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Paul A Pickering, Alex Tyrrell. *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League.* London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000. x + 304 pp. $82.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7185-0218-8.

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Rescuing the Anti-Corn Law League from the condescension of posterity

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This is an important and significant book, of interest not only to historians of mid-nineteenth politics but also of pressure groups, religion, the theatre, women and society generally. It represents a considerable advance on existing knowledge of the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL). The League was an extra-parliamentary agitation to repeal those laws which, from 1815 until 1846, taxed imported grain on a sliding scale in inverse proportion to the cost of domestic wheat. Along with Chartism the ACLL dominated domestic politics in the late 1830s and the first half of the 1840s and the two have been subject to frequent comparison. Yet oddly, as the authors point out in the introduction to this book, the historiography of Chartism has outstripped in size, scope and imagination that of the ACLL. Norman McCord's path-breaking study of 1958 [1] has remained the standard account. Slightly amended in 1968, it has been largely unchallenged by either monograph or journal literature. Pickering and Tyrrell are well-placed to reverse this, given their reputation as historians of Chartism and early Victorian moral radicalism.[2]

So, what remains of McCord's account now that Pickering and Tyrrell have completed their work? The answer is a great deal. The present authors do not attempt to replace the narrative account McCord deftly constructed of the League's origins, development and end. Nor do they really subvert the implication of his concluding chapter that, within and upon 'the decisive theatre' of parliamentary politics, the ACLL was a limited force. On the other hand, even in 1958, the limitations of McCord's approach to the League and its history were recognised, notably in a review by Geoffrey Best that lamented the author bustled his readers past 'many open doorways'.[3] Pickering and Tyrrell lead us through and beyond these doorways in a vivid and skilful exploration of the cultural and political baggage of ACLL supporters. The result is a volume that extends and challenges our knowledge of the League and its times.

The stock image of the ACLL (encapsulated in exam questions along the lines of 'Chartism failed and the League succeeded. Discuss') is of a tight, cohesive and somewhat sober organisation, dominated by Mancunian manufacturers. One reason why modern histories of this body have been so thin on the ground has probably derived from an abiding perception that it was worthy but dull. The authors of the present volume gleefully demolish this clichÃ©. The book opens with an electrifying lecture in 1842 by James Massie, an Anglican clergyman and one of the League's star platform orators. Massie drew a direct comparison between the League and the early German reformation and, reaching his climax, imitated Luther's celebrated treatment of one papal bull by setting fire to a copy of a Corn Bill that had recently been placed before parliament. Then, as the audience ground the ashes underfoot, he declaimed, 'So perish all the laws that would interfere with the food of the people!' (p. 1) The account of this episode sets the scene for much

that follows, for at the heart of the book lies a vivid account of the ACLL as political theatre, which skilfully explores the iconography and rituals of its lectures, dinners, bazaars and conferences. Not for nothing did the League erect in 1840 a vast Free Trade Pavilion on the site of the epochal Peterloo meeting of 1819. Pickering and Tyrrell also show how the ACLL promoted itself as the vanguard of the struggle to throw off the Norman Yoke, and how committed its active supporters had been to political causes that ranged from the Queen Caroline agitation of 1820 to opposing the sale of Manchester's municipal gas undertaking in 1834.

The main vehicle for this political analysis is a detailed collective biography of the 105 councilmen of the Manchester Anti-Corn Law Association (ACLA) in 1839-40. This throws up a number of interesting insights. They ranged in age from 65 down to 21, but at 46 their average age was a full decade older than Pickering's sample of Manchester and Salford Chartists in 1840.[4] Thirty per cent were Unitarians (who numbered only 2 per cent of the church-going population of Manchester at the religious census of 1851). Another 15 per cent were Quakers. No more than a half were native to Lancashire, but the authors are able to show that overwhelmingly councilmen were long-term Manchester residents. No surprises there then; but the ACLA Council was very far from being merely a forum for the major cotton manufacturers. There was a broad balance of commercial and manufacturing interests, leavened by the professions. It also included linen drapers, grocers and a baker, for example, 'a substantial minority…hard-working men, not of the "first station", who have dropped out of the history of the League' (p. 228). The book is also attentive to the support received by the ACLL from wage-earners. Sensibly, it does not seek to make more of this than the evidence will sustain. In particular, the authors find 'little evidence' of working-class women's involvement (p. 133); but they show that the League cannot be marginalised or dismissed by historians of labour. It is regrettable, therefore, that they glide over the issue of the League's alleged complicity in the 1842 mass strike wave in a few lines.

Of the fifty-four men in the Manchester ACLA sample whose marital status can be confirmed, fifty-two were married, six of them to the sisters or daughters of fellow councilmen. Of those fifty-two, no less than twenty-nine had wives who were themselves active supporters of the ACLL. In its treatment of women this book constitutes a massive advance on existing knowledge, though it should be read in conjunction with an illuminating essay recently published by Simon Morgan.[5] McCord had only four references to women (all of them citations of Harriet Martineau's *History of England during the Thirty Years' Peace*). Pickering and Tyrrell point out Martineau donated a novel about the civilising effects of free trade to the ACLL, but they also do very much more than that. The result is a rounded appraisal of the League as a forum in which women played an important part, ancillary it is true to its internal governance but central to the cultural life that the authors are at pains to reclaim from obscurity.

Similarly revisionist is their attempt to establish the geographical scope of the League. A separate chapter deals with Wales and Ireland; and their survey of the English provinces and Scotland identifies 223 anti-corn law associations, from Perth southwards to Truro. The League, in the authors' view, 'worked hard to create a nationwide public opinion based on its version of Britishness' (p. 197). It's their belief that it succeeded, creating along the way a culture that accelerated the development of political parties and the idea of representative politics. Within Westminster, they also argue that the ACLL provided a template for subsequent 'guerrilla warfare' from the back benches, though this claim is less convincing, despite an appendix detailing members of parliament who voted for total and immediate repeal of the Corn Laws on each of the five occasions this was presented to the Commons, 1842-45. The real strength of this study lies in its extensive research into the provinces, to conjure some original and profound insights into the internal life and 'the ways and means' of the ACLL. In their concluding paragraph, Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell invoke E.P.Thompson's oft-quoted trope concerning the enormous condescension of posterity. The ACLL, they argue, has similarly been victim of posterity's condescension. 'The League we have sought to present was a much more varied, vital, robust and even radical organisation. Our League upheld an inclusive definition of the British nation in terms of nationality, gender and class that challenged the existing order in a number of fundamental ways'. Their rescue operation does not render McCord's study redundant, but this was never their purpose. Pickering and Tyrrell open up new ways of seeing not just the ACLL but also the cultural milieu of the early Victorian middle class.

[1]. Norman McCord. *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958.

[2]. See especially Paul A. Pickering. *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford*. London: Macmillan, 1995; and Alex Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the Moral*

Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain. Bromley: Helm, 1987.

[3]. Review in *Historical Journal* 2 (1959), pp. 89-93.

[4]. Pickering, *Chartism*, p. 140.

[5]. Simon Morgan, 'Domestic economy and political agitation: women and the Anti-Corn Law League, 1839-46', in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds), *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat.* London: Macmillan, 2000.

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