The Devil's Freemason: Richard Carlile and his *Manual of Freemasonry*

Andrew Prescott
Centre for Research into Freemasonry
University of Sheffield

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I should begin by introducing myself. I am a medieval historian by training, and very much a product of the University of London. I did postgraduate research at Bedford College in Regent's Park, producing a thesis on the Peasants Revolt of 1381. Completing my postgraduate studies in 1979, I became a curator in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Library. During my time in the Library, I undertook a wide range of curatorial duties, but the highlight was planning and implementing the move of the Library's Manuscript Collections from the British Museum to the Library's new premises at St Pancras. I was also heavily involved in the use of digital technologies in humanities research. I was the British Library contact for the award-winning *Electronic Beowulf* project. As part of its work in this sphere of digital libraries, the British Library in 1994 signed a concordat for closer cooperation with the University of Sheffield, where the Humanities Research Institute is a leader in the field of humanities computing. My connection through the British Library with the Humanities Research Institute had for some time made me interested in working more closely with it, so when I heard that a post was being advertised there to set up the new Centre for Research into Freemasonry, I leapt at the opportunity of being able to work in the Institute. I was fortunate in that the British Library was willing to grant me three years secondment to undertake the work, and in January I began work in the HRI as Director of the new Centre.

Much of the past year has been taken up with the tiresome legal negotiations for setting up the Trust to run the new Centre, but these are now I am glad to say complete, and we are now ready to go public. On Monday March 5th, I will be giving an inaugural lecture, to be called `Freemasonry and the Problem of Britain', which will mark the public launch of the Centre. The mission of the Centre will be a very simple one - to encourage and undertake objective scholarly research into the social and cultural impact of freemasonry. We would take as our intellectual manifesto an article by the distinguished Oxford historian John Roberts published in the *English Historical Review* as long ago as 1969. Roberts points out that, although freemasonry began in Britain, it has been largely neglected by professional British scholars. He contrasts this with the position in Euriope and America, where freemasonry is the focus of a lot of academic research. Our aim at Sheffield will be, quite simply, to change this.

I can't resist giving a brief illustration of the sort of distortion this neglect of freemasonry by professional scholars creates. The *Victoria County History* is a scholarly reference work intended to create a systematic uniform history of every parish in England. It has been in progress for a century, and has now produced about 220 volumes, covering a large part of the country. Among the information the VCH records fairly systematically are details of local clubs and societies. The 220 volumes of the VCH contain masses of information about friendly societies, benefit clubs, sports clubs and Women's Institute branches, but have only a handful of references to masonic lodges. Lane's *Masonic Records*, which would enable brief histories of early freemasonry to be easily written for all the towns and cities covered by the VCH, is not mentioned or used once. Thus, the VCH history of Wisbech in Cambridgeshire notes the founding of the first bank, of various local newspapers, the creation of a literary society and a

museum, describes the foundation of the Working Men's Club and the appearance of such friendly societies as the Ancient Shepherds and Oddfellows. The fact that three masonic lodges were established in Wisbech in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is not mentioned. For the VCH, it is as if freemasonry was hardly a feature of English local life.

The aim of the new Centre is to change this situation, and to put freemasonry firmly on the academic map. How will we do this? I'll give some brief examples of the kind of activities we are planning.

- One of the reasons why historians neglect freemasonry is the lack of good critical bibliographies and guides to research resources. We will develop such bibliographical guides and make them available on the Centre's web site.
- We will develop an active lecture and seminar programme at Sheffield, with one public lecture a month.
- We will actively contribute to academic conferences and lecture programmes elsewhere. I have already contributed to the major Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative conference at the British Library, the conference at the Canonbury Masonic Research Centre and elsewhere.
- We will be producing, with the Humanities Research Institute, a series of CDs containing electronic editions of, for example, the works of James Anderson and facsimiles of manuscripts of the Old Charges, which will be offered for general sale.
- We are hoping, with the Sheffield Academic Press, to launch a major series of academic books dealing with the history of freemasonry.
- The Centre will welcome applications for postgraduate study leading to M.Phil or Ph.D. in areas connected with freemasonry, particularly the history of freemasonry. These will be run through the relevant academic departments, and prospective students will need to reach the usual admission standards for such courses.
- We hope to organise a major academic conference on the subject in 2002, and hope that such conferences at Sheffield will become a regular fixture in the academic calendar.
- We have put forward a proposal for a major exhibition at the British Library on freemasonry. A small exhibition is going to be held in the university library at Sheffield early next year.
- Above all, we will seek to develop major academic research projects into the history of freemasonry. At the moment, we are looking to seek funding to build databases of masonic membership and lodges to be used these for analysis of the role of freemasonry in social history.

My first impressions have been very much of the warm welcome I have received from everyone associated with the craft. In particular here, I should mention the enormous help I have received from John Wade and Tony Lever. Tony's contribution has been an extremely concrete and useful one, in arranging for the loan to the Centre from the Hallamshire College Library of runs of AQC and other vital literature. And the theme of my talk tonight is suggested by one of the books which Tony lent to us - a little red book by Richard Carlile called *A Manual of Freemasonry*. This book, which I'm sure many of you are familiar with, was written by a particularly fascinating historical figure, and provides an immediate, and very direct illustration, of the extraordinary connections one can make from the study of freemasonry, and the reasons why freemasonry deserves greater attention by historians.

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One Sunday in 1814 or 1815, a young Devon tinplate worker, forced to London in the search for work to support his young and growing family, was caught in a sudden shower of rain while out for a walk. He took shelter in the porch of a house, and, while he was waiting for the rain to stop, he noticed that the house was festooned with strange printed advertisements, covered with baffling symbols and referring to freemasonry. Like many others, the young man had heard of freemasonry, but didn't know much about it. His curiosity was struck, however, by the strange display, and, even though the rain stopped, the young man stayed until he had carefully inspected all the advertisements, although he could not make much sense of them. The image remained with the young man, however, and it was to return to him ten years later, when his life had been totally transformed in ways that he could never have anticipated on that rainy Sunday.

The young man was Richard Carlile, who, shortly after this incident, was to achieve national notoriety as a champion of freedom of speech and thought, a pioneer of the freedom of the press, a fierce opponent of the monarchy and supporter of republicanism, a militant atheist, and an advocate of such social novelties as vegetarianism and birth control. Indeed, Carlile can be seen as the forefather of many aspects of modern political protest. As a recent commentator Joss Marsh has put it, `the Chartists' jailhouse refusals, the suffragettes' hunger strikes, the self-starvations and blanket rebellions of IRA terrorists and internees: all alike look back to Richard Carlile.' Yet, if you perform a search for the name Richard Carlile on the internet today, you will find that only one of Carlile's many books is still in print, his *Manual of Freemasonry*, which first appeared in 1825 in a volume of his journal *The Republican*, was shortly afterwards reprinted a separate publication, and has remained in print ever since. Moreover, this continuous publication history is not just an accident. Carlile himself evidently thought that his *Manual of Freemasonry* represented an important contribution to radical ideology, and he went out of his way to ensure that it remained in print, even in his last years, when he was an impoverished and to some extent forgotten man.

The strange house where Carlile had taken shelter belonged to William Finch, a tailor from Canterbury who settled in London in 1802. Finch took up masonic research as a sideline, began publishing lectures and other material on freemasonry, which sold widely, and encouraged him to give up his tailoring to become a full-time masonic publisher. Finch's publications made him the subject of a series of complaints to Grand Lodge and he was engaged for some years in a running battle with both Grand Lodge and a number of individual lodges. He was an acerbic critic of the way in which the Union had been conducted, accusing the Lodge of Reconciliation both of plagiarising his work and of bungling certain aspects of the changes in ritual which accompanied the union. By 1815, United Grand Lodge had decreed that `no Lodge under the United Constitution will admit Mr Finch, neither has he any dispensation from the Grand Master for any act he may do'. It does not seem that Finch was ever actually expelled, but he certainly constituted a one-man awkward squad, as much a nuisance for his contumacious behaviour as for his actual publications.

In many ways, as we will see, there is an extraordinary similarity between Carlile and Finch, and I see

that moment when Carlile took shelter in Finch's porch as a key image in understanding the relationship between freemasonry and the radical tradition in the nineteenth century. It is often assumed that the printing press made its greatest impact on society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the discovery of the power of printing by the working classes at the time of the French Revolution was just as potent. Publications by self-taught artisans such as Carlile and Finch, often deliberately priced in such a way as to reach the widest possible audience, pulsate with excitement at the discovery of the power of the written word and of printing. Both Carlile and Finch felt that with their printing presses they could shake the foundations of the mightiest institutions in the world. An interest in freemasonry forms a significant theme in this textual upsurge, but the importance of freemasonry within this world of what might be called guerilla publishing has been largely neglected. From Finch to Carlile there is a link to other radical freethinkers later in the century such as Carlile's friend George Jacob Holyoake, who attempted to hoodwink the Oddfellows in a way very reminiscent of Carlile's treatment of the masons, Charles Bradlaugh, himself a freemason, who had stayed with Carlile's family as a young man, and Annie Besant, who was of course one of the founders of International Co-Freemasonry in Britain. An interest in the spiritual traditions of freemasonry is a thread connecting much of the secularist counter-culture of the nineteenth century. In studying the history of freemasonry, an important dimension is lost if this complex relationship with radical traditions is neglected. The rift with the Grand Orient over its secularist stance occurred at a time when the secularist debate in Britain, centring around such figures as Bradlaugh, was at its height, and it is significant that the first British Grand Orient lodge was formed in the 1890s by a group of freethinkers in Swansea. These Swansea rationalists may be seen as the ultimate heirs of Carlile.

Carlile was born in the small market town of Ashburton in Devon in 1790. His father, who had been by turns a shoemaker, exciseman, teacher and soldier, had published a book of mathematical adages, but drank heavily, and abandoned his wife and children. Richard's mother was deeply religious and tried to drill her beliefs into her children. What Carlile remembered most vividly about his Devon upbringing were what he afterwards called the wasteful activities of his teenage years: badger baiting, squirrel chasing, Oak Apple Day, and the burning of effigies of Guy Fawkes and Tom Paine. Carlile had two sisters, Mary-Anne, who was one of Carlile's most loyal political supporters, and an elder sister who was to live with Carlile in the last years of his life, after a lengthy estrangement. Carlile received a very basic schooling at local charity schools and in 1803 became a tinplate worker, making pots, pans and other utensils. It was not a good trade to go into, as hand plate working was being undermined by competition from northern manufacturers who were developing mechanised processes. Carlile struggled to make a living, first all in Devon, then moving further afield to places like Portsmouth and then eventually to London. In 1812 or 1813, under the influence of Anglican advocates of moderate deism, he briefly contemplated taking holy orders, but instead, in 1813, he married Jane, the daughter of a poor Hampshire cottager. Within five years, they had three sons.

From 1813 to 1817, Carlile worked for two London firms, in Blackfriars and Holborn. London was at that time in a ferment of radical discussion and agitation, its streets crowded with tractsellers hawking Cobbett's *Political Register* and other cheap papers. Carlile was intoxicated by this heady atmosphere of debate and discussion, as his fascination with Finch's masonic posters shows. By the winter of 1816-7, Carlile, like many other workmen at that time, was facing a bleak prospect as his employers reduced his hours. He began attending reform meetings, and in 1817 wrote his first essays. They were not very accomplished and one of his efforts was dismissed by Cobbett with the words `A half-employed mechanic is too violent'. Nevertheless, in March 1817 Carlile decided to give up tin-plate working to

devote himself full-time to radical politics, selling such papers as the *Political Register* and the *Black Dwarf*. He afterwards remembered `Many a day traversed thirty miles for a profit of eighteen pence'.

Among the contacts which Carlile formed at that time was William Sherwin, who had briefly published a radical journal called *The Republican* and in 1819 produced the more substantial Sherwin's *Political Register*. The risks in publishing political literature of this kind were considerable. For example, the 1799 Unlawful Societies Act which had required the registration of freemasons lodges, also stipulated severe penalties, including transportation, for the sale of publications which breached various strict regulations. In March 1817, the Home Office had ordered magistrates summarily to arrest the publishers of blasphemous and seditious writings. Sherwin and Carlile came up with an ingenious scheme. Carlile would act as publisher of Sherwin's paper and take the consequent legal risks. In return, Sherwin would finance the publications, provide copy and give Carlile use of his premises at 183 Fleet Street. Prison obviously seemed at this time a better bet for Carlile than starvation or the workhouse, and the arrangement with Sherwin allowed Carlile to launch himself as a radical publisher.

Carlile seized his chance enthusiastically, and flooded the streets of London with cheap political publications. Apart from the Weekly Register, Carlile also published political parodies by William Hone, Robert Southey's *Wat Tyler* (disavowed by its author when first published) and a variety of pamphlets designed to show that Britain was, in Carlile's words, `a continued mass of Corruption, Falsehood, Hypocrisy and Slander'. Above all, Carlile published the works of Tom Paine, and his growing reverence for Tom Paine is evident in Carlile's decision to name his third son, born in 1819, after his hero. In 1817, Carlile was imprisoned for the first time, for blasphemy and sedition in publishing an article in the *Weekly Political Register* maintaining that the poor were enslaved politically. On his release, Carlile returned to his activities as a publisher with renewed fervour. He also played an energetic part in the Westminster election campaign of the well-known radical politician Henry Hunt. Carlile's campaign work included the making of political banners, including the famous banner emblazoned with the words `Hunt and Liberty' which was afterwards to be carried aloft at the infamous masdsacre of Peterloo, when soldiers laid into a peaceful political meeting.

At this stage of his career, Carlile was indistinguishable from the many other figures engaged in the struggle for reform which characterised the London radical scene at that point. In the words of Carlile's biographer, Joel Wiener, `His obduracy was beginning to mark him out for advancement, but as yet he did little more than to repeat the ideas of others. Feelings of inferiority weighed heavily on him. He had a dumpy physical appearance; his West Country speech sounded awkward to London workers on those infrequent occasions when he attempted public oratory; and he was conscious of the inadequacies of his formal education. Yet singleness of purpose could, he realised, compensate for many defects'. It was the example of Paine which was to make Carlile take the next stage in his development and earn him particular notoriety, and the study of freemasonry was to play a significant part in this process.

Paine's writings had been the subject of vigorous prosecution since the time of their first appearance. Because of the prosecutions, they were difficult to obtain. Carlile, convinced that Paine's works were `the only standard political writings worth a moment's notice', felt that, if only Paine could be readily available in a cheap edition, the momentum for reform would become unstoppable. First of all, Carlile published Paine's political works. This was risky enough, but the sign that Carlile was about to cross the rubicon came in 1818 when, perhaps thinking back to that moment sheltering in Finch's house three years earlier, Carlile published Paine's *Essay on the Origins of Free Masonry*. Although Carlile had previously published some anti-christian squibs, this was the first sign of his growing interest in religious matters.

Paine's short *Essay on Free Masonry* is a good example of his strengths as a writer. Unlike many other writings on freemasonry at that time, it is detached, almost to the point of being sympathetic in tone. It is extremely clearly written and well researched, citing such sources as George Smith's *Use and Abuse of Freemasonry* and Pritchard's *Masonry Dissected*. Paine's proposition is laid out clearly at the beginning: `It is always understood that Free Masons have a secret which they carefully conceal; but from everything that can be collected from their own accounts of Masons: their real secret is no other than their origin, which but few of them understand; and those who do, envelope it in mystery'. This mystery was as follows: `Masonry...is derived, and is the remains of the religion of the ancient Druids; who like the magi of Persia and the priests of Heliopolis in Egypt, were priests of the Sun. They paid worship to this great luminary, as the great visible agent of a great invisible first cause, whom they syled, Time without Limits'. The reason for any secrecy was therefore, for Paine, readily understandable. `The natural source of secrecy is fear', he wrote. When the Druids became the subject of persecution, `this would naturally and necessarily oblige such of them as remained attached to their original religion to meet in secret, and under the strongest injunctions of secrecy'.

Paine's suggestion that freemasonry was the remnant of the Druidic religion was not a new one. It had previouisly been anticipated by, for example, William Stukeley. Paine's study of freemasonry gains its importance and interest because of its relationship to his other religious writings. The *Essay on Free Masonry* formed part a reply by Paine, unpublished at the time of his death, to an attack by the Bishop of Llandaff on Paine's infamous work, *The Age of Reason*. *The Age of Reason*, partly written while Paine was imprisoned in France, was, at one level, a compelling written attack on Christianity, and, on the other, an attempt to argue the need for a more generalised deistic religion. The *Essay on Free Masonry* developed this thesis further by arguing that Christianity was a perversion of the ancient worship of the sun, and that freemasonry preserved these old tenets in a purer form. Paine favoured a return to the ancient sun religion, developing a new solar method of chronology which he used to date his letters towards the end of his life. This aspiration to return to an ancient sun religion was to haunt radical freethought for much of the rest of the nineteenth century. The *Essay on Free Masonry* was unpublished by Paine when he died, but a version with the more perjorative comments on christianity excised was published by his executrix in America in 1810. The *Essay* was afterwards reprinted in French in this form in 1812. Carlile's 1818 edition was apparently the first unexpurgated edition of Paine's *Essay*, and reflects the assiduousness with which Carlile tracked down texts of Paine's works.

Having printed the *Essay on Free Masonry*, the next step was to produce a cheap edition of *The Age of Reason*. All previous attempts to produce this work in England had ended in the prosecution of the publisher. In December 1818, Carlile produced a cheap edition of *The Age of Reason*, aimed at the working class reader. Within a month, a prosecution against Carlile for selling *The Age of Reason* was brought by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Carlile responded by publishing further freethought tracts, and the government and Vice Society worked together to bring a dozen prosecutions against Carlile between January and September 1819. Street vendors selling Carlile's publications were arrested and book stocks were seized. The more Carlile was prosecuted, the more his business boomed. He moved to larger premises at 55 Fleet Street, which he christened `The Temple of Reason', which became the chief outlet for radical publications in London. He later recalled how `I knew the face of almost every public man in London, by their coming to my shop for pamphlets'. Carlile's radical celebrity was such that he was invited to join Henry Hunt as a speaker at a mass meeting for reform to be held at St Peters

Fields in Manchester. When the meeting was attacked by the Manchester yeomanry, Carlile saw their sabres `cutting very near' him, and within minutes was surrounded by dying men, women and children.

Escaping from Manchester, Carlile published eye witness reports of the `Peterloo Massacre' in early issues of his new venture, a journal called *The Republican*. Joel Wiener summarises the importance of *The Republican* as follows: `By the end of 1825, when *The Republican* had run its course after six contentious years, it had established itself as one of the premier working-class journals of the early nineteenth century, a companion to outstanding radical papers such as Cobbett's *Political Register*, Henry Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*, and Feargus O'Connor's *Northern Star*.' But *The Republican's* greatest years lay ahead. Carlile's more immediate concern was a trial for blasphemous libel in publishing *The Age of Reason*. This trial began at the London Guildhall in October 1819. Some earlier reformers, such as William Hone, had managed to use their trials to score major propaganda points. Carlile did not have the wit or incisiveness of Hone, but he did pull off one masterstroke. He read aloud lengthy extracts of *The Age of Reason*, which were consequently entered verbatim into the court record. Carlile's wife then printed her husband's trial record, an official document, and in so doing was able to print *The Age of Reason* without any fear of prosecution. This loophole was afterwards soon closed. Carlile was found guilty on two counts of blasphemous libel, and sentenced to three years in Dorchester gaol and a fine of fifteen hundred pounds.

Carlile was imprisoned in Dorchester from November 1819 to November 1825, and these were perhaps his greatest years. Carlile in a sense pioneered the modern prison protest which has become, from the suffragettes to Mandela, one of the leading forms of political protest. Just as Mandela was latterly able to use letters and faxes to work towards majority rule in South Africa while still in gaol, so Carlile turned his gaol cell in Dorchester into a `Repository of Reason' and the focal point of the struggle for a free press and the right to publish writings condemned as blasphemous and seditious. Carlile was given a light airy room in return for a weekly payment. This contained a sink, bed, desk, as well as some oddments of furniture and a set of weights for training. These were donated by friends and supporters, who also sent him razors, hosiery, night caps and other gifts. Carlile was allowed to purchase his own provisions and also given permission to hire two servants, one to run errands and the other to do laundry and cleaning. However, Carlile was kept away from other prisoners and visitors were discouraged. He was allowed only three hours exercise a week, and when permitted this `luxury', `he was led out as a caged animal and exhibited to the gaze of the passing curious'. Carlile's response was to develop a programme of rigorous mental and physical training. He read and wrote ceaselessly, constantly asking for supplies of books and periodicals. With the help of his wife and friends, he read thousands upon thousands of books during the time of his imprisonment. He bathed regularly at a time when this was an unusual habit, avoided alcohol, followed a vegetarian diet, used `natural' herbal remedies when ill, and recommended the drinking of herbal tea. Carlile's aim in following such a regime was to make his personal behaviour temperate and moderate by according with the laws of nature, but the most immediate effect was to make him very fat.

In planning his battle for freedom of the press from his gaolroom, the first footsoldiers Carlile deployed were his family. He insisted that they should now face the risks of continuing his publication activities. His wife Jane, though personally unsympathetic to her husband's political activities, loyally took over the publishing house, and was duly sent to join her husband for two years in Dorchester. Carlile's sister Mary Jane then took over 55 Fleet Street, and was also eventually dispatched to Dorchester. By this point, Carlile's gaol room was getting rather crowded - he complained that `locked up as I am with wife, sister and child I find it difficult to accomplish the necessary quantity of reading and writing'. Carlile

demanded that Jane and Mary-Anne should be completely silent, but they refused. The strains of this communal imprisonment helped contribute to the subsequent breakdown of Carlile's marriage.

From July 1821, Carlile began to ask for volunteers to sell his publications, and the celebrated `battle of the shopmen' began. Dozens of artisans came forward to sell Carlile's prosecutions, and more than twenty were convicted and imprisoned between 1821 and 1824. It has been calculated that these volunteers served more than two centuries in jail. Carlile carefully directed their defences from his gaol study. Most took the opportunity to speak against organised religion and in favour of freedom of thought. These tactics were very successful. In Joss Marsh's words, `Jamming the courts, packing the prisons, inflaming public opinion, Carlile and the volunteers literally wore out the government. Between them they secured *The Age of Reason* immunity from further prosecution. In 1825 the attorney-general struck his standard and discontinued prosecution'. The kind of ingenuity used to defeat the government is evident from the device of the `invisible shopman' used in Carlile's shop in Fleet Street. This was a clockwork apparatus, which allowed customers to select the name of a forbidden publication, which was then dispatched to them by a series of chutes, flaps and pulleys. Experiments were also made with speaking tubes. But the battle was not just about freedom of thought. Carlile was the first reformer to popularise the aggressively deist views of French enlightment thinkers such as Holbach and Volney. Supporters of Carlile formed themselves into debating clubs known as Zetetic societies, which engaged in `infidel' antichristian and scientific debate.

Meanwhile a flood of publications issued from Dorchester gaol. But of these the most important and influential was *The Republican*, which was avidly consumed by Carlile's supporters up and down the country. And it was in the twelfth volume of *The Republican* that freemasonry again engaged Carlile's attention and signalled another major development in his thought. In 1824, Carlile had published a short piece of the history and nature of freemasonry for a short-lived weekly called *The Moralist*. In Carlile's words, `The publication of this paper in the Moralist excited an interest among the Materialists who had been Masons, and they began to express a wish that I should, by their assistance, expose the whole abuse. To this end I have been furnished with information from many persons, inhabiting distant parts of England...' At the beginning of 1825, he wrote to William Holmes, a Sheffield shopman who himself wrote substantial quantities of atheist verse, declaring that `I am full of masonry. In a great hurry to tell you that I want a dozen of the best steel pens that you can get me...' In August, he wrote to other supporters declaring that `While masonry lasts you must not be sick yet, or you will be dead before it is all over. What must I feel who have to read through all this trash several times, and to write it over. The exposure could not be made without the nonsense. Besides it will form the only correct history of masonry and is important as a blow to superstition, of which Masonry is a deep rooted point. The Bible is nonsense, everything religious is nonsense, and there is no way of destroying it but by a full disclosure. I shall strike the very roots of masonry, and, in so doing, I shall un-christianize thousands...who, but for the Masonry subject, would not have read *the Republican*'.

In a sense, all that Carlile was doing was what many others had done since the early decades of the eighteenth century - printing the rituals of masonry as an exposure. Carlile's training as a radical publisher in ferreting out the best copies of texts meant that he made a particularly good job of the exposure. His collection was also particularly comprehensive, covering many additional degrees. What is distinctive about Carlile's exposure, however, is that its aggressive materialist stance and the way in which it places criticism of freemasonry in the context of a general condemnation of organised religion and also of such institutions as the monarchy. Moreover, Carlile's exposure was to appear in a journal aimed specfically at working class radicals, with a circulation of over fifteen thousand and a considerably

higher readership.

The tone of the criticisms of freemasonry made by Carlile can be judged by a prefaratory letter to George IV published in *The Republican* in March 1825.

`Sir
You are styled the Grand Patron of the Association of Freemasons and I shall shortly unfold to the public, that you are a grand patron of a grand delusion and of as useless and mischievous a piece of mummery as was ever patronized or unpatronized.
I have been long assured, without a knowledge of particulars, that there could be nothing really good, or unmixed with evi, that was supported by royalty, aristocracy and priesthood.
Before I knew anything of the particulars of Masonry, I pronounced, from my knowledge of man and things, that the Grand Secret was no secret, or alike a secret at all, something expected but never gained.
I will now show you, that a connection with such an association is disgraceful to any magistrate, much more so as to a chief magistrate. It makes a part of that general system of delusion upon the multitude, in which much of error and mischief, is mixed up with a little that is good, and the title of good foisted upon the pernicious compound...
Your prisoner
R Carlile'

The exposure consisted of a series of letters, the first series addressed to William Williams, as Provincial Grand Master for Dorset, the second, on the Royal Arch, to the Duke of York, and the third, on additional degrees, to the Duke of Sussex. Carlile's sources are wide-ranging, including the publications of Finch himself, Samuel Hemming, William Preston and Waller Rodwell Wright (Carlile states that he largely used English sources). The criticisms of freemasonry in the first series are trenchantly materialist. The `Grand Secret' of Freemasonry is that `they have no secret'. Freemasonry, Carlile declares, is a modern association dating back only to the eighteenth century. `All its pretentions to traditions which connect it to early associations...are false and cannot be proved'. The royal family should support mechanic's institutes, not freemasonry. Again to quote Carlile, `I recollect reading..of the Duke of Sussex toasting his mother, as the mother of six masons. If she had been the mother of six practical house-building masons, it would have been more to her credit...'

From the fifth letter of the series, however, there is a change in tone. Again, it was Paine who inspired it. Rereading Paine's *Essay on Free Masonry*, Carlile decided he was right about freemasonry deriving from ancient sun worship. Carlile felt that the problem was that masons had forgoten the origins of their craft, and that it was his destiny was to teach it to them. 1825 was to be for masons AL (the year of light) 1. In another letter to George IV, Carlile wrote that `I shall masonify masons, not only by teaching them what is morality, about which they talk without understanding; but by showing them what is the real meaning of all their boasted secrets, about which they talk without understanding'. Carlile's exposure of freemasonry as it gradually unfolded in the Republican during 1825 was avidly followed by his supporters. One corresopoindent declared that `Thy blow at masonry is a masterpiece and when completed will be one of the best books for lending out that could be put in a library. I know several who intend to avail themselves of the residing of it by that means'. Susannah Wright, a Nottingham woman who had been one of those imprisoned for selling Carlile's publication, wrote in with information supplied by her husband for similar exposures of the Oddfellows.

In 1825, Carlile was unexpectedly released from Dorchester gaol. His release was all the more surprising

since at the time a particularly provocative caricature of God was being displayed in his shop window in Fleet Street, which had caused unruly crowds to gather. In one of his letters on freemasonry to the King, Carlile had threatened to establish a Joint Stock Company to produce complete editions of radical books for working class readers. He put a lot of effort into establishing this company, but it was not to prove successful. In 1826, Carlile, under the influence of Francis Place, published a pamphlet advocating birth control, and became the leading public proponent of birth control.

Carlile also became friendly with one of the most eccentric and bizarre figures in the radical world at this time, the clergyman, Cambridge graduate and surgeon Robert Taylor. Taylor had drifted into the priesthood after graduating from Cambridge and, on meeting a local deist in his coiuntry parish of Sussex, had been easily won over to his views. Taylor gradually became a pariah within the English church, and ended up in Dublin, where he founded a Society of Universal Benevolence and a monthly journal, the *Clerical Review*. Taylor's works are now virtually unreadable, but basically he considered religions to derive from sun-worship and that Christianity, by substituting Christ for the sun, was blasphemous. Taylor wrapped up these ideas with a heavy overlay of spurious astrological and etymological learning. When Dublin became too hot for Taylor, he pitched up in London, where he began to preach at deist gatherings, provocatively held as mock services on Sundays. Taylor was a natural showman:and an ebullient speaker; he often wore baroque clerical attire which shocked his audiences. Henry Hunt christened Taylor `The Devil's Chaplain'. Carlile's study of freemasonry had convinced him that it concealed ancient deist truths. It was a short step for him to accept Taylor's arguments that christianity was also a concealment of ancient truths. Just as Carlile had taught masons the true meaning of masonry, so he and Taylor would now teach the true meaning of christianity. This encouraged Carlile in ever more extreme allegorical statements. At one point he declared that `I am the Jesus Christ of this Island, and of this age'. In truth, one might be more inclined the label him, by analogy with the title given by Hunt to Taylor, `the Devil's Freemason'.

In 1827-8, Carlile and Taylor embarked on a series of exhausting `infidel missions' in the provinces, while in 1829 Taylor served the inevitable spell in prison for blasphemy, although his demands for more and more comforts in his prison cell exasperated Carlile. In May 1830, Carlile and Taylor's partnership reached its climax when they opened the Rotunda in Blackfriars Road, which became the focus of working class radical and freethought activity during the period of the parliamentary reform crisis. Taylor spoke two or three times weekly, presenting what can only be described as multi-media presentations, with the signs of the zodiac painted on the dome of the lecture hall, spectacular use of lighting and theatrical effects, particularly in his talks on Raising the Devil and Sons of Thunder, and Taylor was even sometimes accompanied by a female chorus playing guitars. Taylor's talks at the Rotunda were reprinted by Carlile under the title `The Devil's Pulpit', with an epigram from Allen Cunningham `and a bonnie pulpit it is'. Carlile urged Taylor to look at freemasonry, and Taylor duly delivered four discourses of freemasonry, which appeared in the Devil's pulpit and were also separately printed. Taylor's works continued to be reprinted by freethinkers throughout the nineteenth century.

The slightly curious nature of Taylor's learning is evident at the beginning of his first discourse on freemasonry when, in his attempt to prove that the Epistle to the Hebrews was composed by a Royal Arch mason Taylor argues that it was written in the autumn, because of `the strong symptoms that the epistle itself contains of having been written when wine was cheap and when he who was so anxious to edify others was pretty well headified himself '. Nevertheless, Taylor gives a clear exposition of his aim

in these discources, as follows:

I pledge myself to let the cat-out-of-the-bag; to leave no part of the mysterious secret unexposed; but to flash resistless conviction on the minds of Masons themselves, that they are absolved from their oath of secrecy, in that they know nothing that we do not know as well as they, and that they have nothing left either to conceal or betray.
I shall prove Free Masonry to be the combined result of the Egyptian, Jewish, and Christian superstitions, and absolutely identical with the celebrated Eleusinian mysteries of Greece, the Dionysian mysteries, or Orgies of Bacchus, and the Christian mysteries of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, which are absolutely not more different in any respect from each other, than the customs and forms of any Lodge of Freemasons in England may be from those of a Lodge in any of the nations of the Continent.

Taylor's discourses drew extensively on the material Carlile had gathered on freemasonry for *The Republican*, and Carlile took the opportunity of Taylor's talks to reprint this material as a separate *Manual of Freemasonry*. Carlile's change in his pereception of freemasonry is indicated by the fact that, in this book version, he dropped a lot of the prefatory material sniping at freemasonry he had included in *The Republican*. As Carlile explained it, `I have omitted all those remarks which, in the Nos of the Vol. 12 of `The Republican', must have been so offensive to Masons. My great object is here to instruct Masons as well as others, and not give them offence. They ask for light. Here is light. They ask for fellowship. Here is the only basis of fellowship'. Carlile's aim was the same as Taylor's - to show the Dionysian mystery concealed within freemasonry; to quote Carlile, `the Key Stone of the Royal Arch of Freemasonry is the ancient science of the zodiac, with its moral counterpart of human culture made mysterious in its secret and priestly associations; which is also the science of all religions that pretend to revelations; and also of the religion of the Druids, and of all the Pagans from Hindostan to Rome.' Carlile recalled a conversation with Godfrey Higgins, a West Yorkshireman who was an energetic social reformer and pioneering scholar of comparative religion. Higgin's book *The Celtic Druids* had in 1829 proposed the universalism of religion. Higgins once said to Carlile that there were but two masons in England - the Duke of Sussex and himself. Higgins did not explain the remark, but Carlile claimed that he and Taylor were the third and fourth (he afterwards dropped the reference to Taylor when they fell out). Carlile's *Manual of Freemasonry* was thence to remain in print to the present day, running to hundreds and thousands of copies. The librarian at the Library and Museum of Freemasonry states that, after Gould's *History*, Carlile's *Manual* is the book most frequently brought into the Library for donation or appraisal.

Carlile was imprisoned again in 1831, because of his support for the Captain Swing rioters, and in July 1831 Taylor was imprisoned again for blasphemous libel. The Rotunda entered a decline, and in April 1832 the lease was terminated. By this time, Taylor and Carlile had fallen out. This was partly due to Taylor's drinking and fondness for the good life, but it was also due to philosophical differences between them. These changes can be mapped from the various changes Carlile made in successive editions of the *Manual of Freemasonry*. Carlile began emphasising the moral dimensions of his interpretation of freemasonry as well as the astronomical meaning, which had been Taylor's contribution. Carlile gradually began to see the Bible as an allegory of the creation of man's intellect. For Carlile, the whole of religion was a saga of the struggles of the good man to communicate knowledge. From this, it was not a big leap for Carlile himself to emerge as a full-blown Christ figure - the man whose struggles and sacrifices in life had been to communicate knowledge to others.

By this stage, Carlile was entering a period of decline. His marriage had ended, and he had entered into a `moral marriage' with his disciple Elizabeth Sharples, who had given talks at the Rotunda. He continued to travel the country, lecturing and writing, despite a stroke in 1841. In particular, he was firm in his support for the next generation of atheists and blasphemers. He became close to George Jacob Holyoake, the secularist leader who was charged for blasphemy because of his attacks on the use of public money for building churches. Nevertheless, Carlile's position confused and alienated many freethinkers. He was attacked by atheists for decribing the Bible as a volume of important truth, and primitive christianity as the birth of wisdom in man. Carlile died in 1843. His body was left to science. He was buried in Kensal Green cemetry, where a clergyman insisted on reading the burial service, despite the fierce protests of Carlile's sons, who angrily marched away.

Through the great and difficult struggles of his last years, the one thread which runs consistently through Carlile's life is his *Manual of Freemasonry*. One aspect of the publication of the *Manual* illustrates the trouble Carlile took to ensure it remained in print. Like many reformers of his generation, Carlile was much concerned with respectability. Carlile's friend Francis Place, for example, went out of his way to emphasise how bodies like the London Corresponding Society had been forces for moral improvement and tended to dismiss more radical reformers as scurrilous. The borderline between blasphemy of the kind that Carlile was accused of in printing Paine and obscenity through the publication of pornographic literature was a fine one. Some radical printers felt that their commitment to freedom of the press meant the freedom to publish pornography as well. Thus one radical printer William Dugdale not only printed Shelley's banned poem *Queen Mab*, but was also one of London's leading pornographers. Carlile felt that such disreputable activities were dangerous, and fell out with his sons when they worked with Dugdale. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life, Carlile's *Manual of Freemasonry* was published by Dugdale. This suggests that Carlile was sufficiently anxious to ensure the dissemination of the *Manual* that he was willing to countenance its publication by a printer of whom he disapproved. The reasons for Carlile's commitment to his *Manual*, over and above the dozens of books and pamphlets he published, seems to be that Carlile felt that his interpretation of freemasonry offered a key to the understanding of religion.

For historians interested in working class politics in Britain from the time of the French Revolution onwards, one of the big issues has been continuity. Was there a coherent and continuous working class movement for reform, running from the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s to the Chartists in the middle of the nineteenth century, or was the picture one of isolated and inchoate disturbances which were essentially unconnected? In considering this problem, historians have foccussed on finding threads of continuity. Freemasonry provides one such interesting thread in the criticism of organised religion and christianity, which has been overlooked by historians. Paine's essay on freemasonry provides, through Carlile, a link through to the Zetetic movements of the 1820s, and eventually as far as Holyoake and thus even to Besant. Both Holyoake and Besant were friendly with the secularist Moncur Conway, who was to produce the current modern edition of Paine's *Essay on Freemasonry*. As Holyoake was coming to the end of his first gaol term in Gloucester, Carlile wrote to him, `The six months are nothing when over. What will you do after is the question?'. Three years after his release, Holyoake saw an advertisement for a competition on the themes and degrees of the Oddfellows, namely Charity, Truth, Knowledge, Science and the Golden Rule. The prize was fifty pounds. In a move very reminiscent of Carlile's approach to the freemasons, Holyoake entered the competition which put across his own ideas in a form suitable for Oddfellow consumption. His entry won, and the Oddfellows were outraged to find out that the author was a convicted blasphemer. They nevertheless paid up and published the lectures. This incident set Holyoake on the path to becoming an accomplished writer (and the author of the entry on Carlile in the

Dictionary of National Biography).

The interest taken by such radical figures as Carlile, Holyoake, Bradlaugh and Besant in such social institutions as freemasonry and the Oddfellows may nowadays seem rather surprising. However, freemasonry and friendly societies loomed much larger on the landscape in the nineteenth century than they do now. For example, the *Freemasons Repository* in August 1798 contains a description of the spectacular masonic procession which marked the opening of the General Infirmary at Sheffield, in which not only were masonic lodges from all over Yorkshire and the Midlands represented, but also the cutlers, town officials and a large number of friendly societies. The procession deliberately took a very circular route around the town, so as to ensure that the `immense multitude' of spectators would get a good view of the proceeedings. With freemasonry so much more prominent, social and religious reformers like Carlile were bound to have to take a view on it. But, from today's perspective, there is another link between this radical tradition and freemasonry. In her wonderful book, *Word Crimes*, Joss Marsh argues very strongly that the history of the so-called blasphemers such as Carlile and Holyoake became forgotten and suppressed with the Victorian drive towards respectability. She demonstrates how the rediscovery of this history offers new perspectives on Victorian culture. Likewise, the history of freemasonry has become, for different reasons, a forgotten history. These forgotten histories enable us to view history in a completelty new light, and it is to the rediscovery of such lost histories that the new Sheffield Centre will be devoted.

Further Reading

This lecture is heavily reliant on the excellent biography of Carlile by Joel H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in nineteenth-century Britain: the Life of Richard Carlile*, Contributions in labor history no. 13 (Westport, Conn, and London: Greenwood Press, 1983). Wiener is unusual among labour historians in that he gives full weight to Carlile's interest in freemasonry. Prior to Wiener's full treatment, the best biography of Carlile available was the anniversary publication by G.D.H. Cole, *Richard Carlile, 1790-1843*, Fabian Biographical Series, no. 13 (London: Victor Gollancz and Fabian Society, no. 13, 1943). The biography by Guy Aldred, *Richard Carlile, Agitator: his life and times* (London: Pioneer Press, 1923) is a hagiographical exercise by a writer operating very much in Carlile's own tradition. All modern writers on Carlile have overlooked the important article by masonic historian S. J. Fenton, `Richard Carlile: His Life and Masonic Writings', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 49 (1952), pp. 83-121, where Fenton achieved the extraordinary feat of talking to a masonic lodge about Carlile while also, in the words of one member of the lodge, `steering his course so as to avoid the Scylla and Chrybdis of Religion and Politics'. Fenton's article includes a detailed bibliography of Carlile's writings on freemasonry, with a full listing of different editions of the *Manual*. A large selection of Carlile's papers are in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, and I am grateful to the Curator of Manuscripts there for providing me with microfilms of them. The Home Office files in the Public Record Office (particularly the HO 42 class) naturally contain a great deal of material about Carlile. On Robert Taylor, see I.D. McCalman, `Popular Irreligion in early Victorian England: infidel preachers and radical theatricality in 1830s London' in *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society: Essays in Honour of R.K.Webb*, ed. R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 51-67. McCalman's

works are helpful in placing Carlile in the context of radical activity generally; see particularly: *Radical Underworld: prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); `Ultra-radicalism and convivial debating-clubs in London, 1795-1838', *English Historical Review* 102 (1987), pp. 309-333; `Unrespectable Radicalism: Infidels and Pornography in early nineteenth-century London', *Past and Present* 104 (1984), pp. 74-110. Other important works placing Carlile in the context of the infidel and republican tradition are: Joss Marsh *Word Crimes: blasphemy, culture, and literature in nineteenth-century England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Frank Prochaska, *The Republic of Britain 1760-2000* (London: Allen Lane, 2000); Edward Royle, *Radical politics, 1790-1900. Religion and unbelief* (London: Longman, 1971); idem, *Victorian infidels: the origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791-1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974); Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848 (Brighton: Harvester, 1982); The infidel tradition : from Paine to Bradlaugh, edited by Edward Royle (London: Macmillan, 1976).*

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