

3. The ‘She-Champion of Impiety’: female radicalism and political crime in early nineteenth-century England¹

In December 1822, another of Richard Carlile’s imprisoned shop workers, Susannah Wright, penned a letter from her Newgate prison quarters to Carlile’s wife, Jane, who was herself immured in the Carlile family cell in Dorchester prison. Susannah recounted her experience of arriving in the much maligned and feared prison, recalling that she and her seven-month-old baby were initially placed in a ‘small and disgustingly filthy’ ward in the section of the prison that housed the female felons.² Upon her arrival, Wright found the ward already occupied by five felons of ‘the most wretched stamp’, two of whom were facing execution for their crimes. An exchange between Wright and a turnkey provides a rare insight into the conditions in the female section of the prison.³ Wright was infuriated by the advice of the turnkey that she and the baby were to sleep on the floor with an ‘old blanket and rug...as filthy as the streets and full of holes’. She scoffed at his suggestion that there was nothing he could do to improve her situation; it was custom, he claimed, that even ‘well-off’ women were forced to sleep on the floor in Newgate. Wright retorted that had she been one of them ‘I would have excited a rebellion against you’. Given the choice of her original cell, or another down the corridor housing two women as ‘filthy with snuff as I never before saw’, she reluctantly made her own way back to her first cell and spent a freezing night with her baby on the damp stone floor.

It is of little surprise that Wright was plunged into ‘an atmosphere of the most offensive nature’. Although a century had passed since Daniel Defoe immured the fictional character Moll Flanders in Newgate, neither the redesign and rebuilding of the prison nor the intervention of celebrated prison reformer Elizabeth Fry altered the fact that Newgate remained oppressively overcrowded and impoverished with inadequate ventilation and fetid surroundings.

1 A revised version of this chapter formed the basis of my contribution to a festschrift for Iain McCalman published in 2008. See an article by the same title in Michael T. Davis and Paul A. Pickering (eds), *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular politics in the age of reform* (Hants: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 185–200. My sincere thanks to Ashgate for the permission to reproduce this version of that chapter here.

2 Letter to Jane Carlile reproduced in the *Republican*, 13 December 1822. The quotations that follow are from this letter.

3 For another account of perspectives of the female felons in Newgate, see the fascinating article by Deidre Palk, ‘“Fit Objects for Mercy”: Gender, the Bank of England and currency criminals, 1804–1833’, *Women’s Writing*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2004), pp. 237–58. Her paper is based on letters from female felons convicted of forgery who requested and received regular pecuniary assistance from their prosecutors, the Bank of England.

Wright's two years as a state prisoner, served in both Newgate and Coldbath Fields prisons, afforded her some celebrity as a popular radical heroine. Her profile, however, also came with much public deprecation as the 'She-Champion of Impiety'. The imprisonment of Susannah Wright as part of the spate of radical prosecutions in the early 1820s has been noted in many studies of British radicalism, including E. P. Thompson's celebrated text, *The Making of the English Working Class*.⁴ Previous scholars, however, have afforded Wright little attention, depicting her as an accessory of, and incidental to, the story of prominent radical Richard Carlile. Her story has been relegated to little more than a footnote in radical history and her experience both as a radical prisoner and of the wider radical culture remains untold. Edward Royle's approach to Wright's story in his document collection, *Radical Politics 1790–1900*, is a case in point. Royle includes an article written by B. B. Jones from the *Reasoner* of 1859, originally penned by Jones 'because no one has given any account' of the individuals who 'assisted Mr Carlile in his arduous task against despotism'.⁵ Although it contained one of the most detailed accounts of Wright's experience in the radical movement, Royle reproduced it more than a century later as a record of Richard Carlile's experience; Wright's name was included but the remainder of the detail of her experience was edited out.⁶

Subsequent scholarship from Iain McCalman on radical women has gone some way to redressing this neglect.⁷ McCalman argued that the women in Carlile's circle had been either neglected or misunderstood by historians, even those who were beginning to uncover the women 'hidden from history'. Opposed to the 'supplementary' role ascribed to radical women, he pointed to a radical movement 'in which women played a genuinely critical part' and where the movement enjoyed the exceptional dedication of women such as Susannah Wright.⁸

4 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 802–3.

5 B. B. Jones, 'The Peoples' First Struggle for Free Speech and Writing', *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859, pp. 178–9.

6 Edward Royle, *Radical Politics 1790–1900—Religion and unbelief* (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 104–5. Apart from Thompson and Royle, historians including James Epstein and Joel Wiener also mention Wright in the story of Richard Carlile but overlook her independent contribution to the radical movement. See James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political language, ritual and symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 109, 132–3; Joel Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 89–90, 95.

7 Iain McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History*, no. 38 (1980), pp. 1–25.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–13. Historians who have followed McCalman's lead in documenting radical women have neglected to fully explore Wright's contribution to early nineteenth-century radicalism. See, for example, the brief mention of Wright in the most thorough account of women in the radical movement, Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the making of the British working class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 186. See also Ruth Frow and Edmund Frow, *Political Women, 1800–1850* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), pp. 35, 41, 48–149. A recent paper on the women in the Carlile circle again offers only a short mention

This chapter aims to give full justice to the story of Susannah Wright, to not only extricate her from Richard Carlile's shadow, but to restore her to her rightful place in the historical record. Her experience shows how a woman negotiated various spaces of political activity and forged a radical identity, and how her involvement provided a platform for other women to express their radicalism. Her experience cannot simply be read as a subsidiary to that of the radical male narrative; a woman prepared to forsake her young family for repeated prison terms for the radical cause deserves recognition as a viable political actor in her own right. Her prison experience allows us to examine the extent to which gender impacted on the radical relationship with both the 'unreformed' and the 'reformed' prison space. Moreover, her story places radical women in the evolving scholarship of the alternative or radical public sphere; Wright's experience broadens our understanding of how courts, bookshops and prisons were active sites of radical political activity. Finally, Susannah Wright's story highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of contemporary attitudes to gender. As a freethinker and a woman, how did her experience fit with newly emerging notions of femininity, which were often imbued with deeply religious undertones?

* * *

A native of Nottingham, and a lace worker, Susannah Wright was an active participant in radical politics well before she was first arrested for blasphemy in 1821. She attributed the formation of her political principles to the 'distinguished spirit' of local reformers in Nottingham and, in the years before her arrest, she, and her husband, William Wright, published many politically charged caricatures (in his name).⁹ Wright's early participation in radicalism occurred in a key, though less visible, radical space: the private world of the radical family.¹⁰ The account from B. B. Jones in the *Reasoner* details the participation of the Wrights in the regular Sunday gatherings of radicals at the home of Jones and his wife. These evenings, Jones recalled, were spent feasting on the latest in radical and heterodox literature with their 'Atheistical friends'—an ideological challenge to Christianity on its most sacred of days.¹¹

of Wright, although it provides a valuable account of Jane Carlile's story. See Angela Keane, 'Richard Carlile's Working Women: Selling books, politics, sex and *The Republican*', *Literature & History*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2006), pp. 20–34.

⁹ *Republican*, 23 August 1822. There was a strong tradition of political organisation among women in Nottingham. As Nicholas Rogers notes, in 1811, women employed in Nottingham's lace trade organised themselves into a combination to raise wages. See Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 234.

¹⁰ On the concept of the radical family, see Dorothy Thompson, 'Women and Nineteenth Century Radical Politics: A lost dimension', in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 118–20. See also Brian Harrison, 'A Genealogy of Reform in Modern Britain', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980), pp. 119–48.

¹¹ *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.

Such gatherings were reminiscent of the dinner parties held by the ‘radical intelligentsia’ of the late eighteenth century, which provided a safer forum for expressing one’s heterodoxy during repressive years.¹² As we will see in coming chapters, when many of the public outlets for radical assembly acted to preclude women’s involvement—the clandestine or masculine milieu of the tavern and the coffee house, for example—and when exposing one’s political views to the public gaze could be perilous, the private space of the family home provided a safe arena in which women could express their radicalism.

It was one such gathering that led to Susannah becoming one of Carlile’s key recruits in the radical cause. As members of the London radical community, both Jones and Wright were well acquainted with the radical bookshop of Jane and Richard Carlile.¹³ Following the arrest and imprisonment of the Carliles, management of the shop passed to Richard’s sister, Mary-Ann, though she too was soon arrested for her work in the shop. The ‘not guilty’ verdict from her first trial provided an immense boost for a besieged radical movement, although the triumph, and her freedom, was short-lived.¹⁴ After being successfully prosecuted for a second time, she joined the Carlile family cell in Dorchester gaol, which already housed Richard, his heavily pregnant wife, Jane, and the couple’s young son.

Despite the obvious perils, Susannah was among the first to answer Carlile’s call for volunteers to keep the shop open. She vowed to ‘attend to the business at all risk’.¹⁵ The Society for the Suppression of Vice, a group established in 1802 to counter all manner of ‘vice’ in the metropolis and the leading instigators of prosecutions against the Carlile set, moved swiftly to ensure Wright gained little traction in her new role.¹⁶ An agent for the Vice Society gained much needed evidence when he purchased from Wright a tract penned by Richard Carlile from his prison cell. She was soon charged with blasphemy and in December 1821 faced court for the first of three appearances. Released on bail after her first hearing, her trial was delayed until July 1822 by which time she had given birth to another child. These months provided a vital period of preparation, for, as Carlile noted in the *Republican*, Wright was ‘determined to defend herself, and read her own defence, and will not allow [Judge] Best to silence her’.¹⁷

12 For an account of such dinner parties, see James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the language and culture of popular politics in modern Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 91.

13 In 1822, Carlile observed that Wright was one of the few volunteer shop workers who was known personally to him prior to his imprisonment. See *Republican*, 5 April 1822.

14 Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 84–90.

15 *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.

16 For an account of the early activities of the Vice Society, see Michael Roberts, ‘The Society for the Suppression of Vice and its Early Critics, 1802–1812’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 26, issue 1 (1983), pp. 159–76.

17 *Republican*, 15 March 1822.

On 8 July, Susannah was escorted to the court of the King's Bench by her children, B. B. Jones and his wife and a tight-knit band of unnamed female radical supporters. Jones recalled that Wright defended herself against the charge of bringing the 'Christian religion into disbelief and contempt among the people' with 'an ease peculiar to herself'. He assisted her in the dock, keeping her place in her notes when she was frequently interrupted by the judge disapproving of her line of defence or during the commotion in the public galleries caused by heckling from several youths.¹⁸ Jones recalled that the plan from the outset was to get as much of the defence read as possible, which entailed reading the offending tracts so as to 'prove' their innocence.¹⁹ This was a pattern by now familiar at political trials, where the accused radicals utilised the courtroom as a radical space through which to convey their message to a wider public audience.²⁰

Wright was so absorbed in the trial that Jones had to remind her to request a break to attend to her baby. She emerged from the court to the cheers of the crowd who had gathered outside and retired for refreshments to nearby Castle Coffee House accompanied by a group of 20 close supporters. Returning to the court, Wright concluded almost four hours of defence by advising the jury to 'be firm and do your duty', concluding that she both 'scorn[ed] mercy and demand[ed] justice'.²¹ Despite such bravado, her supporters were determined to avoid her being taken into custody pending sentencing and ushered her swiftly out of the court before the guilty verdict was announced minutes later.

Four months later, Wright returned to court for sentencing. On this occasion, the notoriety of a woman arrested for blasphemy and the defiance she exhibited at her first trial attracted more of the public gaze in both crowd numbers and interest from the press. Wright continued to challenge the validity of her guilty verdict and, under the pretext of addressing the court in 'plea of mitigation of punishment', she instead argued that her conviction was invalid, as Christianity had no place in the law. Clearly agitated by the content of her statement, the

18 Criminal trials attracted audiences from all walks of life and spectators could prove difficult for magistrates to control. For an account of the courtroom crowds, see Peter King, *Crime, Justice, and Discretion in England 1740–1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 253–7.

19 *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.

20 For other accounts of radicals using trials and courtrooms as extensions of the public sphere, see James Epstein, "'Our Real Constitution": Trial defence and radical memory in the age of revolution', in James Vernon (ed.), *Re-Reading the Constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 22–51; Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The press and radical opposition in early nineteenth-century England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 115–57; Uwe Böker, 'Institutionalised Rules of Discourse and the Courtroom as a Site of the Public Sphere', in Uwe Böker and Julie A. Hibbard (eds), *Sites of Discourse—Public and private spheres—legal culture* (Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 35–66; Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), pp. 176–201.

21 See *The Times*, 9 July 1822; *John Bull*, 15 July 1822. A report that the 'avenues of the Court of the King's Bench were much crowded' on account of Susannah's trial appeared in *Bell's Life in London*, 14 July 1822.

Chief Justice issued repeated warnings that he would not suffer such profanity against the law or the church in his court. This only spurred Susannah to greater defiance, retorting: 'You, Sir, are paid to hear me.'²² To the great amusement of the crowded courtroom, she continued to ignore his interruptions. Exasperated by her recalcitrance, the judge sentenced Wright (and by default her infant) to be confined for 10 weeks in the loathed Newgate prison to deliberate on her plea.

Early nineteenth-century courtrooms were undoubtedly gendered spaces; only the public galleries were open to women and the business of the court was performed and controlled by men.²³ It was therefore no accident that it was Jones who assisted Wright with her notes, rather than one of her numerous female attendants. James Epstein has argued, in relation to the courtrooms of the 1790s, 'all those who spoke were men'.²⁴ Wright's experience suggests that by the early 1820s this was no longer the case. Her trial reveals ways that women could circumvent and contest the unequal power relations implicit in the early nineteenth-century legal process.²⁵

Although women were undoubtedly absent as officers of the courts, they were not absent from the courtroom. During political trials, courtrooms provided a legitimate public arena for women to participate in radical culture. By all accounts, Wright was surrounded by women in her trials—from her close circle of female friends to the unknown supporters in the public galleries, some of whom travelled long distances to attend the trial. This support was also not unique to Wright's trial; she reported herself attending Jane Carlile's trial every day for a week to 'watch the conduct of her inhumane Judges'.²⁶ Most importantly, she was not silent—nor did she allow herself to be silenced. Her defence in the July trial lasted almost four hours and in her November trial she countered the judge's interruptions by claiming that 'nothing but absolute force shall prevent me reading'.²⁷

22 *The Times*, 22 November 1822.

23 Epstein, *In Practice*, p. 111.

24 *Ibid.*

25 There are other examples where women defended themselves in the courts in this period. See the case of Mary Ann Tocker, who successfully defended herself in a libel case by invoking constitutionalist language and the principles of English liberty. On Tocker, see Frow and Frow, *Political Women*, pp. 2–14; Jonathon Fulcher, 'Gender, Politics and Class in the Early Nineteenth-Century English Reform Movement', *Historical Research*, vol. LXVII (1994), pp. 57–74; Malcolm Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett, *Women in Protest 1800–1850* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 90. On women's participation in the courtroom, see also Margaret Anne Doody, 'Voices of Record: Women as witnesses and defendants in the Old Bailey Sessions Papers', in Susan S. Heinzelman and Zipporah B. Wiseman (eds), *Representing Women: Law, literature, and feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 287–308.

26 *Republican*, 23 August 1822.

27 *The Times*, 15 November 1822.

Wright's preparation for her own trial was doubtless assisted by her experience of the machinations of the courtroom prior to her own trial. Aside from her attendance at Jane Carlile's trial, it is clear from the historical record that she attended at least one other trial of an indicted shopman. In February 1822, she was called as a witness in the trial of William Holmes.²⁸ Explaining that she was the 'housekeeper at Mr Carlile's' the night Holmes was arrested, she characteristically proved a difficult witness. When questioned whether she herself had the 'misfortune to be indicted' for selling pamphlets from the bookshop, she replied 'if you call it misfortune, Sir, I have', adding that she would 'rather enjoy my own opinion, of course, and be indicted for it'.²⁹ She infuriated the legal counsel by refusing to give Holmes's name, referring to him only as the 'man unknown', and frustrated the counsel by refusing to be drawn into details about the evening when Holmes was arrested. In a further act of defiance—and evidence of her aptitude for the combat of the courtroom—she refused to be drawn on the question of her belief in the holy 'Scriptures'. 'I shall not answer that', she tersely replied, 'When I am brought to trial, perhaps I may give my opinion'. Such prior experience in the courtroom goes some way to explaining why most accounts speak of the ease and comfort with which she negotiated the courtroom during her own trial and her confidence in defending herself from the outset.

The court appearances of Carlile's imprisoned shopmen and women have tended to be downplayed in radical historiography with the suggestion that Richard was responsible for writing their defences. Carlile did mention working on Susannah's defence in private correspondence with another imprisoned shopman, yet much of it accords with the style and language of her correspondence to the *Republican*. The prison correspondence that flowed freely within the network of imprisoned bookshop volunteers reveals that radical defences at this time were a collective effort—learning from and building on each subsequent iteration, honing ways to circumvent the legal arguments against them and to utilise the arena to publicise the radical agenda.³⁰

The question of authorship is further redundant when Wright's performance of the defence is taken into account. One female supporter who travelled from Manchester for the trial recorded her awe at Wright's performance: 'never will the impression be effaced from my memory; the firmness she evinced and her resolution not to be silenced.'³¹ This was not the case of an uneducated or docile

28 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, <www.oldbailey.org>, February 1822, trial of William Holmes (t18220220-204), hereafter cited as *OBP*. See also *Examiner*, 10 March 1822.

29 *OBP*, February 1822, William Holmes (t18220220-204).

30 See, for example, the correspondence between Humphrey Boyle and Richard Carlile and the development of Boyle's defence. Richard Carlile to Humphrey Boyle, 27 May 1822, WYL623/5, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds.

31 *Republican*, 20 September 1822.

woman regurgitating the words of an astute leader; she performed her defence in an exemplary manner—unsettling the prosecution with her legal tactic and understanding, challenging the jury on their own understanding of the Christian faith and frustrating the judges with the force and persistence of her defence and her refusal to yield. Surprisingly, not even the most conservative of newspapers took the opportunity to question the right or the propriety of a woman to conduct her own defence.³² Given her notoriety, the absence of any criticism suggests that it is time to look again at the British courtroom not only as a platform for political radicalism but also as a contested site of power and gender relations.

Wright's performance on the courtroom stage, as well as the harshness of her treatment, helped establish her identity as a popular radical heroine. Details of her trials circulated around the country through newspaper reports.³³ Veteran ultra-radical and poet Allen Davenport was clearly enamoured with her efforts in the poem he dedicated to her, *The Captive*:³⁴

Ah! Great was my surprise rely on't,
When I beheld thy slender form;
'Is this,' me thought, 'the mighty giant,
That battl'd in the *legal* storm!
And was it she that brav'd the fury,
Of the ruthless bench and bar,
And scorn'd the verdict of a jury,
Empanell'd for religious war!'³⁵

Despite Wright's popular radical appeal, the nature of her crime and its moral implications polarised press opinion in the metropolis. Both the *Morning Chronicle* and *The Times* remarked that she and her attendants were 'very respectably dressed'.³⁶ In the courtroom, Wright described herself as a respectable woman in the 'genteel' occupation of lace worker—a stinging taunt to the aristocracy who were mocked by radicals as the 'useless' classes. Describing a working woman charged with blasphemy as 'respectable' infuriated the conservative *New Times*, which countered with a savage invective against Susannah Wright,

32 During Jane Carlile's trial, one provincial newspaper accused her of taking her 'child in arms' to court 'to excite, we presume, the tender sympathies of the jury'. *Treman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 25 January 1821.

33 See, for example, *Treman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 21 November 1822; and for her later trial, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 8 February 1823; *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 10 February 1823; *Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 13 February 1823.

34 On Allen Davenport, see Allen Davenport, *The Life and Literary Pursuits of Allen Davenport... Written by himself*, Malcolm Chase (ed.) (Hants, UK: Scholar Press, 1994); Iowerth Prothero, 'Davenport, Allen', in Joseph Baylen and Norbert Gossman (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* [hereafter *BDMBR*] (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 111–13.

35 Printed in *Republican*, 9 January 1824.

36 *The Times*, 15 November 1822; see also *Morning Chronicle*, 15 November 1822.

aligning her with the most maligned and liminal of the female population: the prostitute. Wright, the columnist sneered, was a 'wretched and shameless woman', an 'abandoned creature' who had 'shunned all the distinctive shame and fear and decency of her sex'.³⁷ John Stoddart's *New Times* saw itself as the voice of a deeply religious conservatism in which blasphemy was akin to prostitution in terms of the moral outrage and danger it posed, particularly from the mouth of a woman: 'Blasphemy from any lips is shocking, but from those of a female it is beyond expression horrible.' Stoddart was not alone in his views; in the House of Commons, William Wilberforce castigated Mary-Ann Carlile as 'fallen and wretched...without one ray of hope to cheer amidst the dark and desolate prospect of eternity'.³⁸

Although the courtroom provided women with a legitimate public arena in which to participate as audience members, the trial of Susannah Wright demonstrated that such attendance could also prove perilous. Not satisfied with castigating Wright, Stoddart (or 'Dr Slop' as radicals had dubbed him) broadened his attack to include her female supporters.³⁹ Women choosing openly to support Wright were left in no doubt that they would be tarnished as the lowest form of 'public woman'.⁴⁰ Noting the 'several females' in attendance with Wright at her trial, the *New Times* editor ranted:

[T]his is the first time...that a *body of women* has defied all shame, and trampled upon all decency, in so profligate and daring a manner—in a manner at which the lowest prostitutes would shudder...It is manifest that these female brutes came prepared, not only to applaud what the She-Champion of Impiety had already done; but to hear her load with fresh insults the law of her country and the law of her GOD.⁴¹

Stoddart had prior form with such voracious attacks against female reformers. When the Blackburn Female Reform Society gained national prominence in 1819 with their involvement at one of the great reform meetings in Blackburn, the *New Times* compared the women with the murderous 'Poissardes of Paris, those furies in the shape of women' and likened Mrs Alice Kitchen, who addressed

37 *New Times*, 16 November 1822. The quotes that follow originate from the same edition. See also Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 803.

38 Wilberforce here is commenting on a petition from Mary-Ann Carlile appealing for her release and presented to the House of Commons by Joseph Hume. See reports in *New Times*, 27 March 1823.

39 Such scathing attacks on female reformers helped fuel the loathing of radical publisher and satirist William Hone towards Stoddart. Hone, in collaboration with George Cruikshank, dedicated his immensely successful satire, *The Political House that Jack Built*, to Stoddart. Hone dubbed him 'Dr Slop' and the *New Times* the 'Slop Pail'. In 1820, the pair produced another satire, *A Slap at Slop*, which ran to four editions. See Edgell Rickword, *Radical Squibs and Loyal Ripostes: Satirical pamphlets of the Regency period, 1819–1821* (Bath: Adams and Dart, 1971), pp. 9–10, 37. For more on Hone, see Chapter 4 of this study.

40 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 140–57. Clark argues that where 'public man' represented a notion of citizenship and civility, 'public women' was a term employed to describe prostitutes, p. 51.

41 *New Times*, 16 November 1822.

the meeting, to a 'hardened and shameless Prostitute'.⁴² The vehemence of the *New Times* attack was a stark warning for women who were beginning to find a place in public politics: participation put reputation and moral standing at grave risk.⁴³ Significantly, Wright's supporters—inside and outside the court—included many men, but they received no mention in the *New Times* report. The commentary conflated the moral heresy of radicalism firmly with its women.

Just as the conservative press linked Wright firmly with the maligned figure of the prostitute, so too did the authorities when they criminalised her heterodoxy and confined her and her baby to Newgate prison with the most marginal of the prison population: the female felons.⁴⁴ Wright embarked on her prison term at a time when Newgate women had been thrust into the public eye by the highly celebrated work of Quaker prison reformer Elizabeth Fry.⁴⁵ Appalled by her first visit to Newgate in 1813, Fry commenced a sustained public campaign to reform prison conditions for women—a program that had the dual purpose of improving the living conditions within the prison and effecting the reformation of those previously deemed beyond redemption, the women prisoners themselves.

The work of the Quaker Ladies focused public attention on the female prison population, who had been demonised as the most wretched and unruly of the entire prison population. In 1812, James Neild's visit to the prison uncovered the desperate overcrowding of the female wards. The eight wards of the female section contained 90 prisoners, allowing 'a space of 20 inches for each', where they slept on bare floorboards without 'any bedding whatsoever'.⁴⁶ While the perceived deviance, depravity and danger led criminals to be classified as non-subjects, forfeiting their rights and privileges, female criminality contained an

42 See Epstein, *Radical Expression*, pp. 88–9. Even more mainstream newspapers, such as *The Times*, considered women who participated in the society as 'of the most abandoned of their sex'. See *The Times*, 13 July 1819.

43 Eileen Yeo documents the 'dangerous territory' that faced women entering the political public sphere in the nineteenth century. See her introduction in Eileen Yeo (ed.), *Radical Femininity: Women's self-representation in the public sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 1–24. See also Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 35–7, 51–3.

44 In the debates of the Seditious Meetings Bill 1819, Lord Castlereagh considered the involvement of women in political protest as the antithesis of femininity, pointing to the involvement of French prostitutes in the 'bloody orgies' of the Revolution, and appealing to his countrywomen to retain their 'innate sense of modesty' and refrain from political activism. *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 41 (23 November 1819 – 28 February 1820), p. 391, quoted in Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain*, p. 238n.

45 Most contemporary and historical accounts of Newgate prison recall the work of Elizabeth Fry and the Quaker Ladies. See, for example, Arthur Griffiths, *The Chronicles of Newgate* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), vol. 1, pp. 143–211; Hepworth Dixon, *The London Prisons: With an account of the more distinguished persons who have been confined in them* (1850; reprinted, New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), p. 222. For the most detailed secondary accounts, see June Rose, *Elizabeth Fry, A Biography* (Philadelphia: Quaker Books, 1994); Anthony Babington, *The English Bastille: A history of Newgate gaol and prison conditions in Britain 1188–1902* (London: Macdonald, 1971), pp. 148–60; Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 116–22.

46 James Neild, *State of the Prisons in England, Scotland and Wales... Together with some useful documents, observations, and remarks, adapted to explain the conditions of prisoners in general* (London, 1812), p. 416.

extra layer of 'otherness'. Lucia Zedner, who has to date produced the most comprehensive survey of women and crime in Victorian England, suggests that since women were generally considered more pure and moral by nature than men, the women who fell from this elevated pedestal through criminality were considered the very 'negation of femininity', and, as such, could be dehumanised and demonised as 'monsters'.⁴⁷

Further, Zedner argues that because of the inherently unfeminine nature of crime, there was a reluctance to accept that women were capable of its barbarities.⁴⁸ Some evidence of this attitude can be seen in the case of Susannah Wright and Jane Carlile. Much was made of Wright's countenance because it seemed so incongruous that a woman with respectable appearance, even from a humble occupation, was capable of crime, particularly one as abhorrent as blasphemy. In both women's cases, the judges voiced their reluctance to have to pass sentence on the defendants and were 'most anxious' to hear any mitigating circumstances that could alleviate harsh sentences. It was reported that, before passing sentence on Jane Carlile,

His lordship admitted the painful nature of the duty which was cast upon the Court and upon the jury...he could not but be astonished at seeing a woman stand forward as the opponent of that system from which everything valuable to woman was derived.⁴⁹

The magistrates were unprepared for the fierce resolve of these radical women who would 'submit with pleasure and with joy to any pains and penalties' in defending their principles.⁵⁰

In Wright's case, the judge provided her time to reflect on her plea with 10 weeks in the 'mansion of misery', Newgate gaol. If Susannah's judge felt any angst at sentencing her to the most feared and detested of London's prisons as punishment, it was apparently short-lived. Her treatment as a felon upon arrival in Newgate, claimed the prison's Governor, accorded with the wishes of the judges. Once again, however, Wright refused to be silenced. She demanded

47 Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*, pp. 11–12. On female criminality, see also Lucia Zedner, 'Wayward Sisters: The prison for women', in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (eds), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The practice of punishment in Western society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 295–324; Deidre Palk, *Gender, Crime, and Judicial Discretion, 1780–1830* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006); King, *Crime Justice and Discretion in England 1740–1820*, pp. 196–207. For accounts of similar attitudes towards female criminality beyond Britain, see L. Mara Dodge, "'One Female Prisoner is of More Trouble than Twenty Males": Women convicts in Illinois prisons, 1835–1896', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1999), pp. 907–30; Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female criminality in fin-de-siecle Paris* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

48 As Garthine Walker has shown, this attitude was evident in the early modern period in England, when women were often treated more leniently than men. See Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

49 *The Times*, 24 October 1821.

50 *Report of the Trial of Mrs Susannah Wright* (London, 1822), p. 10.

that she be moved to the prison infirmary where she was aware that ‘good beds’ existed. Despite advising a bed was ‘against the rules’, the Governor did defer to the visiting Sheriff with whom Wright successfully negotiated an upgrade to more agreeable lodgings.

The concession of more comfortable accommodation was predicated, once again, upon a fear of contagion within the prison. When Wright vowed to the Sheriff that she would desist from ‘unfold[ing] the object of religion to the prisoners’, she gained a sense of her bargaining power within this otherwise powerless space: ‘I cannot describe the difference this expression made on their countenances’, she wrote.⁵¹ Prison officials long feared the spread of radical views of political prisoners within prisons, and as we saw in earlier chapters, radical men were generally housed separately from other prisoners to ensure that their views were contained within their prison cells. Even though prison authorities considered female criminals already morally destitute, the strength of Wright’s character perhaps convinced them that even such wayward women were in need of protection from the ‘She-Champion of Impiety’.

That Wright succeeded in securing this concession is particularly significant given that the structure of Newgate itself worked against her. As we have seen, the prison’s floorplan allowed for some male prisoners, with the necessary financial means, to be housed in the less crowded ‘Masters Side’, which had rooms specifically designated for state prisoners. There were no such rooms allocated in the recently segregated female section of the prison.⁵² In the case of Jane and Mary-Ann Carlile, the problem had been resolved by housing them in Richard’s apartment, but Susannah Wright was on her own in her battle to be afforded a different status to that of the female felons.⁵³ Wright’s negotiation of her accommodation in Newgate forced a change to the rules to place her on a similar footing to her radical male counterparts. We should not underestimate the significance of a working-class woman’s struggle to circumvent the rules normally applied even to wealthier women, to defy the stigma of the female criminal and to forge a radical identity. Wright’s challenge to both the spatial and the regulatory boundaries of the prison saw her achieve recognition within the prison that often eluded other radical women; prison officials saw Wright first and foremost as a radical; her gender became of secondary significance.

It is difficult to gauge whether the turnkey’s suggestion on that occasion—that ‘well-off’ women were forced to sleep on the floor—was the result of a

51 Susannah Wright to Jane Carlile, reproduced in *Republican*, 13 December 1822.

52 Until the work of prison reformers such as John Howard and Elizabeth Fry, male and female felons mixed freely in Newgate although their sleeping quarters were designated separately on Newgate’s architectural plans.

53 According to Richard Carlile, Jane had a ‘long fight’ with the Dorchester prison authorities to secure these accommodation arrangements for herself and her fifteen-month-old child. See *Republican*, 10 October 1823.

misogynistic approach to female criminals or whether the sustained work of prison reformers to realise an egalitarian approach to all prisoners could have filtered down even to unreformed Newgate. Then again, it might simply have been a result of severe overcrowding, for pecuniary enticements still operated in the prison, despite the efforts of prison reformers who agitated against the practice of prison staff extracting fees from prisoners. Indeed, for Wright and the baby, the ability to pay for food and other privileges was not only a means to separate herself from the common criminals, but it also meant the difference between surviving and perishing in the fetid environment. B. B. Jones recalled in 1859 that he developed a way of ensuring that Susannah received a hot meal each week. Officially, only cooked food was allowed into the prison, but by searing the outside of a joint of meat, Wright could 'cut the outside off and [have] it roasted over again', which he noted 'a shilling or two would always accomplish'.⁵⁴

Wright issued further challenges to the prison regime and to her status as a female felon by insisting on special visiting rights rather than those more restrictive rules enforced with the female felons. She also vehemently refused the religious instruction and redemption efforts of the Quaker Ladies. These she dismissed as mere entertainment: 'I know you would help me to laugh at them if you were here', she wrote to Jane Carlile.⁵⁵ It is not surprising that she reported the Ladies were 'afraid to have anything to say' to her; Wright's most biting insult was to label an opponent 'Christian'.

* * *

Despite the concession granted to Susannah with her accommodation, it is clear that the mire of Newgate and the daily ritual of standing in an open-air yard 'with snow burying her shoes and icy water running into the clogs' left her health severely compromised.⁵⁶ She was too ill on the date originally scheduled for her return to court to reappear in front of her judge.⁵⁷ When she appeared a week later on 6 February 1823, the *Morning Chronicle* reported that she was 'genteelly dressed' but exhibited 'infirm health'.⁵⁸ Wright nevertheless showed remarkable resolve, for she was determined to 'see the old women of the bench go into hysterics' by continuing to challenge the very basis of Christianity and its place in the law. She took her battle directly to them, sending copies of her statement to their private residences. The appearance was a short one;

54 *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.

55 *Republican*, 13 December 1822.

56 *Republican*, 7 February 1823, 16 July 1824.

57 *Morning Chronicle*, 1 February 1823. This was confirmed in private correspondence of the Carlile shopmen. See William Tunbridge to Humphrey Boyle, February 1823, WYL623/4, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds, in which Tunbridge reports that Susannah was too ill to attend court.

58 *Morning Chronicle*, 7 February 1823; *Examiner*, 9 February 1832.

once it was clear to the judges that she would not yield by pleading mitigating circumstances, they immediately pronounced sentence. She was ordered to be held in Coldbath Fields prison for a further 18 months with heavy penalties: a fine of £100 and £200 in sureties for good behaviour—an impossible sum for Susannah and William. Despite her ill health, she retorted: ‘then your Lordship must have the kindness to give me a cheque for the £100, and provide me with provisions during my imprisonment.’⁵⁹ She then managed to leave the court with a ‘laugh of triumph’ and a ‘contemptuous smile on her countenance’.⁶⁰ Perhaps there was some small measure of satisfaction that, once again, her gender failed to come into play; her sentence rivalled that of the harshest afforded to male radicals in the period.

Wright’s committal to Coldbath Fields presented a new challenge to resist the identity of the female felon. Unlike Newgate’s ancient presence in the landscape of inner London, Coldbath Fields was sited further away from the centre of London in nearby Clerkenwell. Distance meant supporters such as the Joneses, who had previously visited three or four times a week, now could visit only on the weekend. From her letters published in the *Republican*, it is clear that Wright regarded the relative geographic isolation from family and friends as a small price to pay; in Coldbath Fields she was quickly afforded higher standing than the female felons. Just as other male radical prisoners reported, and in contrast with other prisoners, she was permitted to receive her female friends within her ward in a ‘manner quite satisfactory’. She reported that she was housed in ‘the best part’ of the prison. Even so, this caused problems when she had to share her ward with those committed for short periods; the ‘vagrants and other disorderly persons...unhappy beings, wretchedly filthy and diseased...disease which is attendant upon a want of cleanliness and bad living, or a connection with persons in that state’. Despite all her care, she despaired that she could not keep herself and her infant free from ‘that disease’.⁶¹ Carlile reported in the *Republican* that compared with her experience in Newgate, here Wright was ‘treated with kindness approaching to paternal attention’ by the magistrates and by Mr Vickery, the Keeper, his family and the newly appointed matron, Mrs Adkins.⁶² Other than the issues of hygiene and space, and the continuing health problems from her stay in Newgate, Wright could defiantly claim from Coldbath Fields that ‘prison has no terrors for me’.⁶³

Her ability to cross the gender-divided walls of the prison to meet with male radicals imprisoned in Coldbath Fields also attests to her success in forging a

59 *Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 13 February 1823.

60 *The Times*, 7 February 1823; *Morning Chronicle*, 7 February 1823.

61 *Republican*, 11 April 1823.

62 *Republican*, 16 July 1823.

63 *Republican*, 11 April 1823.

radical identity.⁶⁴ Despairing that 'prejudice and ignorance were so fast rooted in the minds of the people', she was reassured by a fellow radical prisoner, James Watson, that '*perseverance on our part will work wonders*'.⁶⁵ Her contact with Watson was reminiscent of the radical collectives forged decades earlier in both Newgate and Coldbath Fields, where, as we have seen, many radical men had continued their publishing endeavours and transformed their prisons into virtual colleges that offered unprecedented opportunities for self-improvement.⁶⁶

Though there is no record of Wright utilising the educative possibilities of prison, the improved conditions at Coldbath Fields did not mean she acquiesced quietly in her confinement. She continued to rage against the conduct of the magistrates, 'mostly religious men', whose 'order is the law, until another comes and contradicts it by some new whim'.⁶⁷ Like her radical male counterparts, Wright defied her containment in the private prison space by maintaining a presence in the public eye through letters to radical journals. She also continued trenchant public assaults against those responsible for her incarceration. In a caustic public letter to Judge Bayley, published in the *Republican*, Wright cursed the 'Christian' judge and threatened that when justice presided in the country he would 'be a criminal at her bar', if he failed to first follow the suicide of his 'late patron *Castlereagh* and inflict justice on [himself] prematurely'.⁶⁸ After almost six months in prison, her defiance continued unabated and she concluded her letter: 'Conscious in my opinion that I am right: cheerful in my dungeon's solitude; happy even in my widowhood; proud in being the Christian's victim: smiling on each pang as you inflict them, I remain, Yours, &c. Susanna [sic] Wright.'⁶⁹

Wright might have made the best of her incarceration—politically and personally—but women were particularly vulnerable to the moral scarring of prison at a time when an emerging middling class increasingly equated feminine ideals with passivity, gentleness and childrearing. Jane Carlile remained defiant when she wrote that 'neither me nor my children will ever have occasion to blush as the cause of my incarceration'.⁷⁰ Similarly, Susannah Wright gave no

64 Separation of male and female prisoners appears to be one of the few reform measures that was successfully introduced from the beginning in Coldbath Fields.

65 *Republican*, 18 September 1826.

66 See Iain McCalman, 'Newgate in Revolution: Radical enthusiasm and romantic counterculture', *Eighteenth Century Life*, vol. 22 (February 1998); Michael Davis, Iain McCalman and Christina Parolin (eds), *Newgate in Revolution: An anthology of radical prison literature in the age of revolution* (London: Continuum, 2005).

67 *Republican*, 11 April 1823.

68 Radicals detested Lord Castlereagh for his quashing of the Irish Uprising (1798) and his keen support of Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth's, suspension of habeas corpus (1817) and the Six Acts (1819). The Cato Street conspirators planned to march the streets with the pair's heads on pikes. The radical community viewed his suicide in 1822 as a cause for celebration. See, for example, the letter to the *Republican*, 18 April 1823, by a 'poor surgeon' congratulating Castlereagh for knowing 'where the carotid artery lay'.

69 *Republican*, 13 June 1823.

70 *Republican*, 10 May 1822.

hint of concern as to her reputation. Interestingly, none of the accounts of Susannah accuses her of abandoning or disgracing her family, or of failing to fulfil the duties of wife and mother. Even the ultra-conservative *New Times*, so afraid of her monstrous influences on a generation of unsuspecting and unthinking mothers and their infants, passed no judgment on Wright's own role in this sense.

Nonetheless, the attempts to question the morality of Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann through both their imprisonment and the public press attacks provoked a counter-assault from radical supporters. The pages of radical journals such as the *Republican* and *Black Dwarf* assured the women that their actions were seen as both praiseworthy and virtuous. Many men and women showed their support with financial subscriptions, addressing their offerings to 'Susannah the Chaste' or to 'the heroine in the cause of Free Discussion', with some offering 'a small token of my admiration of your virtuous conduct'.⁷¹ Relief funds were organised all over the country and subscriptions were often accompanied by letters from group leaders such as Alfred Cox of Nottingham, who wrote to Susannah Wright: 'you may assure yourself of the sympathy of every virtuous character as well as the approving testimony of a good conscience, of which no earthly power can deprive you.'⁷² Allen Davenport celebrated her moral inspiration in his poem *The Captive*:

Hail child of truth! Hail glorious woman!
Whom tyranny could not subdue;
Since all the pow'rs that she could summon,
Were baffled, and defied by you.
What tho' the Christian bigots blame thee,
What tho' they frown upon thee still;
While truth is thine they cannot shame thee,
Rail and bluster how they will.⁷³

The financial contributions and letters of support confirmed the contribution of these women as equals of men. The radical martyr was becoming a familiar trope in radical literature; correspondence about Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann showed that women could be radical martyrs as well and that their contribution to the cause was no less valued because of their gender. Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann were toasted at radical meetings throughout Britain along with male heroes such as Thomas Paine. Similarly, when Adam Renwick, a Sheffield silversmith, sent a gift to Richard Carlile in the form of an elegantly fashioned 16-blade penknife, he allocated a blade each to Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann Carlile, forging them into the radical movement as equals alongside the names

71 *Republican*, 20 December 1822, 6 February 1824.

72 *Republican*, 23 August 1822.

73 *Republican*, 9 January 1824.

of radical icons such as Mirabaud, Paine, Volney and Richard Carlile.⁷⁴ 'More than our thanks are due', he wrote, 'to your wife, sister, brave shopmen, and that heroine Mrs Wright'.⁷⁵

Importantly, many women independently offered their support through financial subscriptions, gifts and letters of support. The prosecution and martyrdom of radical women provided an opportunity for a wider circle of women to participate through that hitherto essentially masculine medium of the printed word. While the public exposure of their support at a trial risked the moral outrage of the *New Times*, women found a more generous atmosphere in Carlile's *Republican*. The harsh treatment of these women—Susannah Wright having been wrenched from the love of her family, and Jane Carlile enduring both pregnancy and childbirth in prison—enticed female radicals out of the private world of the family and provided the platform on which women could join the radical public sphere. Letters of support came in from around the country and were reproduced in the *Republican* (along with their replies).⁷⁶ Subscription lists were printed weekly and featured women's names more prominently than at any other time during the 1820s (and dropped off noticeably after their release).⁷⁷ While some subscribers preferred to remain anonymous—a 'female republican'—others listed specific donations against their own name, and that of their daughters, alongside their husband and sons. For Richard Carlile, it was glaringly obvious that Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann had given a 'kind of zest' to the struggle for free expression. Carlile clearly saw Wright and the female support she engendered as a means to mobilise women more widely to join the cause. The transcript of her defence was dedicated to the 'Women of the Island of Great Britain' for 'their example, consideration [and] approbation'.⁷⁸

In early July 1824, Susannah received the news she was no longer a prisoner; she was released one month early from her 18-month sentence and with her fine waived. Despite flaunting her apparent comfort with prison life, Wright left prison in a 'dreadful state with the loss of sight in one eye' and a spate of 'nervous disorders'.⁷⁹ After visiting her radical colleagues in Newgate in October 1824, she disappeared from the radical scene during the winter of 1824–25, and Carlile feared that she had succumbed to the raft of 'disorders' with which she left prison.⁸⁰ By the end of 1825, however, Wright had sufficiently recovered in strength to battle with yet another prison keeper when she was refused entry to

74 *Republican*, 23 October 1823.

75 *Republican*, 23 August 1822.

76 See, for example, the letter to Jane Carlile from the 'female republicans of Manchester' (who also noted their support for 'our brave Mrs Wright'), *Republican*, 14 March 1823.

77 McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', pp. 7–8n.

78 *Report of the Trial of Mrs Susannah Wright*.

79 *Republican*, 24 September 1825.

80 *Ibid.*

Dorchester gaol to visit Richard Carlile. Admonished for arriving at the prison without a letter requesting a visit, she was then denied the use of pen and paper to comply with the Keeper's edict. Like so many before, he underestimated her indomitable spirit. Wright made the arduous trip back to the village to compose the letter and eventually gained entry to see Carlile. At that time, he enthused, she 'so delighted me with the detail of the particulars of her share of the campaign since 1821' that for 10 days the radical luminary 'neglected everything to listen to her'.⁸¹

Ironically, William Wright must continue to be accorded the fate in the historical record that normally falls to the female spouse in a radical family.⁸² William and the children were ignored in the public accounts and in private correspondence as much as many radical wives and children were. We know little of his involvement in the radical movement, or of his relationship with Susannah. The fact that she was married was even ignored by all the press accounts. We do know that he had a short stint as a radical bookseller in Fleet Street, although his name disappears in publishing circles after 1821. From the accounts of both the newspapers and reflections of Susannah's closest friends, William was absent from all the court proceedings. We know the Wrights had more than the one child who endured Susannah's prison experience with her; perhaps it was William who attended to the day-to-day task of child care. And we know of William's death, 18 months after Susannah was finally released from prison. The intimate details of their relationship are lost, yet there is a sense that William supported Susannah's radical role, and that the radical community supported him, both by providing him with a home (with the Joneses) during her imprisonment and financially. The Wrights are a reminder that the concept of a radical couple is a hazardous one if it is used to imply a hierarchy of dedication or service.

* * *

Susannah Wright's prison experience evinced neither reform nor redemption. After William's death, she returned with her children to Nottingham to live with her mother. By August 1826, Wright caused an uproar when she established her own radical space in Nottingham by opening a bookshop trading in politically extreme and heretical publications.⁸³ She reported to Carlile that 'large crowds of Christians' assembled in protest each night outside the shop. Wright wrote

81 *Republican*, 18 November 1825.

82 For an insightful article that recovers the experience of the female spouse of a radical couple, see Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Will the Real Mary Lovett Please Stand Up?: Chartism, gender and autobiography', in Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds), *Living and Learning, Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Brookfield, Vt: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 163–81. See also Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in feminism and history* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 124–50, who explores the different experiences of working-class culture of Samuel and Jemima Bamford.

83 *Republican*, 29 August 1826.

that she found herself in the 'midst of a Christian storm' when angry crowds, affronted by the caricatures of God and the King adorning the front window, made repeated attempts to break into the bookshop and to drag her out into the street. Correspondents to the *Republican* reported that Wright was subjected to 'profane curses' and 'horrid imprecations', and Wright herself reported receiving several death threats. While evening produced the largest wrathful gatherings, her radical friends were able to rally around the shop in support. During the day, however, she was forced to take all means to defend herself. Faced with two youths who used the 'most dreadful language' against her, she reached for the pistol that she kept on the front counter and advised that she would most certainly fire it if they did not leave. They hurriedly 'scampered off'. The trouble came to a head by the end of the month when 'furious' crowds attempted to break into the shop five or six times in one evening and by nine o'clock her friends sent for the police. The irony must have struck many. Initially an inadequate force was sent and reinforcements were needed to quell the riot outside the shop. After several arrests, the police succeeded in clearing the streets by 11 o'clock.⁸⁴

By mid-September, however, she reported to the readers of the *Republican* that she had witnessed a remarkable turnaround in her situation. The riots, death threats and curses had ceased and even some of her most vehement opponents, she claimed, were now inquiring for her publications. In what seems to be her last entry in the public record, Wright jubilantly announced that 'the Victory is ours' for she had succeeded in establishing free discussion in Nottingham—a triumph indeed for the 'She-Champion of Impiety'.

In 1899, Richard Carlile's daughter wrote a biography of her father in which she listed the most important people who aided her father in the battle for reform.⁸⁵ Susannah Wright earned a place alongside radical stalwarts such as Francis Place, Julian Hibbert and George Holyoake.⁸⁶ Carlile himself had publicly praised Wright for her 'enthusiasm, her perseverance, her undauntedness, her coolness' during the 'hottest part' of the radical struggle. Following Wright's liberation from prison, Carlile earnestly hoped that she would recover her

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Theophila Carlile Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press as Told in the Story of the Life of Richard Carlile* (London: 1899), pp. 254–6.

⁸⁶ On Francis Place, radical and master tailor, see the introduction by Mary Thale in Francis Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place, 1771–1854*, Mary Thale (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Dudley Miles, *Francis Place, 1771–1854: The life of a remarkable radical* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988). On George Holyoake, freethinker and journalist, see George J. Holyoake, *Life of Holyoake: Sixty years of an agitator's life* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906); Lee E. Grugel, *George Jacob Holyoake: A study in the evolution of a Victorian radical* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976); Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The origins of the British secularist movement 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), passim. Far less is known of Julian Hibbert, though he was a crucial radical organiser and financial supporter of Carlile throughout his radical life. He was also involved in the formation of the National Union of the Working Class. See Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 245–50; Joel Wiener, 'Hibbert, Julian', *BDMBR*, pp. 221–2.

health and ‘some day receive that great reward from the public, to which she is eminently entitled’.⁸⁷ He was not alone in the esteem he held for Wright as the woman who had done ‘more public good than any other one’. Allen Davenport clearly thought her efforts worthy of a place in history:

‘That captive,’ said the friendly spirit,
 ‘With pallid cheeks, and tender frame,
 Has won the laurel wreath of merit,
 And purchased everlasting fame.
 ‘For not a name in his’try’s pages,
 Shall be found more fair and bright,
 Which may descend to future ages,
 Than the name of—Susan Wright.’⁸⁸

Despite the prominent role Wright played in the radical movement of the 1820s, and the wish of some leading radicals that she be afforded an eminent place in the history of the movement, she remains a relatively obscure figure in both the broader radical literature of the period and the subsequent historiography. Wright’s close association with Richard Carlile goes some way to explaining the dereliction by her contemporaries, as the case of Eliza Sharples, examined in a later chapter, also attests. Even among those who admired Carlile’s struggle for a free press were many who were disgusted by his anti-religious zeal and by the most marginal of his advocacies: birth control.⁸⁹ A woman imprisoned for blasphemy, who continued her trenchant attacks upon Christianity and supported Carlile’s most extreme tenets, was a direct affront to a newly evolving moral code, from which a radical movement struggling for a place in the hegemonic order was not immune.⁹⁰ Despite Carlile’s ‘most anxious wish’ to impress on his female readers that ‘religion has nothing to do with morality’,⁹¹ Wright’s early public announcement that she wished her rejection of Christianity to be ‘as notorious’ as that of Carlile undoubtedly curbed her influence among mainstream radicals, both male and female. While she engendered popular support during her imprisonment, her defenders still lamented: ‘Alas! How few of her countrywomen have attained to such an honour, and how very few there are of her own sex, who have even thought her worthy of notice.’⁹²

87 *Republican*, 16 July 1824.

88 *Republican*, 9 January 1824.

89 For a discussion of Carlile’s philosophies regarding sex and birth control, see M. L. Bush, *What is Love? Richard Carlile’s philosophy of sex* (London: Verso, 1998); Iain McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, Unpublished MA thesis (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1975), pp. 163–71. For the reception of Carlile’s ideas on birth control, see Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 181–5; Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex and contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 70–6.

90 Yeo, *Radical Femininity*, p. 3. As Yeo notes, the rising middling classes made religious family life a key factor in their claim to moral superiority.

91 *Republican*, 29 November 1822.

92 *Republican*, 30 July 1824.

Wright's independent contribution to extreme postwar radicalism has also been largely overlooked in radical historiography. Susannah Wright's story helps advance our understanding of the radical relationship with the prison space. In many ways, her experience of the prison space shaped her experience of radical culture. It expedited and cemented her identity as a radical, above and beyond her gender—a status that often eluded women in the radical movement. Wright's story also highlights the experience of women within the radical spaces associated with the prison—that of the courtroom and the radical bookshop—and adds to our growing understanding of women's involvement in the radical public sphere; how they negotiated and operated within the radical movement not only as radical wives and daughters but as women with independent agency. Further, her experience of both Newgate and Coldbath Fields prisons highlights the continuities between the old system and the new in this transitional period of prison reform as well as the resilience and vitality of radical culture in this period. The often fierce encounters between the London press such as the *Courier*, *The Times*, the *New Times* and the *Morning Chronicle* over the rights and treatment of prisoners such as Wright, and the debates within the very centre of political power in the House of Commons, suggest that the radicals were not simply speaking to one another from their prison cells, but were capable of intersecting and interacting with the discourse of the mainstream public sphere.

The radical relationship with the prison space highlighted the adaptability, vitality and tenacity of radical culture, but, of course, it was never a site of choice. The next chapters in this study take a spatial leap beyond the prison walls to examine the interplay between radical culture and other spaces *chosen* by radicals as sites of assembly in the early nineteenth century. Where the issue of prison reform played a central role in the penal experience of radicals, it was to be another reform agenda that would pervade all manner of discourse of, and provide key motivation for, radicals meeting in the London venues featured hereon. The demand for sweeping political reform of Britain's exclusive parliamentary system in this period dominated the social and political aspirations of a generation of radical men and women. The extent to which these other types of radical spaces constituted an alternative public sphere, or enabled radical participation in the mainstream public sphere, is also further explored.