

## 7. 'Bitten with the Rotunda notions': audience, identity and communication 1830–1832

The opening of the Rotunda in 1830 marked a new phase for London's radical culture. For a combination of geographical, temporal and social reasons, the venue provided a much needed rallying point for plebeian metropolitan radicalism in the early 1830s and catered for a whole spectrum of London's diverse radical ideology under one roof. For a period in 1830–32, the radical community found a venue open almost every night of the week, offering a rich array of heterodox political and theological thought communicated in a variety of ways. Working-class London, to Francis Place's chagrin, had been 'bitten with the Rotunda notions'.<sup>1</sup>

By way of illustration, the programme at the Rotunda in the final week of November 1830 proceeded as follows: on Sunday mornings and evenings, patrons attended 'the best theological service that has yet to be presented to a congregation'.<sup>2</sup> They listened as Richard Carlile read from the 'sublime pages' of Volney's *Ruins of Empire* before they were enlightened by the Reverend Robert Taylor's elucidation of all the 'mysteries of religion' through his explanation of 'zodiacal transits' and astronomical principles. The Radical Reform Association (RRA), a purely political group, met under the tricolour flag on Monday evenings to discuss the new Whig administration and the merits of vote by ballot. Carlile himself directed the political discussions on Tuesday evening reviewing the parliamentary speeches of the previous week along with a justification of the conduct of the agricultural labourers in the Swing disturbances of the period. On Thursday, veteran radical orator John Gale Jones lectured on the necessity of political reform, doubting the resolve of the new Whig government to effect any real change. Friday evening saw Taylor repeat the Sunday lecture, such was the popularity of his ribald and absorbing performances.

The great attraction of the Rotunda to the radical community can better be understood by briefly examining the range of other venues available to London's plebeian radicals for meetings and debate. Prior to the Rotunda's opening, several different public forums for radical debate had prevailed in London's radical culture, including (as we have seen with the Crown and Anchor) taverns and ale houses, dissenting chapels and coffee houses. Though Habermas countenanced

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1 Francis Place [Add. MS 27790, ff. 39–47], reprinted in D. J. Rowe, *London Radicalism 1830–1843: A selection from the papers of Francis Place* (London: London Record Society, 1970), p. 42.

2 *Prompter*, 27 November 1830.

such venues as crucial avenues for the rational debate of the bourgeois public sphere, the rich body of radical scholarship initiated by E. P. Thompson and Iain McCalman clearly reveals the plebeian connections of such venues overlooked by Habermas. As radical forums, ale houses and taverns (including those less ostentatious than the Crown and Anchor) held many advantages; they had long been pivotal institutions in popular culture, providing entertainment and a feeling of community and solidarity for workers.<sup>3</sup> Patrons could smoke, drink and socialise with their fellow workers whilst debating the merits of old and new political ideas and programmes.

By the 1820s, coffee shops and houses were also becoming popular centres of radical activity, assuming many of the traditional social and recreational functions of ale houses. As we saw earlier, Habermas declared the coffee house to be the archetypal space of the public sphere. Coffee houses were relatively cheap and easy to establish, and proprietors could operate without the surveillance of licensing justices or brewers. They therefore had the advantage of being able to stock radical journals and tracts, which patrons could buy or read in the premises. The coffee house embodied the notion of free speech and, from the early eighteenth century, particularly in the metropolis, they provided fertile ground for discussion and promulgation of political radicalism, atheism and free thought.<sup>4</sup>

Both tavern and coffee-house radicalism adapted to the surveillance and suppression of radical activities in the period following the Six Acts by adopting the format of radical debating clubs.<sup>5</sup> Although the informal and often opaque character of such clubs offered some advantages for evading prosecution, their informal nature also held serious disadvantages for radicalism. Their amorphous character produced organisational difficulties and affected the wider dissemination of radical ideology. By advertising meetings, radicals risked identifying their premises and groups as centres of sedition.<sup>6</sup> This in turn limited their ability to attract new followers to the radical cause. In this sense they were limited forums, appealing only to those already converted to radical thinking. Most taverns and coffee houses came nowhere near the capacity of the Crown and Anchor so the numbers they could accommodate precluded radical meetings on a large scale. The actual environment of the tavern and the coffee house also restricted the recruitment of new followers. As we saw in the

3 For general references on ale houses, taverns and coffee houses, see Chapter 5 of this study.

4 Brian Cowan, 'What was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the coffeehouse milieu in post-Restoration England', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 51 (2001), p. 140.

5 Iain McCalman, 'Ultra-Radicalism and Convivial Debating Clubs in London 1795–1838', *English Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 403 1987, pp. 312–15.

6 Ibid.

case of the Crown and Anchor, the masculine culture that emanated from these premises acted to exclude many possible followers in women, as well as those who were already active participants in the radical movement.<sup>7</sup>

Dissenting chapels redressed some of these disadvantages. Within the chapels, political dissent could be cloaked in religious terms and licences for dissenting ministers and their chapels were notoriously easy to obtain, as Carlile was to discover when he successfully obtained one for the Rotunda.<sup>8</sup> Ministers could advertise the proceedings openly and were able to cater to much larger audiences—some of the popular chapels attracting congregations of several hundred.<sup>9</sup> Chapels also provided a more congenial atmosphere for women; spy reports attest to their regular attendance.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, radical chapels catered for only one branch of radicalism, excluding political groups that eschewed the use of religious language, or those for whom religion was not the driving social and political issue.

The Rotunda overcame the major disadvantage of both taverns and chapels as radical debating forums by accommodating an astonishing diversity of organisations and outlooks. It was unique as a radical venue in its ability to combine many of the positive elements of other radical forums under one roof. Apart from the two theatres that accommodated the larger meetings, the Rotunda's coffee room also served as a meeting and debating place for radicals. The ex-Cato Street radical turned Home Office spy Abel Hall regularly met his radical colleagues in the coffee room before the main lectures, and again afterwards to discuss the lecture, or simply to socialise.<sup>11</sup> The coffee room assumed many of the characteristics of traditional taverns and coffee houses—Carlile having engaged a vintner to supply refreshments to patrons, including wines, coffee, tea, chops, steaks and fruit.<sup>12</sup> Several subcommittees of the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) used it as their regular

7 Catherine Hall, 'Private Persons Versus Public Someones: Class, gender and politics in England, 1780–1850', in Carolyn Steedman, Cathy Urwin and Valerie Walkerdine (eds), *Language, Gender and Childhood* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 18.

8 McCalman, 'Ultra-Radicalism and Convivial Debating Clubs in London', p. 315.

9 Iain McCalman notes that the tavern clubs could have appealed at a 'deeper level' by 'satisfying religious longing'. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

10 Home Office spy Abel Hall provides many accounts of women in chapels throughout his reports of 1827–32, at Home Office Papers, HO64/11. On Abel Hall, tailor and Home Office informer, see Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 133, 181–2, 195–8, 232–3. For women's involvement in Dissenting churches and rational religion, see Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the making of the British working class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 92–118; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century* (London: Virago, 1983); Linda Wilson, "'Constrained by Zeal": Women in mid-nineteenth century nonconformist churches', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1999), pp. 185–202.

11 See his many detailed reports about the Rotunda at Home Office Papers, HO64/11, HO64/12.

12 *Prompter*, 13 November 1830; Home Office Papers, HO64/11, n.d., fo. 249.

meeting place during 1831.<sup>13</sup> Along with the coffee room, the many other rooms adjoining the theatres, including two large billiard rooms with apartments, an extensive bar and the 'long' room—previously the Surrey's library—could also be hired for meetings. A 'dwelling house' that occupied the top three floors at the front of the premises allowed Carlile to engage the services of a housekeeper—one with whom Taylor would later become embroiled in a sordid and very public affair.<sup>14</sup>

The facilities at the Rotunda even enabled open-air meetings to be conducted from the premises. Radicals used the portico during the agitation of November 1830 and later during the Reform Crisis in October 1831 to communicate with thousands of people rallying outside who were unable to gain entry to the building. On that occasion, Taylor, Carlile and Henry Hunt addressed the 2000 inside the Rotunda, while working-class radicals William Carpenter, John Cleave and John Hunter relayed the message to the estimated 3000 people assembled outside.<sup>15</sup> Later in the evening they were addressed by Hunt and Irish radical William Thompson from the portico. Police officer William Chambers complained that

[n]ot only are the morals and sentiments of the poorer classes corrupted by the Inflammatory and Blasphemous language of the...orators within, but...the great crowds...on the outside are also addressed from the top of the portico with seditious speeches.<sup>16</sup>

The location and physical structure of the Rotunda allowed a blurring of the traditional outdoor radical space with that of the indoor. Much to the alarm of its resident neighbours, the Rotunda had a capacity for large crowds to overflow onto Blackfriars Road either towards the bridge or down the main thoroughfare (Figure 7.1).<sup>17</sup> Such capacity helped to fulfil Carlile's aim to disseminate the radical message to as many people as possible, particularly at times of heightened social unrest. Importantly, it provided a public arena for political activity far larger than those available in chapels, clubs and (most) taverns.

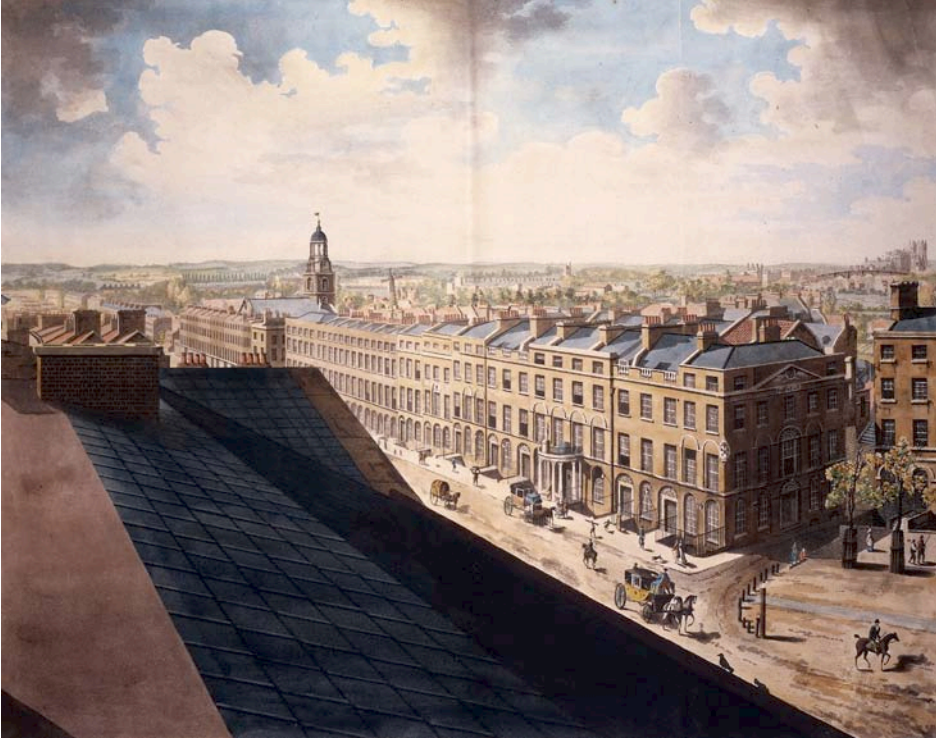
13 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 12 August 1831, fo. 410.

14 For more on this episode, see Chapter 8 of this study.

15 Joel Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 278.

16 Home Office Papers, HO40/25, 10 November 1830, fo. 214

17 The Home Office received many complaints from neighbours. See, for example, Home Office Papers, HO40/020/25, fo. 213, complaining of the nuisance created by the large and noisy crowds, and of the blasphemy of the lectures in early November 1830. See also HO44/21, ff. 408–9; HO44/22, ff. 97–8; HO44/23, ff. 76–7, 154–5, 172–3.



**Figure 7.1 Architectural view of the Surrey Rotunda, Sir Ashton Lever's Museum in Blackfriars Road, London.**

Artist and date unknown. Copyright Wellcome Library, London.

In many ways, the dissenting chapel licence Carlile obtained for the Rotunda was in keeping with its modes of operation. The sport of exposing inconsistencies and historical absurdities in the Christian faith became a Rotunda forte, due largely to the oratorical brilliance of the Reverend Robert Taylor.<sup>18</sup> The essence of Taylor's critique was simple enough. He argued that the first priests were actually astronomers who gave 'ingenious' names to the celestial bodies for the purpose of assisting memory recall; however, 'religious blockheads' took these as names of real people whose actions and sufferings were founded in history.

18 I am indebted to Iain McCalman, who, in the late 1980s, first introduced me to the figure of Robert Taylor. Iain encouraged me to explore his fascinating contribution to Rotunda culture in my Honours thesis, *Radicalism as Theatre: The Blackfriars Road Rotunda 1830–32* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1989). See also Iain McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England: Infidel preachers and radical theatricality in 1830s London', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (eds), *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 51–67; James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political language, ritual and symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 138–40; Edward Royle, 'Taylor, Robert', in Joseph Baylen and Norbert Gossman (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* [hereafter *BDMBR*] (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 467–70.



This had since become the basis of Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Taylor believed that while the sacred Scriptures had been written in an allegorical and mystical way, they could be understood and explained by reason.

Drawing on the example of scientific institutions such as the Surrey, Taylor fortified his critiques of Christian evidence with ‘experiments and facts’ to illustrate his ideas and give ‘vigour to the mind’. Visual demonstration played a crucial role in Rotunda education; tangible scientific demonstration and observation were seen as vital means of countering religious superstition. Lectures were always accompanied by impressive props and contemporaries noted that the theatres were equipped with ‘all the apparatus necessary for the explanation and elucidation of his subject’.<sup>20</sup> One regular prop was an orrery, a clockwork assemblage of the planets used to explain his solar myths. He claimed to be awaiting funds to purchase an ‘eidouranian’, which was superior to the orrery in that it imitated the ‘motions of heavenly bodies’.<sup>21</sup> The zodiacal images that Carlile had painted around the dome of the small theatre were central to Taylor’s performance. By way of example, Taylor pointed to the sign of Virgo to explain the astronomical origin of the birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary, scandalously suggesting that ‘they would find a young woman who had not been quite so prudent as she ought to have been’.<sup>22</sup> By his rationalist interpretation of the Gospels, the 12 apostles of Christ were similarly allegories of the 12 signs of the zodiac. The use of such props underscores the value Rotunda radicals placed on observation as a means of learning. ‘Observation’, Eliza Sharples argued, was ‘the very element of experience; a profound knowledge of things is the consequence of perseverance and just observation’.<sup>23</sup>

Paradoxically, the emphasis on free thought in Rotunda education went hand in hand with intense religiosity. From the outset, religious overtones pervaded Rotunda proceedings. Taylor’s notoriety as an ‘El Dorado of science’ was matched only by his cachet as a man of the cloth; his background as a member of the Anglican Church enabled him to employ the romantic and emotive devices of the established church to attract and captivate his audiences. He emulated its ritual and ceremony in most of his Rotunda performances, deriving his ‘Canticles, Creed, Lessons, Thanksgiving and Collect’ from the Anglican service—a format he adopted because of its ‘majestic rhythms...and declamatory grandeur’.<sup>24</sup>

19 Home Office Papers, HO64/13, 27 March 1831, fo. 37.

20 Parolin, *Radicalism as Theatre*, pp. 25–6. Home Office Papers, HO64/13, 13 November 1830, fo. 2. Other preaching infidels of the day also employed devices to explain their subject. After Rowland Detrosier died in 1834, Carlile advertised his ‘philosophical apparatus’ for sale. These included magic lanterns, astronomical slides, a globe receiver and a large transparent circle. See *Scourge For the Littleness of Great Men*, 11 December 1834.

21 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 13 November 1830, fo. 119.

22 Home Office Papers, HO64/13, 13 November 1830, fo. 5.

23 *Isis*, 19 May 1832.

24 McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 188.

The announcement of Taylor and Carlile's 'joint apostleship', the promotion of Sunday lectures as divine services and the observance of Taylor's title of 'Reverend', all accentuated the image of the Rotunda as a church.

In addition to borrowing from the church service, Taylor donned the full pontificals of the Anglican clergymen for all his Rotunda discourses. His theatre was also carefully outfitted for such 'services'. According to contemporary descriptions, it sported a raised altar complete with a 6 ft crucifix and a communion table laden with bread and wine 'similar to those prepared in the Established Church for the Administration of the Sacrament'.<sup>25</sup> The infidel service commenced with Carlile or Taylor's young assistant, Harrison, reading the first lesson—generally a chapter of Volney's evocative and sonorous *Ruins of Empire*—followed by a second reading of a chapter from the Bible relevant to Taylor's lecture. Each sermon delivered by Taylor was read from a 'written document in black covers similar to the sermon books of the Established Clergy'.<sup>26</sup> A 'prayer' was often also read by Taylor or Carlile during the service. The 'New Lord's Prayer', which Home Office records confirm was 'commonly used at the Rotunda', played upon the language of the Lord's Prayer: 'May that peace which virtue gives possess your heart and minds that you may hear and understand and may the reward of knowledge and virtue be with you and remain with you for ever and ever.'<sup>27</sup>

Taylor's performances indicate that radical free thought and religiosity were not necessarily incompatible.<sup>28</sup> In many respects, religion and irreligion drew on the same set of conventions for public communication. Rotunda radicals and other infidel preachers of the period recognised the romantic and emotive appeal of religion to the imaginations of working people. This religiosity was not exclusive to the Rotunda. As Prothero notes, 'many radicals clearly felt the need to clothe their activities in a religious garb' to cater for the interest and attraction in 'rational religion'.<sup>29</sup> The Dissenting chapels of the 1820s had also represented themselves as places of deist religious worship. Their preachers issued liturgies outlining forms of public worship and made use of a variety of religious rituals and ceremonies. Josiah Fitch, an eccentric radical preacher who operated from the aptly named Grub Street Chapel, recognised the importance of religious qualifications in being accepted as a radical educator.<sup>30</sup> He was compelled to complement his qualifications as a schoolmaster with a licence for preaching.

25 Home Office Papers, HO64/11 n.d., fo. 293; and HO64/13, 3 April 1831, fo. 50.

26 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, n.d., fo. 293; HO64/13, 3 April 1831, fo. 50.

27 Home Office Papers, HO64/13, 13 November 1830, fo. 3.

28 Parolin, *Radicalism as Theatre*, pp. 26–7.

29 Iowerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, John Gast and his Times (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979), p. 263.

30 On Josiah Fitch, schoolteacher and freethinker, see McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, pp. 190–2. Fitch was not unique in this respect. See the account of the Reverend Scholefield in Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, "'In the Thickest of the Fight': The Reverend James Scholefield and the Bible Christians of Manchester and

Religion was deeply rooted in early nineteenth-century popular culture; ceremonies of folk life such as births, deaths and marriages were saturated with religious associations.<sup>31</sup> The Bible was an integral part of literate working people's lives and of folk culture generally. Abel Hall's reports of the increase in numbers of attendances at the Rotunda on Sundays, while perhaps to be expected given the tempo of the working week, also suggest that the venue met a need for those disillusioned with mainstream religion.<sup>32</sup>

The romanticism of Volney and the intense ceremony and rich theatricality of Taylor's discourses, coupled with his extravagant scientific displays, could induce feelings of intellectual intoxication for some of the observing audience. The discovery of radical knowledge, especially the recognition of the endless possibilities of free thought, could engender an intense emotional experience—something akin to religious conversion.<sup>33</sup> After attending one of Taylor's performances in 1830, a young architect's clerk, William Knight, filled several manuscript pages with his newfound inspiration:

[I]n vain my pen attempts to express the throbbing joys which fill my heart, no tongue can utter and no Christian's mind can imagine the pleasures which fill my soul...Be still my heart for thou art free! thou can's't reach the Heavens.<sup>34</sup>

Although Rotunda radicalism could have offered psychological satisfactions akin to religious belief, Carlile never intended to deceive his patrons into the 'deist public worship' he claimed was a feature of Fitch's chapel and which merely mimicked Christian superstition.<sup>35</sup> Given the history of Carlile's enmity towards the established church, there is little doubt that the religiosity of the Rotunda performances was utilised primarily as a means to mock and thereby debunk and demystify the central tenets of orthodox religion. Taylor adopted the church rituals in blasphemous mockery of the religious service; lampooning the practices of the established church particularly delighted Rotunda audiences. On entering the stage, Taylor would make three low bows to the

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Salford', *Albion*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1994), pp. 461–82.

31 Edward Royle, *Radical Politics 1790–1900: Religion and unbelief* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 9.

32 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 4 December 1831, fo. 202.

33 McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England', p. 55.

34 See Knight's letter printed in the *Examiner*, 14 November 1830. See also McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 189. On the intense emotional connections often made between the audience and the performer, see Peter Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture', *Past & Present*, vol. 144 (1994), pp. 138–70. See also Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Feeling Public: Sensation theater, commodity culture and the Victorian public sphere', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2002), p. 246. Gillian Russell argues that performances by Thomas Erskine, barrister and Whig MP, in the courtroom engendered similar emotions from his audience. See Gillian Russell, 'The Theatre of Crim. Con.: Thomas Erskine, adultery and radical politics in the 1790s', in Michael T. Davis and Paul A. Pickering (eds), *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular politics in the age of reform* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 57–70.

35 McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England', p. 53.



communion table and to the 6 ft crucifix. Hall regarded this extravagant use of gesture and motion as 'mockery of the clergy' and viewed Taylor's burlesque of the sacrament as particularly blasphemous. With the aid of his water and wine, which were placed on a communion table, Taylor imitated the clergy's practice of administering the communion sacrament. After repeating 'this is Christ's blood', he drank the wine and exclaimed, 'O Blessed Jesus your blood is good indeed'. Following the drinking of the wine, he rested his head on a desk as 'if in liquor [sic]' and imitated church prayer.<sup>36</sup> Hall's reports clearly testify to the fact that Taylor's audiences recognised his 'mock solemnity'. He reported that throughout the performance there was abundant applause and great laughter for the antics of the 'Devil's Chaplain'.

Taylor's penchant for theatricality was particularly evident in his flair for melodrama. The rise in the number of melodramatic performances in all theatrical spheres coincided with the emerging Romantic movement in England. Like Romanticism, melodrama became an avenue through which to express direct and powerful emotions.<sup>37</sup> Taylor's 'Devil Raising' derived much of its popularity from its use of melodramatic principles of intense emotion, moral dichotomies of 'good' and 'bad' and flamboyant special effects.<sup>38</sup> With the theatre in darkness and Taylor dressed in full clerical regalia, he would begin by chanting: 'Satan, Beezeleubub, Baal, Peor, Belial, Lucifer, Abbaddon, Appolyon, thou King of the Bottomless Pit, thou King of Scorpions...to whom it is given to hurt the earth... Appear.' A large globe on the stage promptly lit up and a hideous caricature of Lucifer appeared. With a flick of the wrist, Satan became an 'angel of light' as the reverse side of the globe revealed a zodiacal symbol of the sun.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, the 'Devil Raising' regularly attracted crowds of between 700 and 1000, and on some occasions hundreds assembled outside were unable to obtain admission.

Carlile promoted Taylor as his star attraction and Rotunda placards all over London projected both a glamorous and a mysterious image of the radical performer. Describing Taylor as 'His Satan Majesty's chaplain' was clearly calculated to capture the attention of the London populace. Taylor's eccentricity, both public and private, accentuated his image as an entertainer to the extent that one contemporary compared his 'fine voice' with that of Charles Kemble,

36 Home Office Papers, HO64/13, 3 April 1831, fo. 54.

37 One of the most useful surveys of the genre remains Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965). See also Martha Vicinus, "'Helpless and Unfriended': Nineteenth-century domestic melodrama', *New Literary History*, vol. 13 (1981), pp. 127–43; Louis James, 'Taking Melodrama Seriously: Theatre, and nineteenth-century studies', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 3 (1977), pp. 151–8; Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

38 Parolin, *Radicalism as Theatre*, p. 38. See also David Worrall, *Theatric Revolution: Drama, censorship and Romantic period subcultures, 1773–1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 357.

39 See the description of this 'Devil Raising' in *Devil's Pulpit*, 27 November 1830.

the most famous actor of the day.<sup>40</sup> Taylor's choice of clerical dress and other flamboyant attire helped in his manufacture as a star performer. Aside from the clergy's pontificals, he regularly wore white kid gloves, posed with an eyeglass and had his hair arranged in curls over his forehead according to the dandy fashion. Whilst preaching, he made a point of 'flourishing a scented cambric handkerchief, trimmed with a deep lace border, at every pause in his discourse'.<sup>41</sup> He delighted in his various diabolical nicknames: the 'Devil's Chaplain', the 'Archbishop of Pandemonium', 'Primate of all Hell' and 'Apostle to the Church of the Rotunda'.<sup>42</sup> All were played upon by Taylor to create an image of iconoclasm and notoriety.

It was then, perhaps, a natural progression that Taylor should extend his theatrical endeavour and pen his own full-length melodrama for the Rotunda stage. *Swing! Or who are the Incendaries?* saw a sharp shift towards political instruction for the Devil's Chaplain. Promoted by Carlile as a 'politico-tragedy', *Swing!* defended the agricultural labourers of several southern counties who were rioting during 1830–31 in response to falling wages, tithes and the introduction of automatic threshing machines.<sup>43</sup> The *Prompter* boasted to its readers of the literary and theatrical excellence of the tragedy, reporting that the 'language is worthy of Otway, and the denouement of the plot beats that of any other popular tragedy'.<sup>44</sup> The play, described as an 'admirable tragedy' in which the audience could 'alternately cry and laugh', was standing entertainment for two nights a week at the Rotunda and ran for several weeks.

That Carlile should embrace such a theatrical production at first seems incongruous given his earlier disdain for the theatre. In 1828, he declared he was 'no great admirer' of the 'theatrical profession', viewing it as 'a corresponding principle with that mass of fiction, of which all theology is a part, by which man is so much degraded'.<sup>45</sup> These sentiments were also expressed by Carlile's ideological paladin, Thomas Paine, as well as by the 1790s radical intelligentsia of the Godwin circle.<sup>46</sup> To understand Carlile's about-face, and his decision to

40 Iain McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, Unpublished MA thesis (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1975), p. 186.

41 H. Vizetelly, *Glances Back Through Seventy Years* (London, 1893), vol. 1, pp. 98–9.

42 *Prompter*, 4 December 1830.

43 For a more detailed account of the *Swing!* play, see McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England', p. 57; Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution*, pp. 340–60. Jane Moody offers a brief account of the play, and the Rotunda, in her study of 'illegitimate theatre' of the period. As Gillian Russell notes in her review of Moody's book, the Rotunda represented the 'far end of the spectrum of illegitimacy', and its relegation to the 'very margins' of Moody's book weakens its claim to be a 'definitive account' of theatre's 'illegitimacy'. See Gillian Russell, 'Recent Studies in Late Georgian Theater and Drama', Book review, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2003), pp. 396–405.

44 *Prompter*, 5 February 1831. Carlile is here referring to Thomas Otway (1616–93), celebrated poet and playwright.

45 *Lion*, 14 March 1828.

46 David Karr, "'Thoughts that Flash like Lightning': Thomas Holcroft, radical theater, and the production of meaning in 1790s London", *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2001), p. 327.

market the Rotunda as a theatre, we must consider the political context of the theatrical trade in this period. In 1737, the government of the day established the position of Examiner of Plays to preside over the moral and political health of the stage, a role that continued well into the next century. At the same time, a system was introduced so that the authorities could close theatres operating without a licence.<sup>47</sup> Such official regulation meant the government dictated what material was deemed appropriate for London audiences. Moreover, the Patent Theatres—Drury Lane, Covent Garden and the Haymarket—were alone licensed to perform dramatic forms of tragedy and comedy.

The vigorous political life of the early nineteenth century was therefore kept out of the licensed Patent Theatres of London through direct government intervention. Although David Karr's fascinating study of Thomas Holcroft and radical theatre in the 1790s reveals ways in which both performers and audiences could circumvent these official constraints in mainstream theatres, by 1833, one contemporary observer considered that at a time when the 'public mind' was 'so absorbed in politics' the stage, commonly supposed to 'represent the times', was devoid of politics.<sup>48</sup> The association of the Patents with 'Old Corruption'—thought to be responsible for the theatre monopolies—was anathema to a whole class of people growing conscious of their strength and culture, and of their exclusion from political and social power.<sup>49</sup> Their truculence had been manifested in 1809, when a price rise at the Drury Lane theatre led to the notorious 'OP' (Old Price) riots, which rocked central London for several weeks.<sup>50</sup>

A mounting resentment of the monopolies of the Patent Houses was also reflected in the proliferation of popular theatricals in saloon theatres, penny gaffs and other illegal theatre venues during the 1820s. It also led to greater support of the more formal 'minor theatres' that flourished in response to a growing market for sites of urban sociability among middling and plebeian classes. These were licensed only to produce what theatre historian Jane Moody

47 On the regulation of theatres, see Leonard Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama, 1737–1824* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1976); Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution*, pp. 1–32.

48 Michael Booth, *Nineteenth Century Plays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), vol. 1, p. 7. On political theatre in the 1790s, see John Barrell, "'An Entire Change of Performances?'" The politicisation of theatre and the theatricalisation of politics in the mid-1790s', *Lumen*, vol. 17 (1998), pp. 11–50; Karr, "'Thoughts that Flash like Lightning'"; Gillian Russell, "'Burke's Dagger": Theatricality, politics and print culture in the 1790s', *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, vol. 20 (1997), pp. 1–16. For a recent study of the intersections of politics and theatre in the 1830s, see Katherine Newey, 'Reform on the London Stage', in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (eds), *Rethinking the Age of Reform, Britain 1780–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 238–53. For an overview of political theatre for the working classes during the Chartist years, see Marc Brodie, 'Free Trade and Cheap Theatre: Sources of politics for the nineteenth-century London poor', *Social History*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2003), pp. 346–60.

49 C. Barker, 'A Theatre for the People', in Kenneth Richards and Peter Thompson (eds), *Nineteenth Century British Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 11.

50 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 806.

describes as 'illegitimate forms such as melodrama, pantomime, burletta and spectacle', though they soon challenged their exclusion from the 'legitimate' dramatic forms of the Patents.<sup>51</sup>

These venues flourished outside the City of Westminster, as the 1737 Act specifically limited the power of the Lord Chamberlain to scrutinise theatrical texts to be performed in the borough. Minor theatres, while still requiring licences from local magistrates, were clustered in East London and, to the great advantage of Carlile, south of the Thames, in Surrey. The Surrey Theatre (originally the Royal Circus) was also located on Blackfriars Road and became a noted working-class theatre during the early 1830s.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the Surrey, a short distance away could be found the Coburg and the Bower theatres.<sup>53</sup> The poet and literary critic Leigh Hunt considered in 1831 that the 'trade of a theatrical critic' would now take place in the 'classical ground of Southwark', rather than the 'once witty neighbourhood of Covent Garden' and, by 1840, the social observer Henry Mayhew also identified many theatres on the 'Surrey side' that were renowned for catering to a working-class audience.<sup>54</sup> As Moody suggests, Hunt's observation reflected the 'disintegration of old hierarchies and the emergence of new forms and places of dramatic performance'.<sup>55</sup> The 'new feel' that Thomas Markus identified of towns and cities of this period was also reflected in sites of urban sociability. Paradoxically, while the location in Surrey played a role in the demise of the Leverian and the Surrey Institution, the cultural development of the environs surrounding the Rotunda helped in establishing another layer of identity as a theatre. The cultural topography of London had been refigured.

Carlile's reticence about the theatre as a mode of popular entertainment therefore centred on the restriction of free speech, which he so lauded at the Rotunda, and the dearth of political critique in the formal theatres of the period. The Rotunda was unique in offering entertainment that reflected the uneasy political climate of the day. Even the minor theatres generally avoided politically charged theatrical productions in order to protect their own licences. This ultimately meant the exclusion of 'dangerous' political material such as Taylor's politico-tragedy, *Swing!*, from licensed theatres of the day.

Although Rotunda performers such as Taylor were great entertainers, the purpose of the theatricals was the reverse of frivolous. Serious political

51 Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, p. 5.

52 As David Worrall notes, audiences sometimes confused the Surrey Theatre with the Rotunda. A 'competitive spin-off' of Taylor's play, written by Charles Barnett and titled *Swing! A Farce*, opened at the Surrey Theatre only a few weeks after Taylor's opening night at the Rotunda. See Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution*, p. 359. See also Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, pp. 35–7.

53 Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution*, p. 341.

54 Barker, 'A Theatre for the People', p. 22.

55 Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, p. 33.

assertions were being made throughout. Taylor's dramas aimed to infuse anti-establishment propaganda with entertainment value. In *Swing!*, he employed overtly political dialogue:

Our proud and haughty lords  
That make the laws only to serve themselves,  
and hire the clergy, like the gospel dogs  
That lickt the beggars sores, to slobber us  
Into patience, would, if they could  
Make air and water theirs, and not suffer us  
To breathe or drink of the stream, but by their  
Allowance.<sup>56</sup>

The enormous popularity of *Swing!* and Taylor's other Rotunda performances also convinced Carlile that theatre was an effective mode of communication, particularly as he believed that the majority of English people were unwilling to 'listen to what may be termed the philosophy of politics'.<sup>57</sup> He claimed that a 'great adroitness, with some finesse' was necessary to gain their continued attention and he believed that political theatre could achieve this. If this meant drawing on the modes of communication of the formal theatres, so be it. There seems little doubt that Rotunda radicals recognised that the method of delivering a political message was as important as the message itself.

In adopting theatrical modes, however, Carlile was also capturing the nuances of a much more traditional form of plebeian entertainment that remained outside the institutional setting of either the Patent or the minor theatres, but in another older, more plebeian tradition of folk theatre, or 'countertheatre'.<sup>58</sup> The ballad singers and 'patterers' with their pavement farces, street-corner parodies and satirical monologues, all represented forms of counter, or folk, theatre.<sup>59</sup> Those re-enacting the cruelties of Coldbath Fields House of Correction during the election parades of Sir Francis Burdett (outlined in Chapter 2) belonged to this tradition, and much of the entertainment in pubs and coffee houses also took the form of countertheatre. Free-and-easies provided radicals with entertainment where they could relax and gossip in a convivial atmosphere and be stimulated by 'dramatic, fantastic, and humorous performances', as well as participating in the ritual 'hullabaloo of singing, toasting and chanting'.<sup>60</sup> Although less overtly theatrical than formal popular theatre, countertheatre still incorporated the underlying principles of burlesque, satire and drama.

56 Robert Taylor, *Swing! Or who are the incendiaries* (London, 1831), p. 31.

57 *Prompter*, 20 November 1830.

58 The term 'countertheatre' was first coined by E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture', *Journal of Social History*, no. 4 (1974), pp. 382–405.

59 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 782.

60 McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 121.

Characterised by a mocking or lampooning of the texts, offices and ceremonies of the establishment, it was performed to undermine traditional authority by ridiculing its roles, functions and symbols of distinction.<sup>61</sup> In countertheatre, play and event were used as indirect means of conveying a political message that could be interpreted and understood by rich and poor, literate and illiterate. Many of these performances took the form of lampooning the establishment and its officers. Ordinary men could become 'kings or heroes of the night'.<sup>62</sup> This form of social inversion was an intrinsic part of the tradition of countertheatre.

This mode of political communication had a long tradition in popular radical culture as a means of sparking and sustaining interest in the radical cause. Such was the popularity of countertheatre in plebeian culture that some radicals explicitly adopted its modes in an effort to gain popular support. John Wilkes' use of countertheatrical devices in the latter half of the eighteenth century contributed enormously to his popular appeal.<sup>63</sup> His public manner—epitomised by flamboyant gestures, dress, theatricality, wit and irreverence—won him the immediate admiration of all those who would have loved to flout authority. Much of Taylor's popular support was similarly derived from his 'countertheatricality'. Aside from his flamboyant dress and eccentricity, his propensity for low burlesque and his mocking of authority were vital elements in his appeal. For plebeian audiences, the Rotunda tapped into traditional modes of communication and conviviality in popular culture but also provided the more formal setting of a theatre, which allowed patrons to enjoy the trappings of new modes of urban sociability.

Carlile's pricing format also catered for working-class audiences. He priced his theatrical entertainment well below that of the formal theatres in order to disseminate the radical message as widely as possible. He boasted that the Rotunda provided the 'cheapest theatrical entertainment to be found' in London and the relatively low cost of admittance to performances found a receptive audience among the working classes of the metropolis. Though the minor theatres provided a more affordable option for plebeian theatregoers than the Patents, there remains some contention among scholars as to the affordability of such theatres for the majority of the population. Marc Brodie notes that prior to the 1830s the admission prices for the Coburg remained relatively out of reach of many—the boxes, four shillings; the pit, two shillings; and the

61 John Brewer, 'Theatre and Counter-Theatre in Georgian Politics: The mock elections at Garrat', *History Today*, vol. 33 (1983), p. 22.

62 McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 121.

63 John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 163–200.



gallery one shilling—compared with the much lower cost of the penny gaffs.<sup>64</sup> The comparative affordability of the Rotunda tickets at sixpence or one penny provided an attractive alternative for working-class audiences.

The working-class recognition of the Rotunda as a forum for popular theatre was perhaps most evident in the audience reaction to, and involvement in, the performances. Traditionally, melodrama accorded an opportunity for audiences to participate in their entertainment through cries of 'shame' for the arch villain or 'bravo' for the hero. It provided a communal theatrical interaction between actors and audience, which was also evident at the Rotunda theatre. Home Office spy Abel Hall reported that Rotunda performers received 'theatrical applause' in great quantities, suggesting that audiences reacted to the performances as if in a traditional theatre house.<sup>65</sup> Another Home Office recorder testifies similarly that cries of 'bravo' and long and loud applause became familiar accompaniments to Taylor's lectures and extravaganzas.<sup>66</sup>

This audience reaction suggests Carlile may have underestimated the degree of political awareness and political engagement of Rotunda patrons. Cries of 'shame' or 'bravo' and extra applause during seditious or blasphemous acts were two of the ways Rotunda audiences expressed their disgruntlement with authority. For a people who lacked the political voice or strength to express their disapproval formally, the communal interaction between radical leader and followers provided an opportunity to register disaffection with the injustices of Old Corruption. As Marc Baer contends in relation to mainstream plebeian theatre, 'a place in the audience was also a voice'.<sup>67</sup> The more explicit political content of Rotunda performances provided audiences an opportunity for a more potent expression of their discontent.

By offering political instruction in the guise of theatre, the Rotunda also provided sanctuary for what we might term 'closet radicals'—people who might otherwise have been repelled by the more formal or clandestine political groups that met in taverns and coffee houses. People could voice their political will and independence by attending political theatre. Patrons could not be arrested for attending the theatrical performances, although their presence automatically acted to register their political discontent. The Rotunda also offered a powerful alternative for those working people who wanted access to radical theory but who were concerned about the illegality of unstamped papers and journals. The repressive legislation levelled at the unstamped press, and the severe punishments surrounding its distribution, meant that alternative, less provocative means of obtaining radical knowledge were particularly valuable.

64 Brodie, 'Free Trade and Cheap Theatre', p. 350.

65 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 25 September 1830, fo. 167; HO64/12, 27 February 1832, fo. 47.

66 Home Office Papers, HO64/13, 3 April 1831, fo. 50.

67 Marc Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 177.

Recent scholarship has argued for the centrality of the theatre—both plebeian and bourgeois forms—in urban sociability in early nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>68</sup> Lynn Voskuil links audience involvement in theatrical performances with a voice in the public sphere: ‘while hisses, catcalls, and shouts cannot be equated with rational discourse, such accounts of audience behaviour bespeak a conception of the public sphere grounded in verbal exchange, specifically in the articulation and public debate of fiercely held opinions.’<sup>69</sup>

This is a crucial point. Participation in, and an impact on, the public sphere cannot alone be limited to the sober, rational discourse of middle-class institutions such as the Surrey Institution. Public opinion was clearly reflected in, and generated by, voices within such middle-class institutions, but also in spaces such as the Rotunda, which, for Habermas, sat outside the bourgeois public sphere. The example of the Rotunda poses a serious challenge to the dichotomous approach of thinking towards the two separate spheres.<sup>70</sup>

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The device of theatricality was not the only form of radical communication employed at the Rotunda; other modes of radical discourse and exchange also found an outlet within its walls. The Rotunda accommodated purely political radical groups and identities, even those who eschewed Carlile’s assaults on Christianity. In July 1830, Henry Hunt’s Radical Reform Association (RRA) found a home at the Rotunda. The new Metropolitan Political Union (MPU) formed by Irish and English radicals under the chairmanship of Daniel O’Connell (and later Hunt) also found in the Rotunda a perfect venue for their lofty ambition to unite the whole of London’s radical opinion in one organisation.<sup>71</sup> Despite early disputes between Carlile and the MPU over its direction, the July Revolution in France injected a new urgency to consolidate and

68 See, for example, the work by Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); idem, *The Theatres of War: Performance, politics, and society, 1793–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Voskuil, ‘Feeling Public’; Julie A. Carlson, ‘Hazlitt and the Sociability of Theatre’, in Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (eds), *Romantic Sociability: Social networks and literary culture in Britain, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 145–65; Simon During, ‘“The Temple Lives”: The Lyceum and Romantic show business’, in James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds), *Romantic Metropolis: The urban scene of British culture, 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 204–26; Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*.

69 Voskuil, ‘Feeling Public’, p. 248. Julie Carlson argues that although Habermas paid little attention to theatre as an institution of the public sphere, it was nevertheless ‘instrumental in negotiating changes in forms of representation and representability’. Carlson, ‘Hazlitt and the Sociability of Theatre’, p. 147.

70 Gillian Russell also argues that the ‘potent space’ of the Beaufort buildings (in the Strand) was less a counter-public than a space that extended ‘the limits of inclusivity encoded in notions of the commercialized public sphere in its classic Habermasian formulation’. Gillian Russell, ‘Spouters or Washerwomen: The sociability of Romantic lecturing’, in Russell and Tuite, *Romantic Sociability*, p. 129.

71 For an RRA meeting that attracted more than 1000 people, see *Morning Chronicle*, 15 August 1830. For more on the RRA and the MPU, see Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, pp. 25–281, 386ns17–18; D. J. Rowe, ‘Class and Political Radicalism in London, 1831–2’, *Historical Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1970), pp. 31–47; John Belchem, ‘Orator’ Hunt: *Henry Hunt and English working-class radicalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 194–213.

centralise metropolitan radicalism. William Cobbett used the occasion to deliver a series of 11 immensely successful lectures at the Rotunda on the French example and on 'the English boroughmongers', which energised the political meetings at the Rotunda for the remainder of the year.<sup>72</sup>

It was not long, however, before the divisions that had destabilised London's radicalism for decades emerged at the Rotunda. Despite Carlile's public aim to establish a venue of free discussion for all tenets of radicalism, his polemics against many of London's leading radicals, as well as his criticism of the strategy to make universal suffrage the key demand of reform, soon impacted on relationships within the Rotunda. The tumultuous events of early November 1830 revealed the first rifts, and again centred on the personalities of Hunt and Carlile. The opening of the Rotunda saw a truce (albeit tenuous) in the bitter feud between the two men, which originated in their respective prison cells and continued into the late 1820s. In the year before Carlile assumed the tenancy of the Rotunda, he caustically asserted that he had never known a political association 'more contemptibly devoid of intellect and useful purpose' than Hunt's Radical Reform Association.<sup>73</sup> That they came together under the roof of the Rotunda suggests that both men recognised the potential of the venue for driving London radicalism in this period. The veiled harmony was to be short-lived. Ultimately, it was the threat of prosecution that again brought the two radical leaders to blows.

Although Carlile frequently claimed that his numerous prosecutions were 'heaven' to him, others such as Hunt and Cobbett were less enthusiastic about a return to prison life. Cobbett, for instance, was due to deliver a lecture to a packed Rotunda audience in early November after thousands assembled the previous evening to hear him speak. At the last moment, he had an emissary deliver Carlile a message advising that he was too ill to proceed with the next lecture. Many of the Rotunda fraternity suspected cowardice in the face of possible prosecution.<sup>74</sup> A greater schism in Rotunda solidarity was to follow. On 11 November 1830, following the heady events caused by the anticipated visit of the King to the city, Hunt pre-empted the rumours of state warrants being issued for his arrest for his role at the Rotunda meetings and presented himself to the magistrates. During this meeting, Hunt was reported to have disavowed any connection with the Rotunda leaders.<sup>75</sup> The denial led to a public row after the incident was reported in *The Times*, which Hunt subsequently maintained misrepresented his statement to the magistrates. Acknowledging that he had 'disclaimed any connexion' with the leaders of the Rotunda after being

72 See Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register*, 2 October 1830; George Spater, *William Cobbett: The poor man's friend* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 493–5.

73 *Lion*, 9 October 1829.

74 Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 280; Home Office Papers, HO40/21, 8 November 1830, fo. 262.

75 Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt, p. 214.

accused of being the 'sole cause of holding nightly meetings', he offered that he never disputed their 'propriety of doing so'.<sup>76</sup> The minor concession went little way towards placating other Rotunda stalwarts.

Hunt was clearly rattled by the threat of prosecution and proceeded carefully at the next meeting of the RRA. On 15 November 1830, he interrupted his address to object to the tricolour flag that one audience member had raised over his head. Hunt requested its removal, seeing no reason for its display unless they were assembled specifically to discuss the revolution in France. Further antagonising some members of his audience, he questioned why they wanted any flag at all. Some 'well-dressed persons', *The Times* reported, had retorted that 'the tri-colour flag is no humbug; let it stand as the badge of liberty'.<sup>77</sup> *The Times* reported that despite several of the audience showing 'a very marked dislike of [Hunt's] sentiments', the removal of the flag was put to the vote, and accordingly it was removed from the meeting.<sup>78</sup> Abel Hall's correspondence to the Home Office, however, suggested that Hunt was forced to proceed with the meeting with the flag in place. Whatever the actual outcome on the night, the incident added further fuel to the tense relationships at the venue. Other Rotunda leaders moved quickly to re-establish the centrality of the tricolour. Taylor responded with his now familiar theatrical wit; spy reports attest that he appeared the following week with his eyeglass suspended from a huge tricolour ribbon draped around his shoulders.<sup>79</sup>

If Hunt's objection to the tricolour flag was not enough to alienate him from his fellow radicals at Blackfriars Road, his denunciation of Carlile as a coward at Peterloo and a government spy sealed his expulsion from London's new leading radical forum. It also effectively signalled the end of the RRA; Rotunda radicals split over their support for either Carlile or Hunt and, as Prothero notes, the group 'rapidly declined amidst these quarrels'.<sup>80</sup> Leading Rotunda radicals such as John Gale Jones were frustrated that once again 'party feeling and disunion had broken in upon the professed advocates of reform'.<sup>81</sup> Despite Carlile's wish to provide a venue under which London radicals could unite, he simply could not ignore Hunt's bitter accusation of him being a government spy. Carlile's decision in late November to raise the price of the theatre hire to five guineas for the large theatre and two guineas for the small theatre helped to 'do away with the Radical Association from meeting there'.<sup>82</sup> By December, Carlile's decision to no longer allow the RRA to use the Rotunda was the 'death blow'.<sup>83</sup>

76 *The Times*, 13 November 1830.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *The Times*, 16 November 1830.

79 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 30 November 1830, fo. 148.

80 Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 280.

81 *The Times*, 22 November 1830.

82 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 22 November 1830, fo. 143.

83 Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 281. For the end of the RRA, see *Prompter*, 20 November 1830, 4 December 1830. See also *The Times*, 12 November 1830.

With the RRA now defunct (the MPU having followed a similar fate earlier that year), Carlile, Taylor and Jones provided the political instruction at the Rotunda with lectures on political economy and republicanism. Although Jones was an accomplished veteran radical orator, Carlile was a poor public speaker and lacked the charisma, showmanship and oratorical skills to sustain Rotunda audiences. Though prison had developed him as a scholar, he never learned the skills of effective public speaking and Rotunda audiences at his political meetings began to fall.<sup>84</sup>

The formation of the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) in April 1831 helped revive the Rotunda's political credentials among the radical community.<sup>85</sup> Although Carlile had long objected to the effectiveness of and need for political associations, the NUWC provided Carlile with not only a much needed injection of rental income from the Rotunda, but also a boost to his claim to provide a radical forum for all reformers. The NUWC grew out of the disillusionment of plebeian radicals with the middle-class leaders of the Reform movement, including the Crown and Anchor stalwarts encountered in an earlier chapter, and the impending likelihood of some measure of reform with the election of the new Whig administration. The group would become the most effective working-class radical organisation of the early 1830s.<sup>86</sup> Its mandate—universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, vote by ballot and the removal of property qualifications for MPs—would provide the blueprint for that crucible of working-class radicalism, the People's Charter. The NUWC combined the talents of radical artisans William Lovett, Henry Hetherington, James Watson, John Cleave, William Carpenter, John Gast and the veteran ultra William Benbow, with Rotunda financier and radical strategist Julian Hibbert.<sup>87</sup> As Prothero notes, by July, 'the new union had absorbed all the ultra-radical groups in London'.<sup>88</sup>

84 Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 167.

85 On the NUWC, see Rowe, 'Class and Political Radicalism in London'; Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, esp. pp. 281–99; William Lovett, *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett, In his pursuit of bread, knowledge and freedom* (London: Trübner & Co., 1876), pp. 68–89; Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press: A study in working-class radicalism of the 1830s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 40–5, 198–204, ch. 8, passim.

86 McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 198.

87 On William Lovett, see Joel Wiener, *William Lovett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); David Large, 'William Lovett', in Patricia Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England* (London: E. Arnold, 1974), pp. 105–30; Eileen Jones 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: Scholar Press, 1996), pp. 163–81. On Henry Hetherington, radical publisher (including of the *Poor Man's Guardian*) and journalist, see George J. Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Henry Hetherington* (London, 1849); Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, pp. 268–99; Joel H. Wiener, 'Hetherington, Henry (1792–1849)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter ODNB], <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13136>>. On John Cleave, see Henry Weisser, 'Cleave, John', *BDMBR*, vol. 2, pp. 138–41; Hollis, *The Pauper Press*, esp. pp. 77–80, 149–64, 198–202, 281–3. On John Gast, see Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*. On William Carpenter, see Chapter 6, Note 7. On William Benbow, see Iowerth Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the "General Strike"', *Past & Present*, vol. 63 (1974), pp. 132–71.

88 Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 285.

The NUWC met in the large theatre of the Rotunda every Wednesday, with attendances of up to 1000 during 1831.<sup>89</sup> The Rotunda became the organisational headquarters of the new Union as committee members were encouraged to establish smaller parish or regional 'classes' of 25 members each. The class leaders would then meet back at the Rotunda each week to discuss the members' concerns, lead discussions and debate the Reform crisis and other logistical measures. By late 1831, discussion over the direction of the Reform Bill took precedence at NUWC meetings with 'other topics having lost their interest pending the National Question'.<sup>90</sup> The NUWC was far from projecting a united voice for either support or rejection of the limited measures proposed in the Act. John Gale Jones argued for the ballot and universal suffrage while Taylor advocated excluding the "Soldiery" from the franchise given their abjectstate [sic] of servitude rendering them incapable of the proper exercise of that privilege'.<sup>91</sup> Whether the Rotunda radicals were, as D. J. Rowe suggests, 'endeavouring to make the best of both worlds' in continuing to demand universal suffrage while 'still offering tacit support to the Whig measure', or whether the use of Francis Place's memoirs to draw this conclusion has perhaps muddled the waters, the Rotunda nevertheless played a key role in plebeian response to the Reform Bill crisis.<sup>92</sup> As Francis Place led his delegation from the Crown and Anchor to Downing Street, the Rotunda provided the major metropolitan rallying point for working-class reaction to the Reform Bill.

One of the key Rotunda figures of the NUWC was the Manchester radical William Benbow. It was from the Rotunda that Benbow first launched his notorious proposal for a 'Grand National Holiday', or a month's general strike, as well as a national convention.<sup>93</sup> As Prothero notes, the idea of a national convention was not new in British radicalism. The success of the American and French examples of the late eighteenth century energised British radicals. They recognised the opportunity such a convention provided for a revolutionary change of guard and there were sporadic attempts to organise such a gathering throughout the early nineteenth century, culminating with the Chartist Convention of 1839. It was, however, Benbow's call for the 'people' to unite, amass provisions for a week and withdraw their labour from the economy for a month that was to capture the attention of radicals throughout Britain and, no doubt, that of the

89 Ibid. Prothero estimates an average attendance of 500 during this time. Although Carlile initially charged the group the three guineas hire fee for the large theatre, by July, he offered it for the proceeds of the entry charge (one penny for members, twopence for non-members).

90 *Republican*, 26 March 1831.

91 Ibid. See also Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 20 August 1831, fo. 412.

92 Rowe, 'Class and Political Radicalism in London'. See also E. P. Thompson, who noted the 'unscrupulous manoeuvres' of Place and his attempts to 'limit the influence of the Rotunda men'. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 894.

93 Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the "General Strike"'.



authorities.<sup>94</sup> Though the 'holiday' nomenclature helped temper the concept, the plan remained revolutionary at heart. Benbow had long been, as Prothero argues, an advocate of physical-force tactics and his intention for the 'holiday' was to provide the kindling to ignite a political revolution. Although Benbow's plan excited great interest (the first edition of the published plan sold out and a second edition was produced), the NUWC simply did not yet have consensus among its ranks, the national reach or organisational structure to engender support, let alone coordinate a mass general strike. It was to remain a work in progress that Benbow would revisit and amend over the following two decades.

Regardless of whether the plan ever came to fruition, the promulgation of such views from the ultra-radical organisation of London whose headquarters was at the Rotunda saw the development of yet another layer of identity at the venue as a centre for radical militancy and revolutionary intent. George J. Holyoake would later recall in his memoir of Carlile that the 'prophecy of the day was, that the Rotunda would cause a Revolution in England'.<sup>95</sup> As we saw in Chapter 5, the *Courier* clearly considered the Rotunda milieu as a threat when it sought to distinguish Francis Place's Crown and Anchor delegation group from that of the danger posed by the 'Rotunda revolutionists'.<sup>96</sup>

The venue's identity as a haven for extreme radicalism is evident in other examples of print culture from the period. Although the Rotunda never featured in the graphic satire to the scale of the Crown and Anchor prints, it nevertheless appeared in one of the most popular prints of the day titled *John Gilpin!!!*, by leading caricaturist John Doyle (pseudonym 'HB').<sup>97</sup> Published in 1831, the print is based upon the famous poem of the same name by William Cowper. In the poem, John Gilpin, out with his family to celebrate his wedding anniversary, loses control of his horse, which charges, taking him 10 miles beyond his original destination of Edmonton and then back again.<sup>98</sup> In the print, William IV is shown as the errant and misfortunate horse rider, satirising the Monarch's impotency during the Reform Bill crisis.<sup>99</sup> The beer bottles depicted on the King's waist are labelled 'Rotunda Pop' and 'Birmingham Froth' (the latter in reference to Thomas Attwood's Birmingham Political Union) and are beginning

94 As Prothero notes, historians have afforded Benbow credit as the first person to have publicly advocated a general strike.

95 George J. Holyoake, *The Life of Richard Carlile* (London, 1849), pp. 14–15.

96 *Courier*, 14 October 1831.

97 This is possible because, unlike the 1790s, most prints of this period were reformist by nature and the enemy was seen as the aristocrats opposing reform—not the divided voice of the working class. See M. D. George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1978), vol. 11, p. xxxiii.

98 William Cowper's poem *The Diverting History of John Gilpin* was written in 1782 and, according to Cowper's biographer, John Baird, became the most popular poem of the decade. John D. Baird, 'Cowper, William (1731–1800)', *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6513>>

99 George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, vol. 11, p. 483. William IV dissolved Parliament and pressured Grey to modify the Bill to conciliate its opponents in the House of Lords.

to explode. M. D. George, the celebrated British Museum print surveyor, notes—as evidence of the enduring subversive image of Rotunda radicalism—in her description of the print that “‘Rotunda pop’ stands for sedition and profanity: the revolutionary ultra-Radicals at the Rotunda (Rotundanists) in Blackfriars Road were anti-Whig’.<sup>100</sup> She might have said so much more.

One of the more ominous and perhaps most publicised warnings concerning the Rotunda milieu came from an alarmist pamphlet penned by Edward Gibbon Wakefield.<sup>101</sup> In *Householders in Danger of the Populace*, thought to have been published in late 1831, Wakefield classifies the dangerous elements of London society as ‘the populace’, whom he divides into three distinct categories: the ‘common thieves’; ‘the rabble’ (those led into crime by circumstance and poverty); and ‘the Desperadoes’, the men of the Rotunda.<sup>102</sup> The Rotunda men he further divided into two groups: the supporters of Henry Hunt and those men who had formerly been associated with the Owenites, though he pointed to universal suffrage as the unifying mandate under the Rotunda banner. All members of the populace, Wakefield warned, were ‘bent on a state of anarchy’.

Of the Rotunda revolutionaries, he described Hunt’s supporters as ‘loose single men, living here and there in lodgings, who might set fire to London’. These men, of whom Wakefield counted about 1000, were ‘not less dangerous on account of their number’ for though they were ‘poor creatures’, ‘careless and inert’ workmen, they had a ‘naturally weak intellect; having deficient foreheads and a sinister expression’. The Owenites, however, he found ‘worthy of respect on public grounds’, but though ‘sober men’, they were of ‘scanty knowledge and utterly impracticable’. Their danger lay in the fact they were fanatics and idealists; these men would become the leaders if ‘the populace’ as a whole began to revolt. While the extent of circulation of the pamphlet is unclear, it is likely to have aroused particular interest given Wakefield’s own, unwelcome notoriety. His infamous abduction of, and forced marriage to, fifteen-year-old heiress Ellen Turner resulted in three years’ imprisonment in Newgate.<sup>103</sup> The Rotunda radicals were certainly aware of the pamphlet. It became the source of great hilarity and derision at one NUWC meeting at which Wakefield’s criminal past and the pamphlet itself were mocked mercifully by Julian Hibbert.<sup>104</sup>

Reports in the mainstream press also conflated Rotunda radicalism with criminality. Within months of the venue opening, *The Times* reported:

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 484.

<sup>101</sup> Wakefield would become one of the leading proponents of colonisation. See David J. Moss, ‘Wakefield, Edward Gibbon (1796–1862)’, *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28415>>

<sup>102</sup> Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *Householders in Danger of the Populace* (London, 1831). The quotations that follow are taken from the pamphlet.

<sup>103</sup> Wakefield’s brother, who acted as an accomplice, was also imprisoned in Newgate.

<sup>104</sup> *Poor Man’s Guardian*, 3 December 1831.

The nightly meetings which have for some time past been held at the Rotunda...were known to have collected together great multitudes of persons, the majority of whom were composed of thieves and other ill-disposed persons, who were ready to join with others in the commission of any illegal acts, to disturb the peace of the metropolis.<sup>105</sup>

Similar reports continued throughout 1831, citing the large crowds assembling each evening as targets for an 'organized gang of thieves and ruffians' who had 'assaulted, robbed and hustled' many of those milling near the venue.<sup>106</sup> Inside or outside the prison walls it seems that the opponents of radicalism had made up their minds: radicals were dangerous criminals. This blanket typification of radicals in the public sphere (incarcerated or otherwise) makes the persistence of radical culture all the more heroic.

London's radical community themselves also promulgated the notion of revolutionary threat emanating from the Rotunda and played some role in cultivating the image of the dangerous and unpredictable mob. As Ian Haywood notes, in the *Swing* tragedy, 'Swing's success is attributed to the Rotunda'.<sup>107</sup> David Worrall also notes that the play was a 'continuous celebration of Carlile's Rotunda and its place in working-class radical rationalist politics':<sup>108</sup> 'And has old Swing turned rational at last/Has he been at that horrible Rotunda,/Where nothing is going on but REASON?'<sup>109</sup>

Though the Rotunda radicals celebrated the venue's revolutionary possibilities and wore the term Rotundanist as a badge of honour, they also were forced to contend with hostility from within the London reform movement itself. The most enduring criticism of the Rotundanists has come from the memoirs of Francis Place. As we will recall from an earlier chapter, Place described the Rotunda men as 'vehement, resolute reckless rascals whose purpose was riot as providing an opportunity for plunder'.<sup>110</sup> His mistrust of the Rotunda's ultra-radicals was particularly evident in the attempt to form the National Political Union as an alliance between middling and plebeian reformers. He and other organisers were determined to ensure that the new council of the Union consisted of 'respectable working men untainted with Rotunda heresy'.<sup>111</sup>

Yet even Carlile, who allowed the NUWC access to the Rotunda, remained publicly critical of the group's objectives. Acknowledging in the *Prompter* that

105 *The Times*, 11 November 1830.

106 *The Times*, 31 March 1831, 12 October 1831.

107 Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, politics and the people, 1790–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 109.

108 Worrall, *Theatric Revolution*, p. 351.

109 Taylor, *Swing! Or who are the incendiaries?*, p. 13, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 353.

110 Francis Place Papers (Add. MS 27791, ff. 47–57).

111 Francis Place quoted in Rowe, 'Class and Political Radicalism in London', p. 40.

it was the 'best effort at the formation of a political society that has yet been made, and contains more stability of principle than has been essayed in any former scheme of the kind', he nevertheless concluded that it remained 'very defective...the high flown style and title assumed is quite aristocratical and ludicrous'.<sup>112</sup> The public attacks must have infuriated the leaders of the nascent association. Nevertheless, in the Rotunda, the ultras of the NUWC found a place where they controlled who could assemble and what could be uttered. Such freedom to operate must have gone some way to compensate for Carlile's churlish behaviour.

Although the NUWC also met at more traditional radical meeting places such as public houses, coffee shops (including Benbow's own) and radical chapels, the importance of the Rotunda to the group, despite Carlile's animosity, is clearly evident in the following extract from radical ultra John Cleave. To a packed Rotunda audience, he relayed his hope that 'they would in one short year be able to build themselves a Rotunda to meet at and debate in, and enable them to laugh at their enemies, as well as to establish the liberties of their country. (Tremendous cheering).'<sup>113</sup> Place certainly feared that 'the influence of the Union [NUWC] had become extensive, and was increasing' because of its ability to disseminate an image of an organised, structured and united London working class to the provinces. The Rotunda played a crucial role in cultivating this image.<sup>114</sup>

For Henry Hetherington, the Rotunda promised even more. Along with Carlile, he also considered that the venue provided a voice for the people who remained disenfranchised from the formal political channels; the Rotunda was their 'centre', the 'House of the Unrepresented'. Prothero's contention that the NUWC's Rotunda meetings 'were mainly for publicity' clearly underestimates the importance of the site to the group.<sup>115</sup> There, unlike the other radical spaces we have so far explored, radicals found a venue where the radical community themselves determined what Stallybrass and White refer to as the 'cultural conditions' that act to regulate behaviour and how people experience a particular space.<sup>116</sup> We should not underestimate the significance to the radical movement of a space controlled by their own. This was a period when property and political power were inextricably linked. The struggle for the freedom of the press was accompanied by another, albeit less recognised struggle for access

<sup>112</sup> *Prompter*, 28 May 1831.

<sup>113</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 29 October 1831.

<sup>114</sup> Rowe, 'Class and Political Radicalism in London', p. 43. Place's involvement in the formation of the National Political Union was a direct response to the threat posed by the Rotunda milieu. See Joseph Hamburger, *James Mill and the Art of Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 77–90.

<sup>115</sup> Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 285.

<sup>116</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), quoted in James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the language and culture of popular politics in modern Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 113.

to spaces in which to organise. Epstein has argued that a marked feature of popular radicalism in this period was the search to gain access to and control sites of assembly.<sup>117</sup> The Rotunda was such a space.

The Home Office also recognised the Rotunda as a key centre of radical sedition; both the Tory Home Secretary, Robert Peel, and his Whig replacement, Lord Melbourne, employed spies and informers to keep constant vigilance over the proceedings and to report on any possible 'mischief' emanating from the lectures and meetings.<sup>118</sup> During the November 1830 agitation, letters from surrounding residents and government officials poured into the Home Office, warning of the dire consequences of the moral corruption of the values of working-class people through the 'lawless and abandoned proceedings' at the Rotunda.<sup>119</sup> The concern over the possible threat posed by the Rotunda went all the way to the top. According to E. P. Thompson, then Prime Minister and former army commander, the Duke of Wellington, saw the contest as

one between the Establishment and the Rotunda, which he compared to two armies '*en présence*'. It confused his military mind very much to reflect that he could place no river between armies, with adequate sentinels and posts on the bridges. The enemy was installed at sensitive points within his own camp.<sup>120</sup>

Wellington's military training had prepared him for engaging with enemies from without, not for confronting an 'enemy' marshalling just across the Thames.

There is no doubt that the Home Office actively sought legal means to close the building, which had long been a menace to the authorities. In a letter dated 9 November 1830, a senior police official named Chambers wrote to Peel expressing his belief that the Rotunda constituted a 'disorderly house' and advised Peel that under existing legislation a magistrate could be called upon to close the building. Yet despite precedents of successful closures on these grounds from the earlier *Seditious Meetings Act* of 1795, Chambers advised Peel that in the case of the Rotunda, he 'entertained considerable doubt of the power of convicting in a summary manner'.<sup>121</sup> Peel then made inquiries as to the validity of the dissenting chapel licence issued to the Rotunda given the types of meetings

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> See *Home Office Reports* concerning the activities at the Rotunda in Home Office Papers, HO64/11, HO40/25.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Home Office Papers, HO40/25, 4 November 1830, fo. 33.

<sup>120</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 894.

<sup>121</sup> Home Office Papers, HO40/25, 9 November 1830, fo. 179. On the closures of premises under the 1795 Act, see Clive Emsley, 'Repression, "Terror" and the Rule of Law in England During the Decade of the French Revolution', *English Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 397 (1985), p. 812.

being conducted there. Despite receiving an answer apparently favourable to the authorities, evidently neither avenue was strong enough to force a legal closure.<sup>122</sup>

What, then, accounts for the apparent inability of the authorities to close the Rotunda at a time when all radical activity was under the sustained threat of prosecution? Carlile's ability to secure a dissenting chapel licence goes part of the way in explaining the continuing operation of the premises. Within the chapels, political dissent could be cloaked in religious terms.<sup>123</sup> Radicals were conscious that scriptural language carried weight in society, especially with London juries.<sup>124</sup> This is not to say that non-conformist ministers could evade prosecution but political dissent voiced within the confines of a dissenting chapel proved harder to suppress than other forms of radical political expression. Further, the dissenting chapel licence also helped Carlile avoid the necessity of a theatre licence, which would likely have been revoked by local magistrates following the production of the politically charged *Swing!* play.<sup>125</sup>

The diversity of the Rotunda offerings could have itself helped facilitate the premises' immunity from prosecution. The impressive, scholarly credentials of performers such as Taylor and Sharples assisted in promoting the Rotunda as a reputable learning establishment. The theatricality of Rotunda performances also provided some legal protection. By employing the often satirical yet non-verbal symbols associated with countertheatre to convey their radical messages, Rotunda orators deployed an effective means of dodging the wrath of the prosecuting societies. Burlesque or satirical performances were technically difficult to prosecute because much of the 'sedition' was implicit. It lay in the use of excessive gesture, motion, dress and expression.

Moreover, the brilliantly successful defence of radical publisher William Hone in his three libel trials of 1817 set a legal precedent concerning the prosecution of satires, which assisted the radical movement for more than a decade.<sup>126</sup> Hone, a poor bookseller and radical, was indicted for publishing blasphemous libels in the form of parodies on the Catechism, Litany and Creed. He conducted his own defence, and his introduction of ludicrous parodies as evidence in his defence caused such amusement in the courtroom that the Sheriff threatened to arrest 'the first man I see laugh'.<sup>127</sup> Despite Chief Justice Ellenborough's instruction to the jury that the work was the 'most impious and profane libel', it nevertheless returned 'not guilty' verdicts in all three trials. For more than a decade, all

122 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 10 November 1830, fo. 114.

123 McCalman, 'Ultra-Radicalism and Convivial Debating Clubs in London', p. 315.

124 Ibid., p. 319.

125 Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, p. 103.

126 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 792.

127 Ibid., p. 793.



parodies, burlesques and satires were immune from prosecution. The authorities dared not risk repeat embarrassments with juries who could not be relied upon to convict such entertaining personalities as Hone; their flouting of authority and irreverence all too easily won the people's affections.

Such diversity of Rotunda meetings might also have acted to dilute the purely political aspirations, and perceived threat, of the NUWC. Furthermore, the adoption of the 'Union' nomenclature, in line with the flourishing number of political unions based on Thomas Attwood's model from Birmingham, also assisted the NUWC to operate without the threat of prosecution.<sup>128</sup> With the majority of political unions supporting the Whig measure of reform, to target the opposition voices from the NUWC might have been perceived as engaging in class warfare. The extent to which the use of the term 'union' by all these groups was calculated to ensure some protection under the new *Combination Act*, which, although severely curtailing the rights of union organisation, nevertheless legalised their existence, also warrants further investigation.<sup>129</sup>

Though all of these factors could have provided a veil of protection, the answer must surely lie in the inability, or unwillingness, of the government of the day to enact the powers they evidently held under the Six Acts, even given the expiration of the *Seditious Meetings Act* in 1824.<sup>130</sup> Legal historians have highlighted the limits of the 'repressive' measures of successive governments throughout both the 1790s and the early nineteenth century and of governments who grappled with the rights of the people to meet, discuss and petition under peaceful conditions with the perceived threat of riot and public disorder arising from the spread of popular radicalism. Clive Emsley argues that the legislative acts of the 1790s were formulated in the tradition of eighteenth-century law and, rather than mandating that all offenders would be punished, 'held out the threat of punishment'. 'No subsequent legislation', he continues, 'set out to ensure that they would be enforced to the letter. Only the *Seditious Meetings Act* was ever used, and this was rarely.'<sup>131</sup>

Philip Harling similarly makes an important distinction between 'the readiness to use the mailed fist' and the 'frequency of its use' in his study of the law of

128 For an in-depth study of the rise of political unions and their influence on the passing of the *Reform Act*, see Nancy LoPatin, *Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

129 Prothero considers that, regardless of the nomenclature, the NUWC displayed 'expressions of trade union consciousness' in the early 1830s. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 275.

130 See J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796–1821* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), p. 286.

131 Emsley, 'Repression, "Terror", and the Rule of Law', p. 813. See also Philip Harling, 'The Law of Libel and the Limits of Repression, 1790–1832', *Historical Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2001), pp. 107–34; Michael Lobban, 'From Seditious Libel to Unlawful Assembly: Peterloo and the changing face of political crime, c.1770–1820', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1990), pp. 307–52.

sedition and blasphemous libel in the period 1790–1832.<sup>132</sup> Though Harling argues that these laws were sporadically enforced because the Home Office lacked the ‘institutional means to embark on a policy of wholesale prosecution’, the very possibility of prosecution under the laws provided the government with a ‘formidable instrument of oppression’.<sup>133</sup> It was the arbitrariness of the government’s approach to prosecution, coupled with the vague legal definitions of sedition and blasphemy, as well as the often harrowing experiences of defendants when they did choose to prosecute, that in effect provided a ‘formidable instrument of harassment, if ultimately not an efficient instrument of repression’.<sup>134</sup> These were particularly uncertain times for those engaging in political dissent, for as legal historian Michael Lobban notes, ‘the limits of acceptable political debate had broadened’ and in so doing, the definition of political crime also shifted.<sup>135</sup>

Significantly, it was one of Carlile’s written protests rather than a Rotunda oratory that eventually landed him in trouble with the law after a hiatus of five years. In the third issue of the *Prompter*, dated 27 November 1830, he addressed a letter ‘[t]o the Insurgent Agricultural Labourers’—a fairly minor article placed on an inside page. His intention was to extend a ‘feeling heart’ to the rural poor, who had begun rioting and destroying food and property as a response to starvation and harsh working conditions. Carlile’s advice to the labourers to ‘go on as you have done’ was interpreted by the authorities as a seditious call to arms. He later claimed that ‘neither in deed, nor in word, nor in idea, did I ever encourage, or wish to encourage...acts of arson or machine breaking’.<sup>136</sup> In January 1831, however, Carlile was sentenced to two further years’ imprisonment, in Giltspur Street Compter.<sup>137</sup>

The prosecution took Carlile and other radicals by surprise. Many of his past publications had been far more seditious and blasphemous than the *Prompter* letter. Indeed, Taylor’s performance of the *Swing!* tragedy contained far more seditious and provocative material than Carlile’s letter. Carlile had also publicised his dislike of ‘mobs’ and ‘mob action’, and his assertion that a ‘few bullets’ be distributed among the heads of rioters in Bristol matched the most callous middle-class reactions.<sup>138</sup> Carlile’s assertion that the prosecution was planned as a means to close the Rotunda was thus probably correct.

132 Harling, ‘The Law of Libel and the Limits of Repression’, p. 107.

133 Ibid., p. 120.

134 Ibid., p. 111.

135 Lobban, ‘From Seditious Libel to Unlawful Assembly’, p. 327.

136 *Prompter*, 14 May 1831. For a more detailed account of Carlile’s arrest, see Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 174–7.

137 As Wiener notes, unlike his previous imprisonments, this time, Carlile received little support from the radical community. He had so alienated himself from other working-class reformers that few ‘were prepared to embrace him in his hour of need’. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 177.

138 McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, p. 205.

Carlile's claim gained even greater credence with Taylor's arrest and subsequent conviction in July 1831 for blasphemous libel.<sup>139</sup> By this stage, the authorities must have considered that curbing Taylor's growing popularity and reach was worth risking defeat in the courtroom, for in April the authorities filed a suit against Taylor for two provocative lectures delivered on Good Friday and Palm Sunday. In the lectures, he described God as a 'GOUTY OLD MAN IN AN ARMCHAIR', who had a proclivity to 'A DROP OF crater' and who had not really been crucified but rather some other 'blaspheming infidel'.<sup>140</sup> The risk paid off for the authorities: Taylor's prosecution for blasphemous libel was successful, led to a conviction of two years' imprisonment in Horsemonger-Lane Gaol and meant the end of a 14-year spell of immunity from libels cast in the form of burlesque and satire.

The strategy of prosecuting the key Rotunda individuals would strike a major blow to Carlile's 'Palladium of Liberty'. Yet the relative proximity to the Rotunda of his new prison quarters at the Giltspur Street Compter, as Wiener notes, allowed him to keep a close watch on the affairs of the premises and, like his previous period of incarceration, to continue managing the production of a key publication, the *Prompter*.<sup>141</sup> A year after the doors of the Rotunda first opened to the radical community, Carlile could still delight that he had created

the best school that was ever open among the human race. Oxford, Cambridge, the London University, the King's College are Folly's seats, contrasted with the Rotunda. There has been more expansion of mind generated at the Rotunda, in the last year, than in all the world beside.<sup>142</sup>

Despite quarrelling with most of the leading metropolitan radicals during the time, Carlile created a space that fused the positive elements of other working-class centres of learning and conviviality to effect a new and unique venue on the London landscape. The promotion of the Rotunda as a popular theatre enhanced its appeal within popular culture. It was an attractive option for a newly urbanised working population who valued the escapism, relaxation and pure fun of theatre. The theatricals presented at the Rotunda embodied elements of folk, or countertheatre, which was indigenous to working-class culture and valued by working people as part of a vernacular political tradition. The Rotunda's patina of scholarship, its use of non-verbal symbols, as well as drama, burlesque and satire to convey its political message all combined to make it a haven for metropolitan working-class radicalism.

139 *Morning Chronicle*, 31 May 1831. For a more detailed account of the arrest and conviction, as well as Taylor's split with Carlile and his post-prison career, see McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England', pp. 59–64.

140 Quoted in Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 179.

141 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

142 *Prompter*, 12 November 1831.

The significance of the Rotunda as a public space and its layers of identity have been overlooked largely because of the piecemeal approach to its history. The emphasis on the NUWC in traditional radical historiography, for instance, has obscured the rich material in Rotunda sources that illuminates the presence and involvement of women in Rotunda radicalism—at a time when some historians contend that the masculine temper of early nineteenth-century radicalism, and importantly its type of venues, acted to exclude a whole nation of possible followers in women.<sup>143</sup> The relationship between female radical activity and the Rotunda—from orators to audience—and its implication for debates on gender and the public sphere will be explored in the next chapter. There is yet more to say about how London was ‘bitten with the Rotunda notions’.

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143 Hall, ‘Private Persons Versus Public Someones’, p. 18.