

3. Richard Carlile (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbzp6lggwNQ>

0:00:13.760,0:00:24.300

Richard Carlile

8 December 1790 - 10 February 1843.

0:00:24.300,0:00:30.160

Hello. It's Bob Forder again.

0:00:30.590,0:00:39.079

Richard Carlile was born in Ashburton, Devon, the son of a shoemaker.

0:00:39.080,0:00:46.580

He received an elementary schooling and was apprenticed as a tinsmith in Plymouth.

0:00:46.580,0:00:50.800

By 1813 he was living in Gosport, Hampshire,

0:00:50.800,0:00:57.340

where he married Jane Cousins.

Soon afterwards he moved to London to

0:00:57.340,0:01:02.950

work as a tinsmith,

but 1816 was a year of economic

0:01:02.950,0:01:07.939

depression and he found himself with little employment.

0:01:07.939,0:01:15.740

He began attending political meetings and read Thomas Paine, who he had been

0:01:15.740,0:01:23.920

taught to burn in effigy as a child.

To make a living he began to sell the

0:01:23.920,0:01:34.270

writings of reformers, particularly Paine, and weekly newspapers such as the banned Black Dwarf.

0:01:34.270,0:01:39.420

Then he started publishing and selling his own journal.

0:01:39.520,0:01:49.030

All dangerous stuff at a time of repression, fear of France and fear of revolution.

0:01:49.030,0:01:57.380

In particular Carlile published all Paine's works, he became his hero.

0:01:57.380,0:02:03.560

He kept Paine's ideas alive.

0:02:03.760,0:02:08.950

Carlile made something of a name for

0:02:08.950,0:02:18.970

himself as a radical and a reformer.

On the 16th August 1819 the events

0:02:18.970,0:02:23.750

now known as Peterloo occurred in Manchester.

0:02:23.750,0:02:30.050

Carlile had been invited. He attended, and he was on the hustings when the

0:02:30.050,0:02:36.100

yeomanry intervened.

In the aftermath he managed to avoid arrest.

0:02:36.100,0:02:43.860

He returned to London and wrote his eyewitness account of what had occurred.

0:02:43.880,0:02:51.500

Soon afterwards he published his famous print depicting the events,

0:02:51.500,0:02:57.590
and dedicated the print to Henry Hunt,
the main speaker of meeting

0:02:57.590,0:03:04.270
and to the female reformers of Manchester.

0:03:04.600,0:03:12.500
When in Manchester Carlile was greatly
impressed by the role of women at Peterloo.

0:03:12.500,0:03:15.960
They had turned out in their thousands,

0:03:15.970,0:03:19.860
many dressed in white.

0:03:20.750,0:03:27.950
Carlile was horrified that amongst the
casualties there was a disproportionate

0:03:27.950,0:03:33.980
number of women.
In his prints Carlyle (shown on the

0:03:33.980,0:03:41.230
extreme left of the platform) is shown,
symbolically, next to Mary Fildes,

0:03:41.230,0:03:46.540
Chairwoman of the Manchester Female
Reform Society.

0:03:46.540,0:03:54.510
Also, if you look closely, you can see a
woman being sabred.

0:03:54.510,0:04:07.920
Note also the banner carrying the legend
"universal suffrage" not "universal manhood
suffrage".

0:04:08.240,0:04:14.720
Carlile's activities were all too much
for the authorities, so he was prosecuted for

0:04:14.730,0:04:23.150
blasphemy, blasphemous libel and sedition.
He was found guilty at what he called

0:04:23.150,0:04:30.000
his "mock trial" and he was sentenced to
three years in Dorchester Jail, with a

0:04:30.000,0:04:41.020
fine of £1500, a fortune by the standards
of the time. In fact he served 7years

0:04:41.020,0:04:46.200
because he refused to pay the fine, as a
result his premises were raided and his

0:04:46.200,0:04:53.700
stock was confiscated.
On the other hand his cell was light and airy,

0:04:53.700,0:04:57.490
and remarkably he continued to edit

0:04:57.490,0:05:04.960
his journal, The Republican, from jail
which was now published by his wife, Jane,

0:05:04.960,0:05:10.360
back on Fleet Street.
The Republican sold well

0:05:10.370,0:05:15.540
and Carlile produced 12 volumes
while in prison.

0:05:15.540,0:05:23.010
Carlile's religious beliefs evolved at
this time and he decided he was an

0:05:23.010,0:05:31.100
atheist, rather than he a deist, like his
hero Thomas Paine.

0:05:31.300,0:05:40.160
In 1820 Jane was in turn tried for seditious
libel,
and she was sentenced to 2 years.

0:05:40.160,0:05:43.280
She spent this time with her husband and

0:05:43.289,0:05:50.620
their infant son, who they named
Thomas Paine Carlile.

0:05:50.620,0:05:58.199

While in prison Jane gave birth
to a daughter, Hypatia.

0:05:59.000,0:06:05.870

Jane's place on Fleet Streets had been taken
by Richard's sister, Mary, who in turn

0:06:05.870,0:06:09.920

received a 6 months sentence.

0:06:10.000,0:06:20.160

She was interned at Dorchester, where she
shared the same cell as Richard and Jane.

0:06:20.160,0:06:30.500

8 of Carlile's shop workers were also
prosecuted
and more than 150 men and women

0:06:30.500,0:06:36.720

were sent to Newgate Jail, in London,
for selling The Republican.

0:06:36.760,0:06:45.610

Despite all, Fleet Street book sales continued.
To make the authorities task more difficult

0:06:45.610,0:06:52.040

books were sold from behind a screen.
On the customer side was a clockface

0:06:52.040,0:06:57.280

bearing the names of the books, with a
hand could be pointed at the relevant title,

0:06:57.280,0:07:03.100

whereupon the hidden shop man
pushed the book through a hole in the screen,

0:07:03.100,0:07:13.759

thus avoiding identification.
Carlile called this "selling books by clockwork".

0:07:13.940,0:07:18.800

By 1825 it was beginning to dawn on the
authorities that their actions were

0:07:18.800,0:07:23.600

merely creating a bigger demand for
Carlisle's publications.

0:07:23.640,0:07:32.840

Suddenly and unexpectedly he was
unconditionally released.

0:07:33.020,0:07:39.230

His first action was to take on the
lease of a larger shop at 62 Fleet Street

0:07:39.230,0:07:52.000

and expand his publishing business.
This shop was externally provocatively
decorated,

0:07:52.000,0:07:58.360

and this caused various ructions and rioting
outside.

0:07:58.360,0:08:02.380

The shop is still there today,

0:08:02.380,0:08:08.400

and that's what it looks like now.

0:08:08.820,0:08:14.310

If Carlile's status as a controversialist
was in any doubt

0:08:14.310,0:08:22.860

he resolved that in 1826, by publishing
his own Every Woman's Book, the first

0:08:22.860,0:08:30.540

book in English to advocate birth control,
provide contraceptive advice and,

0:08:30.540,0:08:36.680

wait for it, advocated free love!

0:08:36.880,0:08:41.020

Here is a frontispiece from an early edition.

0:08:41.039,0:08:49.560

Carlile was saying to horrified Christians:
Don't accuse me of indecency

0:08:49.560,0:08:55.860

when there are stories like this in the Bible.

0:08:55.860,0:09:05.300

Of course, the thing that's missing in

this illustration is the fig leaf.

0:09:05.500,0:09:13.400

For Carlile, contraception served two purposes, not only did it prevent conception,

0:09:13.400,0:09:18.000

but it also liberated sexual pleasure.

0:09:18.010,0:09:24.910

I quote "See what an evil arises from bastard children, from deserted children,

0:09:24.910,0:09:30.960

from half-starved and diseased children, and even where the parents are most industrious

0:09:30.960,0:09:36.800

and most virtuous, from a half-starved, naked and badly housed family,

0:09:36.800,0:09:41.280

from families crowded into one room..."

0:09:41.420,0:09:49.320

Carlile was appalled by the practice of abortion and infanticide which were

0:09:49.320,0:09:57.680

common at the time in British towns and cities.

0:09:57.960,0:10:04.470

Shockingly, Carlisle also claimed Christians sexual morality was a

0:10:04.470,0:10:11.320

constraint on female emancipation reducing women to subservience.

0:10:11.320,0:10:23.600

He accused Christian marriage of placing women under a form of "legalized slavery".

0:10:23.960,0:10:28.550

Carlile saw love making as a healthy pursuit, both physically and mentally, and

0:10:28.550,0:10:32.720

challenge still more taboos by claiming women found it as pleasurable and

0:10:32.720,0:10:35.940

satisfying as men.

0:10:36.100,0:10:42.200

He even went so far as to advocate the establishment of "Temples of Venus", where

0:10:42.200,0:10:51.020

they young could receive instruction in sexual technique from the experienced.

0:10:51.120,0:10:55.300

Carlile must have been disappointed by the

0:10:55.300,0:11:02.160

reaction of some to his book, though perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised.

0:11:02.160,0:11:09.660

Many female followers turned against him, including Mary Fildes. She objected

0:11:09.660,0:11:13.960

to Carlile's implied contention that the ills of society were due to the

0:11:13.960,0:11:18.309

behavior of the working class, rather than the greed of the rich.

0:11:18.309,0:11:27.040

William Cobbett branded Carlile 'the grand pornographer and pimp',

0:11:27.120,0:11:35.800

who plan to lure into prostitution the maidenhood of England.

0:11:35.920,0:11:40.920

Despite all, "Every Woman's Book" went through many editions

0:11:40.920,0:11:46.280

and evolved with Carlisle's own thoughts.

0:11:46.640,0:11:53.770

After his release Carlile did not restrict himself to publishing and writing,

0:11:53.770,0:12:01.180
but went on a number of provincial
lecture tours between the years 1825 and
1829.

0:12:01.180,0:12:09.840
There were four expeditions altogether:
Two in 1827, lasting 8 months in total,

0:12:09.840,0:12:17.660
One in 1828, 6 months,
and another in 1829, another 6 months.

0:12:17.660,0:12:24.880
Remember: there were no railways then.
He had to travel by turnpike road.

0:12:24.880,0:12:28.940
Although these tours have mixed success,

0:12:28.940,0:12:35.260
they did establish a national network of
reformers.
He was always well received

0:12:35.260,0:12:40.420
in Portsmouth and Manchester in
particular, although he had substantial

0:12:40.420,0:12:45.660
support in many other industrial towns
in the North and Midlands.

0:12:45.660,0:12:56.640
Carlile was not a particularly good or forceful
speaker.
In 1829 he teamed up with the "Devil's
Chaplain",

0:12:56.640,0:13:05.200
the self-styled Reverend Robert Taylor,
and they launched their "infidel mission".

0:13:05.209,0:13:11.059
Taylor was a Cambridge-educated former
Anglican Minister, who had served a prison

0:13:11.059,0:13:18.619
sentence for blasphemy. His oratorical
skills greatly exceeded Carlisle's, hence

0:13:18.620,0:13:25.860
their joint enterprise was a considerable
success,

0:13:26.120,0:13:33.900
Sadly, the duration of Carlile's tours
may help explain his falling out of love

0:13:33.900,0:13:43.440
with Jane, despite her extraordinary
devotion, loyalty and sacrifices.

0:13:43.440,0:13:52.280
It seems he first met Eliza Sharples in
1827, when he visited Bolton.

0:13:52.420,0:14:05.880
In 1831 Eliza moved to London, and went
on to supplant Jane as Carlile's "moral wife".

0:14:06.440,0:14:12.420
Eliza emerged as a formidable character
and campaigner in her own right.

0:14:12.420,0:14:22.720
She was a good platform speaker,
who edited her own feminist journal "Isis".

0:14:23.060,0:14:32.260
In 1930 Carlile opened the Blackfriars Rotunda,
just down the road from 61 Fleet Street.

0:14:32.260,0:14:36.120
This was a substantial building
with two lecture theatres,

0:14:36.120,0:14:42.880
one of which could accommodate up to 1500.
The Rotunda became the centre

0:14:42.899,0:14:51.360
of reformers and radicals activities in
London at a time of mounting discontent.

0:14:51.360,0:15:00.689
In 1831 Carlile was incarcerated again,
this time in London, for an

0:15:00.689,0:15:06.689
article defending agricultural workers

and the rural sabotage movement,

0:15:06.689,0:15:15.709

known as the "Swing Riots", after their mythical leader "Captain Swing".

0:15:16.520,0:15:26.890

After his release, Carlile lived on another 10 years, but his moment had passed

0:15:27.560,0:15:33.460

So, what were his achievements? What is his legacy?

0:15:33.620,0:15:41.060

First and foremost perhaps, he republished all the mighty Paine's works,

0:15:41.060,0:15:46.640

and helped keep his ideas alive.

0:15:46.640,0:15:54.040

Second, he was a champion of press freedom and freedom of speech.

0:15:54.050,0:16:03.369

This has always been, and remains, a central secularist concern.

0:16:03.860,0:16:09.940

Third, he was a feminist, before the term had ever been heard of.

0:16:09.940,0:16:15.680

He was a feminist and champion of the rights of women. From this time on,

0:16:15.680,0:16:25.700

female emancipation has been a secularist theme. it's about equal rights for all.

0:16:25.960,0:16:33.600

Fourth, he was a pioneer birth controller, and again we can identify a consistent

0:16:33.620,0:16:41.360

and continuing secularist theme. The right of all, particularly women,

0:16:41.360,0:16:45.880

to control their fertility.

0:16:48.220,0:16:54.960

Fifth, he was, perhaps, the first to champion the idea

0:16:54.960,0:17:00.420

of a national, radical secularist movement.

0:17:00.420,0:17:07.880

Thus he paved the way for the foundation of the National Secular Society some 40 years later.

0:17:08.000,0:17:13.910

There is only one relatively modern biography of Carlile,

0:17:13.910,0:17:20.840

which was written by an American, Joel Weiner in 1983, and entitled

0:17:20.840,0:17:29.500

"Radicalism and Free Thought in 19th century Britain".

This is very difficult to find.

0:17:29.560,0:17:34.560

However Michael Bush's "The Friends and Following of Richard Carlile",

0:17:34.560,0:17:44.120

published in 2016, is more easily obtained, and there are copies available on ABE books,

0:17:44.120,0:17:54.320

as are copies of another book by Bush, entitled "What is Love?", which deals primarily

0:17:54.320,0:17:59.400

with Carlile's work as a birth controller.

0:17:59.400,0:18:02.500

Again, thank you for listening.

0:18:02.500,0:18:10.020

If you want to contact me about this or any other aspect of secularist and NSS history