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**Ernest Charles Jones (1819-69) – A Life of Adjacency**

Of course, all lives are unique. And of course, all lives can only truly be biographically represented with reference to their particular generational relationships to historical, political, and social situations. But some lives appear to resist the trajectories of their cohort, to run counter to conventional social narratives, to remain adjacent to their generation's familiar pathways. Like formal or thematic variations, surely these are the lives that interest us especially.

As with many of the subjects of this Roundtable, the fifty years of the poet and Chartist Ernest Charles Jones's life, from 1819 to 1869, quite neatly encompass some of the major British political milestones of the nineteenth century – the Peterloo Massacre in the year of his birth, the 1832 Reform Act, the Chartist movement of the late 1830s to the early 1850s, and the Second Reform Act of 1867.<sup>1</sup> Jones's life was heavily impacted by the first two milestones, and he in turn had significant impact on the latter two. However, the life, works, and political endeavours of Ernest Charles Jones are particularly illustrative of the multilinear nature of nineteenth-century life histories.<sup>2</sup> As well as the generational perspectives attention to Jones's biography reveals, there are also important aspects of the cultural intersections between Victorian social classes, and between German and British literary cultures to consider. In turn, each of these sets of intersections is subject to generational shifts which alter the nature of the relationships between them. As a social and political renegade, and a radical poet who appealed to both patriotic and internationalist instincts in his readers, Jones uniquely bestrode various aspects of mid-nineteenth-century British cultural life, even if occasionally his balance was less than perfect. His equally poor timing (a historical rather than personal fault) meant that he became the de facto leader of the Chartist movement just as it entered terminal decline, and died just as he was about to be elected MP for Manchester. Even in death Jones was subject to the kind of adjacency which had characterised so many of his previous experiences with ambitions and objectives.

Ernest Charles Jones was born in Berlin on 25 January 1819, a long way from the concerns of the British working class which came to dominate the last twenty-three years of his life. His father, Captain Charles Jones, had fought under Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo and was equerry and aide-de-camp to Ernst Augustus, the Duke of Cumberland (1771-1851), who was the fifth son of George III, uncle to the future Queen Victoria, and the future King Ernst of Hanover (1837-51).<sup>3</sup> Though English and primarily Anglophone, Jones absorbed the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful and relatively recent study of the literary and cultural implications of this period see Chris R. Vanden Bossche's *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel, 1832-1867* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> For this essay, and indeed for my book on Jones's poetry (*The Poetry of Ernest Jones: Myth, Song, and the 'Mighty Mind'*, Routledge, 2016), I am deeply indebted to the work of previous Jones biographers, in particular Miles Taylor's *Ernest Jones, Chartism, and the Romance of Politics 1819-69* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Much was made of Jones's royal connections in subsequent sympathetic biographies, including the introduction to *Ernest Jones: Chartist* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), edited by John Saville.

influences of his family's adopted country, and was home schooled by German tutors before attending a German language school, St Michael's College in Lower Saxony, from 1835. He emerged from that institution a prize-winning student, linguistically fluent, and with a burgeoning reputation as a poet. His family returned to Great Britain in 1838, but the influence of Germanic culture on his poetry remained considerable; indeed, he composed poetry in that language and translated several works from it, notably by German Romantic writers including Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860), Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg (1750-1819), Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), and Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862). That a writer should be influenced by the previous literary generation is of course natural, but the synthesis through Jones's poetry of German mythic figures into the Chartist imaginary is a unique literary effect. The elements of German Romantic literature Jones engaged most with, and which tended to influence his writing, were themes of patriotism and nationhood, often filtered through figural tropes of masculinity and youth. The tension between German patriotic poetry and British Romantic scepticism around nationalism informed much of Jones's later Chartist writing, with appeals to pre-industrial neo-medievalist patriotism (recognisably Tory tropes) sitting sometimes awkwardly alongside the recognition of an emergent international democratic socialism in post-1848 Europe.

Some of the politically charged German Romantic poems which Jones translated, including 'The German Boy's Song' and 'The Boy's Mountain Song', by Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg and Ludwig Uhland respectively, found their echoes in later Chartist pieces he composed.<sup>4</sup> As Malcolm Chase has noted '[v]ewed collectively, Chartists were young in years', and the associations of youth and revolutionary change were mythically transferred from the struggle for German Reunification to that for the British male franchise.<sup>5</sup> For Jones, the moral simplicity of Chartism's message replaced the nationalistic fervour of the literature he had grown up reading. But of course, being neither German nor British working class, his relationship to both of these causes required the negotiation of similar strategies of social detachment. Chartism's implied disruption of British social stratification was a goal which ran parallel to these negotiations. But alongside discourses of disruption and reform was the necessity of political solidarity. Jones's calls in his Chartist speeches to 'Organise! Organise! Organise!' recalled the drive in some later German Romantic literature for national unification, but the mythic figures and landscapes in this literature, and its representation of a Romantic German past, also found echoes in the neo-medievalist tropes Jones used in poetry supporting the pre-capitalist rural ideals of the Chartist Land Plan.<sup>6</sup> My research into Jones's poetry has uncovered various ways that he recycled his work not just thematically but in some cases wholesale textually for very different ideological purposes, but this only reflected a capacity for adaptation which was evident in his personal and political life. The same mechanisms of cultural immersion and absorption which Jones employed to appropriate German-ness, and to re-learn a more English English-ness on his return to his native country, were later used to learn the language, and to some extent form part of the literature, of working-class radicals.

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<sup>4</sup> Ernest Jones (trans. from Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg), 'The German Boy's Song', *Court Journal* cutting (no date), Manchester County Record Office Ernest Jones Manuscript Papers, MS. f281.89 J5/95. Ernest Jones (trans. from Ludwig Uhland), 'The Boy's Mountain Song', *CJ* cutting 18/10/1841, MCRO EJMP, MS. f281.89 J5/95.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 316, 333.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Jones. Speech at Manchester, 20 October 1850 in *Ernest Jones: Chartist*. John Saville, ed. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), 113.

When, in 1838, the Jones family returned from Germany, there was little to indicate that their son would be imprisoned for seditious speech-making ten years later. Jones's life before 1845 adhered to the conventions one would expect for a man of his social standing. He was presented at the court of the young Queen Victoria, studied law and was called to the bar, and made a good marriage. After publishing original and translated poetry in the *Court Journal* and *Morning Post* newspapers, and German-language poetry in the London-based *Deutsche Londoner Zeitung*, he had a long dramatic monologue published called *My Life* (London: T. C. Newby, 1845). The poem was well-reviewed in good newspapers and Jones used this newfound literary status as one of his credentials when he presented himself in 1846 at the London offices of the *Leeds Northern Star* newspaper, the official organ of the Chartist movement. Jones eventually published forty poems in the pages of the *Northern Star*, subsequently some of his best known works, and co-edited a magazine companion to the newspaper called the *Labourer* with Feargus O'Connor (1794-1855), the Chartist movement's then leader. As the older (and genuinely working class) Chartist poet Thomas Cooper (1805-92) found his political star beginning to wane, partly due to his ideological opposition to O'Connor's agrarian Land Plan scheme, Jones found himself positioned ever closer to the political, cultural, and literary centre of the movement. O'Connor's description of him as a 'sprig of the aristocracy', whilst marking his difference, was intended to convey the usefulness of that difference to Chartism's cause. It also, crucially, emphasized his youth, and in a movement already nearly a decade old which had not achieved its political purpose this image of political regeneration was vital. Jones became increasingly active politically and was asked to speak at meetings up and down the country. His flamboyant but direct oratorical style soon won him many admirers, and he began to forge deep links with working-class audiences in different regions. At this point in Jones's life the cultural stars aligned and his entry into the Chartist project invigorated the movement, providing it with a figure of high social status whose connections reached deep into the broader political sphere (Jones was friends with Disraeli and Edward Bulwer Lytton, and later with Marx and Engels) and whose education and eloquence proved a significant boon. Jones's effective replacement of Cooper as the new 'Laureate of Labour' appeared to encapsulate Chartism's forward-thinking political, cultural, and social missions.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Jones re-interpreted German Romantic mythic figures and tropes for his Chartist poetry, a more direct literary heritage worked through his writing. In common with Cooper and other poets associated with the movement, Jones's radical poetics displayed British Romanticism's intergenerational influence, particularly through the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), whose posthumous presence was particularly important to Chartism. However, Jones's generation of radical poets were operating under entirely different political and literary circumstances than Shelley and his contemporaries, and this was especially apparent in the nature of their relationship with their audience. Andrew Franta writes of the political agency of Shelley's poetry: '[h]owever critics frame the opposition between poetry and politics, they have continued to ask: why did a writer committed to many of the tenets of radical political reform choose poetry as his vehicle?'<sup>8</sup> Franta's interpretation of the motivating drive for Shelley's faith in his poetry to effect social change lies not just in the poet's recognition of the inherent quality of his own work, but in his acute awareness of the

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 186.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 112.

peculiarly intergenerational nature of poetry's transmission. Shelley was, as poems such as 'Ode to the West Wind' indicate, anticipating a future political response to his poetry, though he could only speculate on the nature of this response.<sup>9</sup> Shelley might have composed his poems in the aftermath of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre - including 'The Mask of Anarchy', 'England in 1819', and 'Men of England' - largely aware that they were unpublishable in the contemporary climate, but he could not have known that their afterlife in the 1840s would be enhanced by technological advances in printing, travel, and communication. Nor could he have envisaged that an increasingly literate and literary industrial working class would engage so deeply with the previous generation's radical poetics. In this sense the second generation of literary Romantics, including Byron and Shelley, reached beyond their resistance to the increasingly conservative trajectories of their predecessors Robert Southey and William Wordsworth (both of whom lived to be Victorian Poets Laureate during the Chartist years) to find a voice for a future generation of readers with greater political agency. Whilst Shelley's 'exoteric' shorter poetry became formally influential upon the work of Jones and other Chartists, Byron's particular blend of humour and attack was equally popular, if less imitable.<sup>10</sup> In *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* Mike Sanders noted of the *Northern Star's* influential poetry column that 'in 1846, Byron's poetry provided more than a tenth of the poetry column's output and only Ernest Jones - who contributed eighteen poems - came close to matching Byron's total of twenty poems.'<sup>11</sup> In a period of increasing political instability, the youthful Jones became a new generation's interpreter of Romantic poetics through the most widely-read radical platform in the country. Relatively unknown just months before, he found himself, partly through poetry, wielding a considerable amount of political agency.

In 1848, the year of European revolutions, as regimes across the continent toppled, that political agency became a matter of serious concern to the British government, and Jones became a political scapegoat. On 4 June Jones predicted during a speech to a large crowd of Chartist supporters at Bishop Bonner's Field in East London that the Prime Minister and Home Secretary should be deported rather than the Irish Nationalist John Mitchel (1815-75), and that the Chartist involved in the Newport Uprising of 1839, John Frost (1784-1877), who was deported in 1840, should be repatriated. This eventually led to his imprisonment for two years for seditious speech-making in Tothill Fields Prison in Westminster, where he endured considerable mistreatment in comparison with earlier Chartist prisoners, including solitary confinement and periods of enforced silence. Upon his release in 1850 he found the Chartist movement much depleted, but was hailed as a political hero in the Chartist heartlands of the north of England, forming a particularly strong relationship with the people of Halifax, West Yorkshire. He used the poetry he had written or planned in prison to restart his literary career, and embarked on the editorship of a series of political newspapers (*Notes to the People* 1851-52; *The People's Paper* 1852-58; *Cabinet Newspaper* 1858-60). He had effectively taken over as the leader of the Chartist movement from the ailing Feargus O'Connor. As political

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of Shelley's awareness of, and relationship with, his future readership, see Andrew Bennett's *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 158-78.

<sup>10</sup> For example William S. Villiers Sankey's 'Ode' (*An Anthology of Chartist Literature*, ed. Y. V. Kovalev, gen. ed. A. A. Elistratova [Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956], 76) consists effectively of extra verses for Shelley's 'Men of England', and has found a new lease of twenty-first-century life as the song 'Slaves' by the British traditional music group, Faustus.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Lit. and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 78.

energies around him were dispersed into unionism, co-operatism, and educational endeavours, Jones stuck doggedly to the Chartist cause, insisting on the ultimate necessity of universal male suffrage.

The partial achievement of that political goal was eventually achieved not by Chartism, but by political pressure from the middle-class Reform League, in the shape of the 1867 Representation of the People Act (known informally as the Second Reform Act). Jones had effectively abandoned poetry and politics by 1860 and had returned to the legal profession in Manchester, but was drawn back to support for the League in 1865. He stood for parliament for Manchester without success in 1868, but died of pneumonia in the city in January 1869, just as his opponent was being found technically ineligible, and when the first round of votes made it almost certain that Jones would become the sitting MP. It was this expectation, his work with the Reform League, but mostly the memory of his Chartist endeavours which brought several thousand Mancunians to the streets for his funeral cortege. He died one day after his fiftieth birthday.

Jones lived an extraordinary life in extraordinary times, often associated with reformist and radical literary and political movements with a particularly keen sense of generational influence. Just as some northern English Chartist marches paraded the previous generation's Peterloo survivors (often with visible scars and amputations from the sabres), so the founders of the modern labour movement looked back to Jones's example and sacrifices as a socialist writer, speaker, and politician. The many thousands who lined the streets of Manchester to pay respects at Jones's funeral in 1869 were remembering the Chartist generation of the Hungry '40s as much as celebrating his contribution to the contemporary 1867 Reform Act. Indeed, for a while in northern English towns including Halifax, there was a demonstrable statistical spike in the naming of male children 'Ernest' after Jones, no doubt largely unaware that their hero's forename was itself homage to one of the most right-wing royal personalities (King Ernst Augustus of Hanover) of the nineteenth century.

Writing a book on Jones's poetry effectively meant re-tracing Jones's biography, despite the historical accuracy of Miles Taylor's earlier biographical volume. More than writers whose literary ambitions might be more purely aesthetic, Jones's poetry was intimately bound up with the events of his life. This extra-literary aspect of his literary output necessitated detailed study of his interaction with German and British Romanticism and his political and literary legacy, but also a consistent awareness of the significance of the fulcrum point of his ultimately unexplained radicalisation in the winter of 1845-46. Although I was able to trace the development of Jones's literary career chronologically, it made little sense to explore the significance of his Chartist poetry without reference to his sometimes very conservative pre-Chartist poetry, or vice versa. Heavily influenced by the second-generation Romantics, Jones was in a sense a 'second generation Chartist', a generation characterised by sometimes acrimonious disputes over the necessity of moral force or physical force in the face of political disappointment, and eventually a dissipation of political energies into various arenas. Ultimately, movement on working-class voting rights came not from working-class agitation but from middle-class reform in the shape of the Reform League. The social legacies of Chartism lay in the co-operative movement, trade unionism, and working-class education. The legacy of Ernest Jones, because of his writings, his speeches, and his personal sacrifice for the cause, lies closer to the mythic legacy of Chartists which inspired future generations of socialists and radicals. Rather like his literary hero Shelley, Jones's greatest successes

were posthumous. And yet in life and retrospectively, Jones has often been defined not so much by what he was, as by what he was not. He was not German, not a British aristocrat, certainly not working class, not really a Marxist, not effectively a Chartist leader, and for some, perhaps not even a very good poet. He was, however, adjacent to all of these.