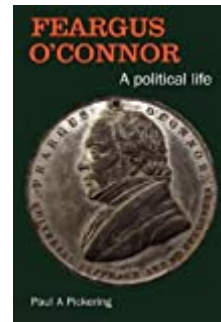




Paul A. Pickering. *Feargus O'Connor*. Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2008. vii + 172 pp.
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A Political Life

Paul A. Pickering is recognized as one of the leading scholars on Chartism and popular and radical politics in Victorian Britain. His new book, a political biography of Feargus O'Connor, *Chartism's Lion of Freedom*, is a completely accessible historical biography, intended for a popular audience. There is another feature to this book that also makes it unique. Pickering's intention was to give voice to the areas of O'Connor's life and career not typically examined, specifically his pre-Chartist and later Chartist activities. By giving less attention to the most closely examined and successful period of O'Connor's story, Pickering has chosen to look at his personal maturation and mental decline to better understand his ideas, both those which were quickly overtaken and those that were ahead of their time (p. 2).

This book does just that. The first four chapters, nearly half the biography, tell not just the story of Feargus as a boy and young man, but the story of the O'Connor family and the expectations that went with such an association. O'Connor was born to fight injustice, lead others, and raise the expectations of the poor that

they were entitled to do more and have more. The son of Roger O'Connor, a compassionate landlord and barrister and nephew of United Irishman leader Arthur O'Connor, Feargus was fully aware of his family's reputation as descendants of the royal O'Connor clan, champions of the defeated and vulnerable Irish peasants, and passionate nationalists. The declining family fortunes, death of his mother, and arrest of his father for a coach robbery ended his formal education; his decision to begin legal training in Dublin was divisive within the family that saw this as an affront to O'Connor's Celtic roots.

Study law, he did however, and this, we learn, solidified his moral and political beliefs, as well as launched his public career. O'Connor's first prominent defense was of a poor man facing transportation for stealing a goose. O'Connor defended the man on the grounds that the man was indeed guilty of theft, but stole the goose only to feed his family. Equating poverty and crime, O'Connor found his political voice and average people found their champion. His advocacy moved from the law courts to the larger political arena. The case ended as the national ag-

itation for a parliamentary reform bill emerged. Never a strong supporter of Catholic emancipation or Daniel O'Connell, the undisputed leader of Irish politics—both parliamentary and popular—O'Connor chose not to ally himself with O'Connell and the proponents of the Whig reform bill. Reform, he argued, sent the message to the Irish poor that emancipation would cure all their ills, leaving them little personal responsibility to end their poverty. Instead, O'Connor argued, repeal of the Union and democratic representation were the answers to Irish problems.

He drew large crowds throughout Cork to hear speeches described as bombastic, full of "political dramaturgy" using fanciful description to draw the listener into the political picture, even when he had no vote at stake (p. 33). Though O'Connor was discounted as a viable candidate, freeholders exercised their right to vote, often for the first time, to support O'Connor and "Old Ireland." O'Connor's return to Parliament was a milestone for both the man and the nation of Ireland. As he told his supporters, he was proud to be "the first man who had the boldness to rescue from the hands of the Aristocracy your privileges" (p. 38). He immediately advocated "Total Abolition" of tithes and repeal of the Irish Union, challenging O'Connell's authority. O'Connor portrayed O'Connell's Whig alliance in Lichfield House compact as a betrayal of the Irish people. O'Connor's political "independence" throughout 1834 deprived him of any parliamentary allies, antagonized many, and, ultimately, resulted in a parliamentary inquiry that deprived him of his seat by disqualification.

He then turned to English radical politics as the next logical step in his political career, challenging the seat in Oldham vacated by the death of Radical-Populist, William Cobbett. This split the liberal votes for the seat, allowing a Tory to be elected. Rather than see this as a defeat, O'Connor turned it into a positive, declaring that he would challenge Whig, Tory, and Radical alike if candidates and politicians failed to work toward reform, democracy, and fairness for the working man and the poor. Hence, the failure in Oldham took him directly to the extraparliamentary organization emerging in Manchester: Chartism. This is, of course, what all students and scholars most associate with O'Connor, have read the most about, and therefore, what Pickering chooses not to discuss in much detail. The Chartist campaign, *The*

Northern Star, and his land reform programs comprise two chapters in this study, Pickering himself referring the reader to the previous biographies on O'Connor by Donald Read and Eric Glasgow (*Feargus O'Connor, Irishman and Chartist* [1961]) and James Epstein (*The Lion of Freedom: Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement, 1837-1842* [1982]).

True to his objective, he moves to the "later Chartist activities" that defined O'Connor's legacy. The success of his first Chartist estate in Hertfordshire in 1846 and his successful parliamentary return as member of Parliament for Nottingham, one year later, show both his perseverance in matters of political reform and expansion of the franchise, but also brought him full circle, politically speaking, back to his early days in the Irish political campaigns in Cork. His expanded appreciation for the rights of people and the vote made his argument universal, rather than those of an Irish politician, but his position inside the Commons made for strained relations with some prominent Chartists. At the same time, his Irish "mission" also reflected the dramatically changed nature of Irish popular politics since his time in England. Repeal was justified in nationalistic terms, and O'Connell had been replaced by Charles Gavan Duffy, Young Ireland, and new land reform strategy. Losing touch was exacerbated by increased romantic theatricality and unpredictable outbursts, ultimately resulting in his mental commitment and death in 1855. How Chartist leaders struggled to commemorate him reflected deep divisions within the popular political reform movement to which he devoted his whole adult life.

Pickering's biography succeeds in bringing the many facets of O'Connor's work and struggles to life. It is completely readable, scholarly, and totally accessible to students and general interest readers alike. More significantly, it devotes attention to the conditions that made O'Connor an advocate for the working man and the politically oppressed. It helps us understand how frustrations with Irish politics led to his best-known role, leader of an English political and socioeconomic reform movement; and how divisions there, brought him back, however unsuccessfully, to pick up the Irish cause at the end of his political life. Pickering thoroughly humanizes the great "Lion of Freedom," rendering him more sympathetic and, perhaps, historically relevant than previously believed.

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