

Class is “a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness.”

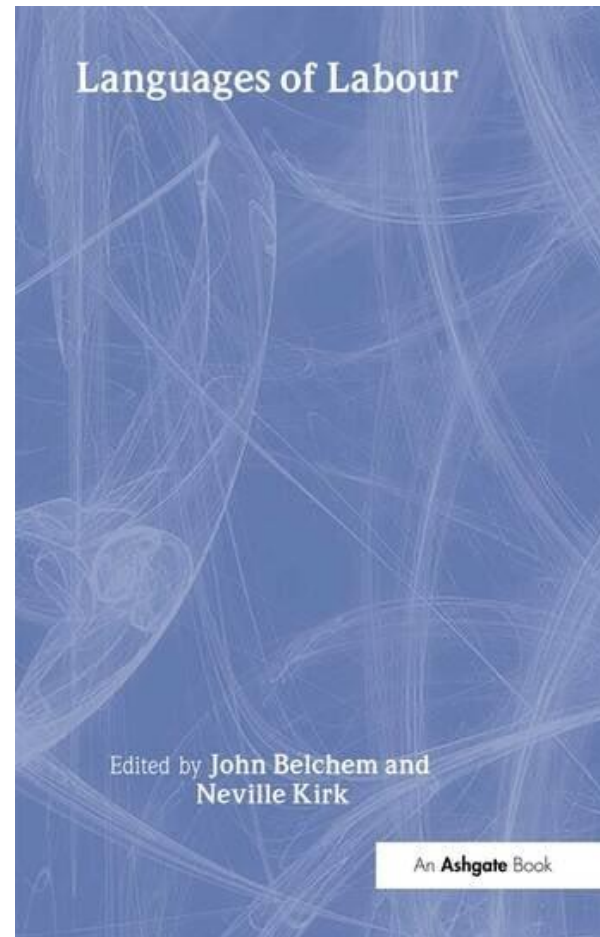
“Something which in fact happens [...] in human relationships”

*“The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context.” (E. P. Thompson, *The Making*, 1963)*

Back to class?



1996



1997

“a non-referential conception of language”

G. Stedman Jones, ‘Rethinking Chartism’, p.22.

“As a constitutive and organizing framework, language could empower broad-based radical movements, uniting workers whose material experience of industrialization diverged considerably.”

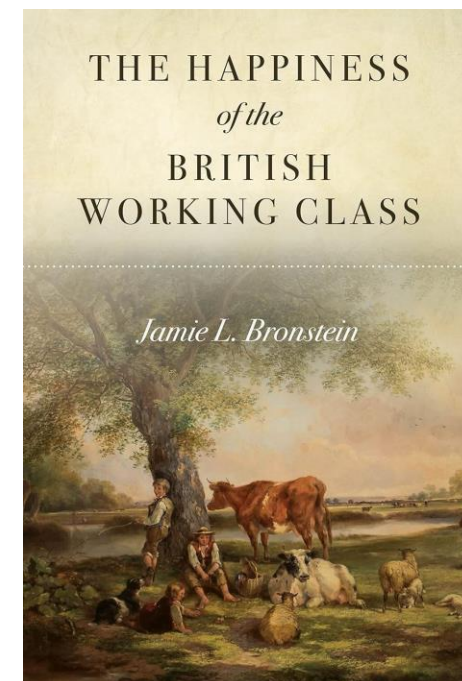
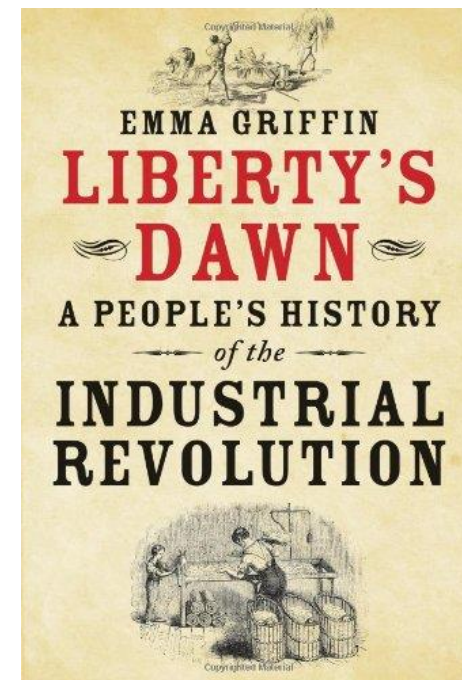
John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in 19th-century Britain* (Palgrave, 1996).

3) New departures and current challenges

The limits of ‘ego-documents’

“The problem with relying on ‘ego-documents’ such as autobiographies and diaries is that this genre is not representative of the wider working class, especially the poor.”

Matthew Roberts, ‘Rural Luddism and the makeshift economy of the Nottinghamshire framework knitters’, *Social History* 42, 3 (2017), p. 368.



'God bless Tom Mann. God bless the strikers and Tom Mann'.
Strikers' Children Parade in Vauxhall, Liverpool, 1911.
Source: [Stockport Image Archive](#), Open Government Licence.

Children in activism

Gleadle Kathryn and Hanley, Ryan.
"Children against slavery: juvenile agency
and the sugar boycotts in Britain."
Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,
Vol. 30, 2020, pp. 97-117.



THE PETITION FOR ABOLISHING THE SLAVE-TRADE.

Come, listen to my plaintive ditty,
Ye tender hearts, and children dear!
And, should it move your souls to pity,
Oh! try to *end* the griefs you hear.

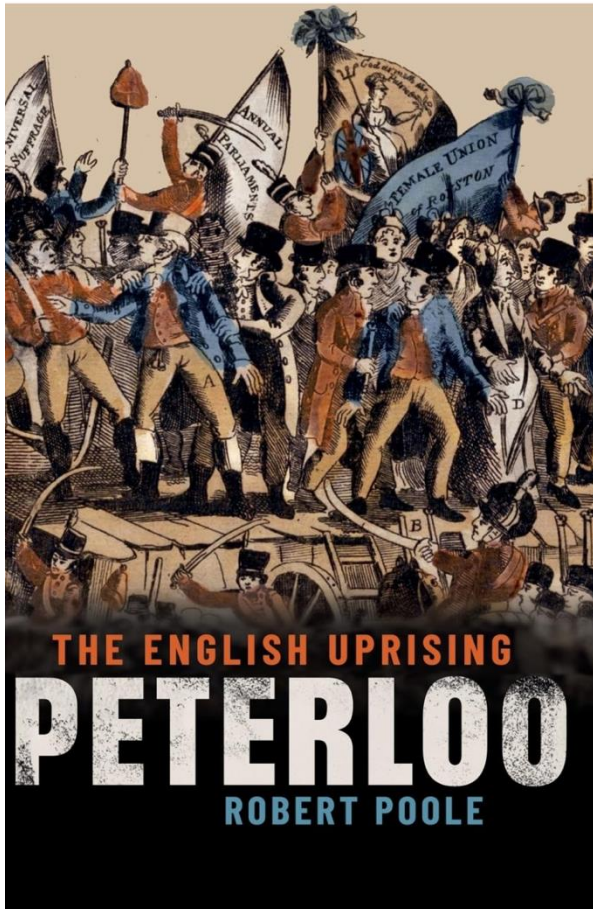
Malcolm Chase, (2010). 'Resolved
in Defiance of Fool and of
Knave'?: Chartism, Children and
Conflict in Birch, D., Llewellyn, M.
(eds) *Conflict and Difference in
Nineteenth-Century Literature*.

Malcolm Chase, "Chartist Lives,
Ann Dawson" in *Chartism: A New
History* (2007).

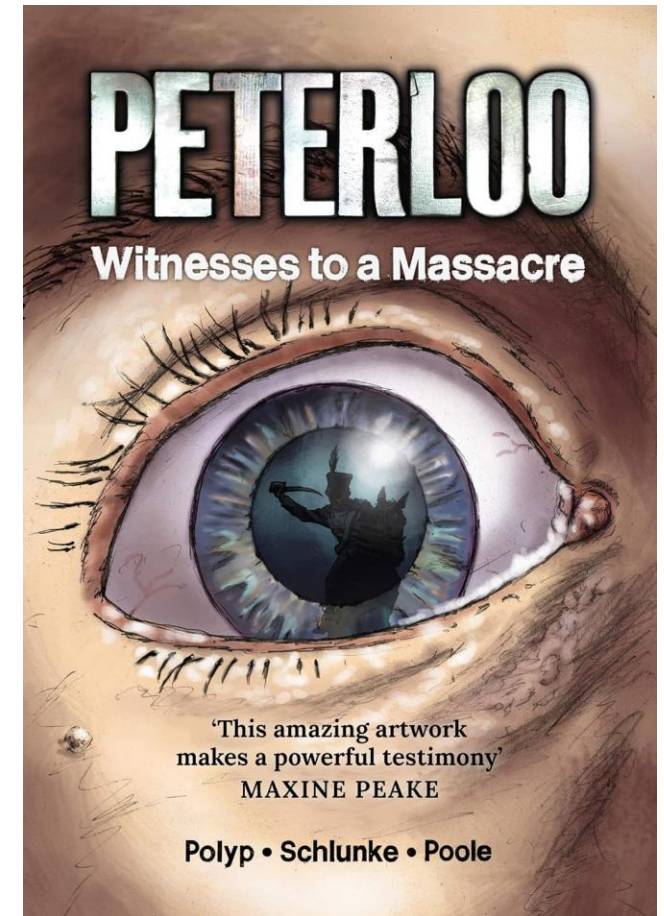


Sampler by 9-year-old Ann Dawson,
Copyright Angela Killick

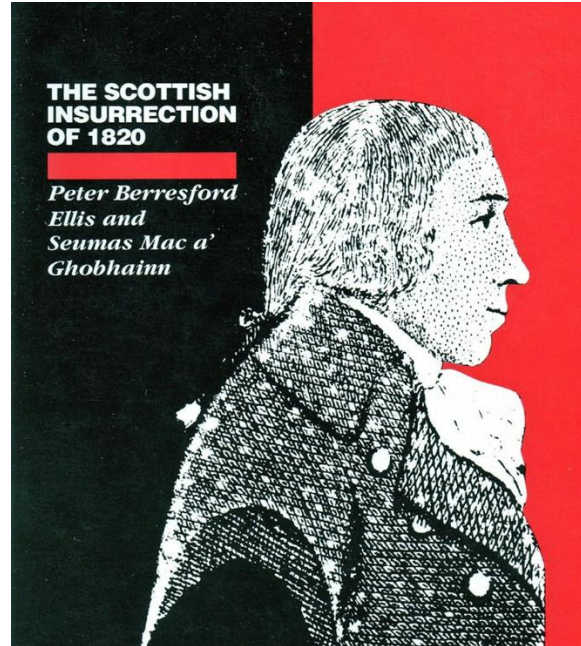
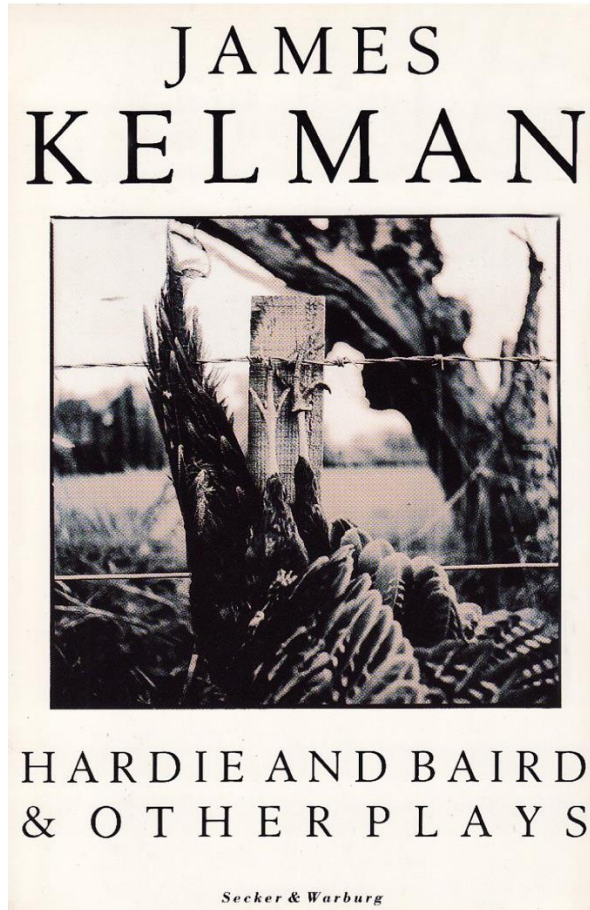
Commemorations: Peterloo, 1819 - 2019



Jeremy Deller's memorial outside Manchester Central. See for example [Caruso](#) [St John Architects](#).



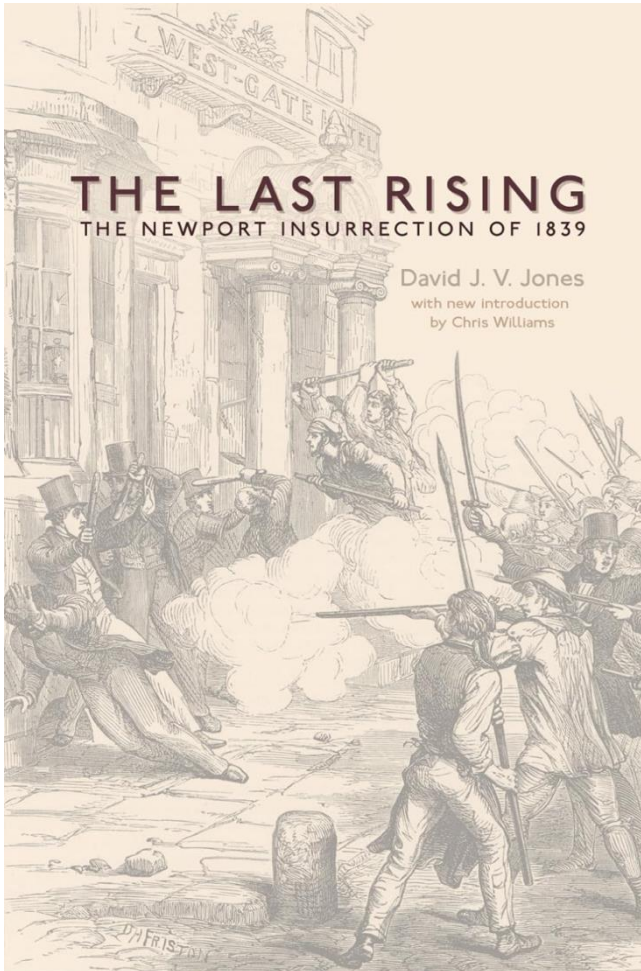
The Scottish radical war 1820 - 2020



First published in 1970

The battle of Bonnymuir memorial.
See "[The Scottish Radical Rising of 1820](#)" for photo.

The Newport rising, 1839



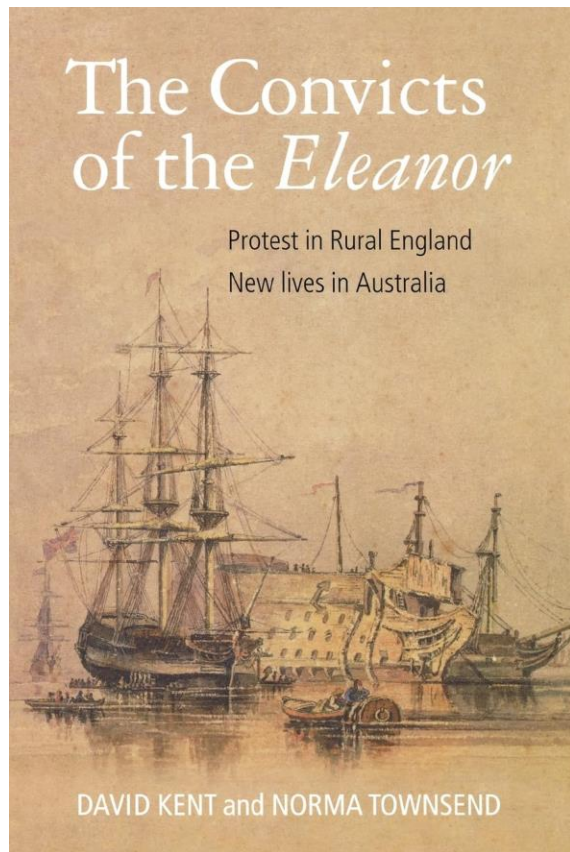
The Chartist steps, in Newport. Source: [Wikimedia](https://www.wikimedia.org/), GNU Free Documentation License.



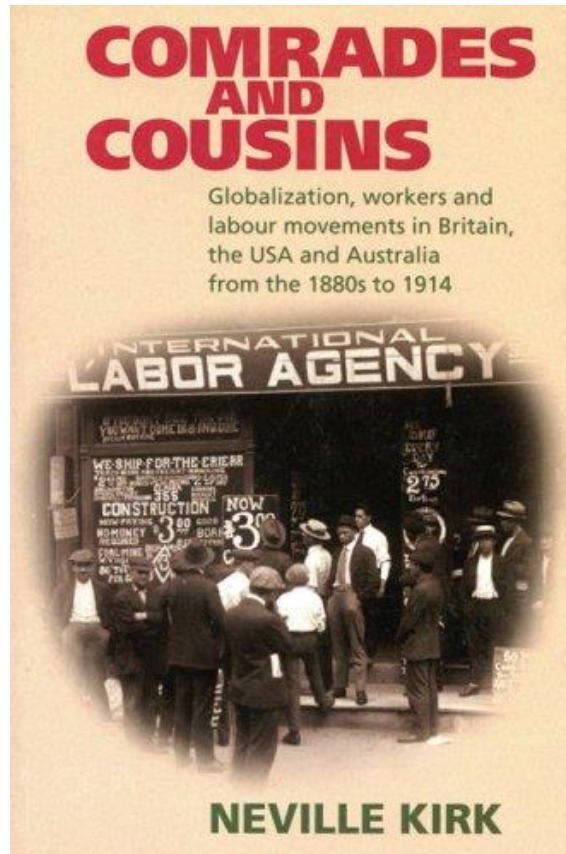
Map of the route that festival-goers at the Newport rising festival can follow <https://www.newportrising.co.uk/digitaltrail>



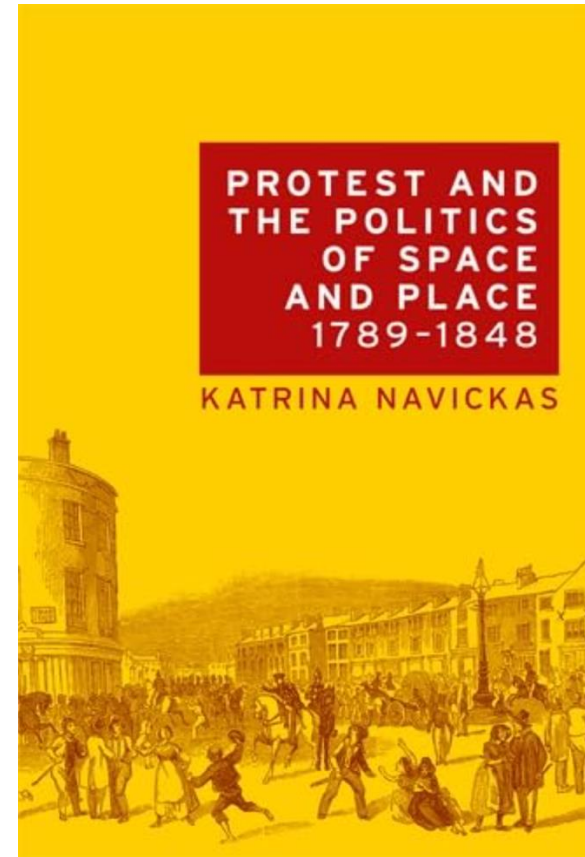
Place, space, migration, ecologies of protest



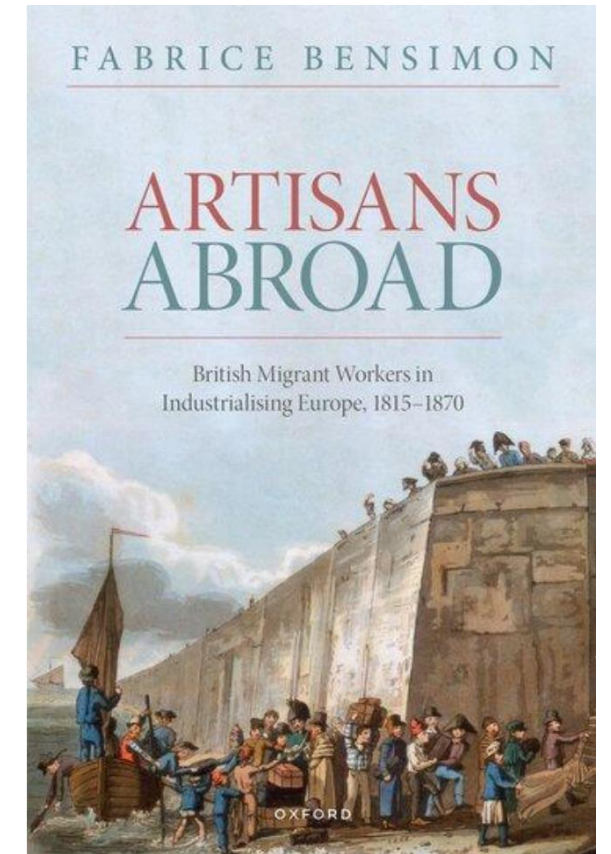
2002



2003

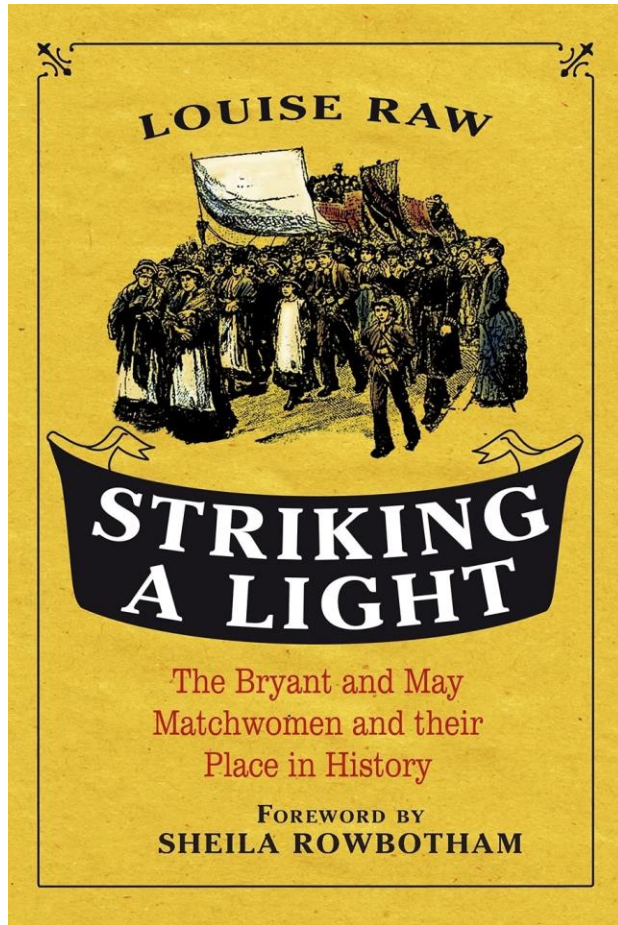


2016



2023

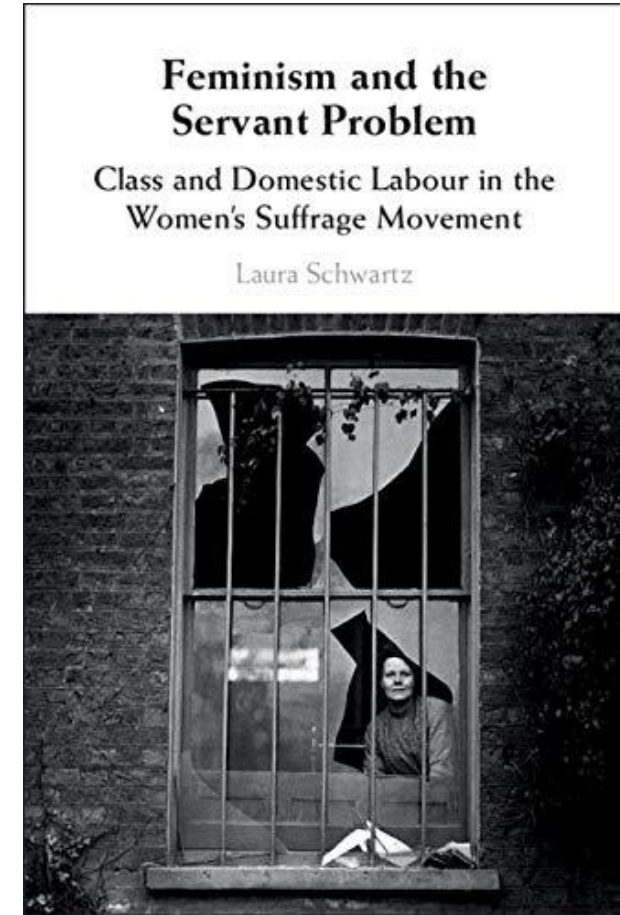
Tensions and intersections



2011

“The lack of harmonious interaction and exchange of ideas” between these different struggles “was to the detriment of all parties, leaving the first to develop without a coherent policy on class relations, and socialist groups and the labour movement to harbour sexism and misogyny.”

Louise Raw, *Striking a Light*, 2011

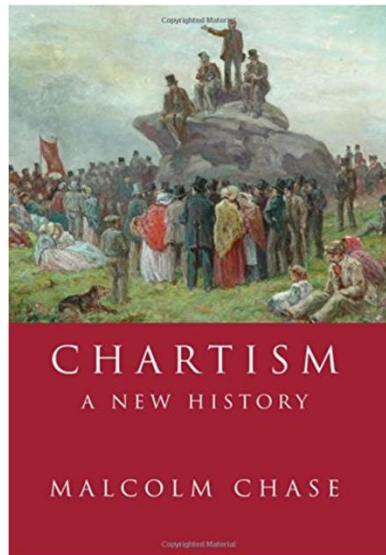


2019

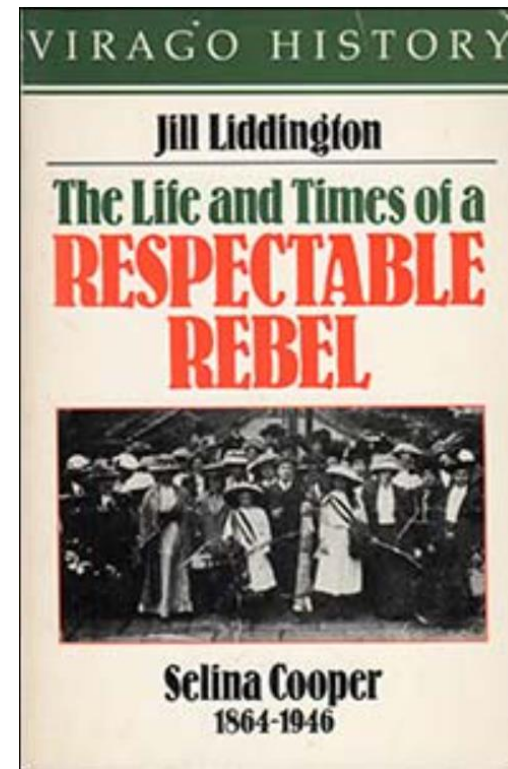
Biography from below

“I do not know how the many sacrifices and small acts of bravery that political activism typically involves can be conveyed or understood other than through a biographical approach”.

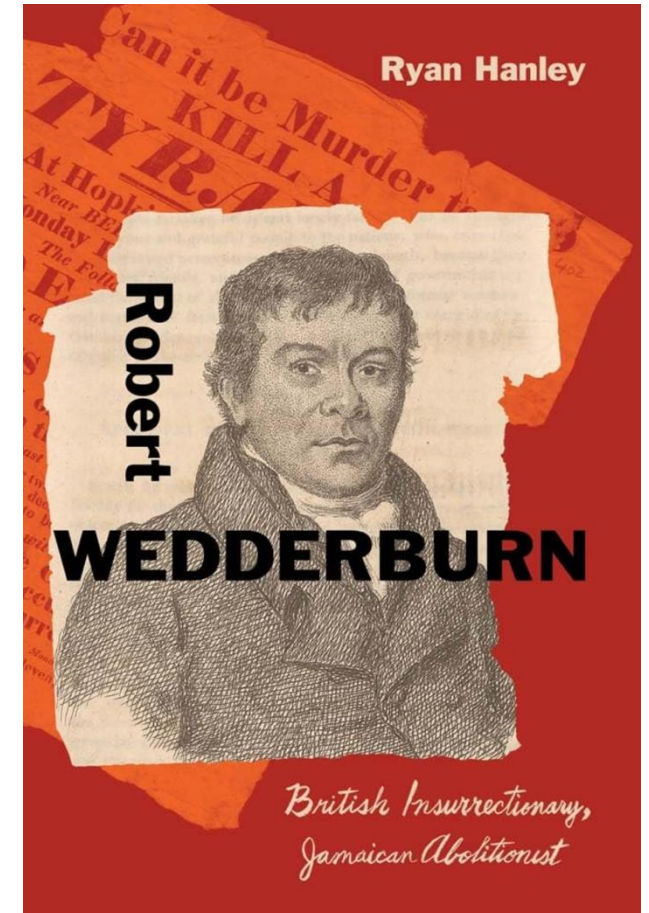
Malcolm Chase, “Labour History’s Biographical Turn” *History Workshop Journal* (2021).



2007



A biography written in 1984 based on interviews with Selina Cooper’s daughter Mary Cooper in 1976.



2025 forthcoming

Race and empire

“Attention to other ‘identities’ is, however, still limited, especially those of race and ethnicity” (in protest studies).

Katrina Navickas, ‘What happened to class? New histories of labour and collective action in Britain’ *Social History* 36, 2 (2011), pp. 192–204, p. 194.

Pryamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (Verso, 2019)

Neville Kirk, ‘The Rule of Class and the Power of Race: Socialist Attitudes to Class, Race and Empire during the Era of ‘new imperialism’, 1899-1910’, in *Comrades and Cousins: Globalization, Workers and Labour Movements in Britain, the USA and Australia from the 1880s to 1914* (London, Merlin, 2003).

Yann Béliard, ‘Le syndicalisme britannique dans la première mondialisation (1868-1914)’, *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online] XV-2 (2009).

Ryan Hanley, “The Shadow of Colonial Slavery at Peterloo”, *Caliban* [Online] 65-66 (2021).

“History has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change, the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors”

Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, Temple Smith, 1972), p. 15.

History from below today?

Between “warmth and empathy” and “authenticity”?

Malcolm Chase, “Labour History’s Biographical Turn” *History Workshop Journal* (2021).