

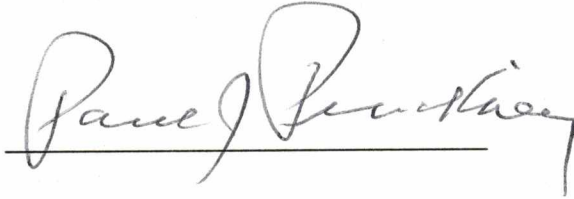
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John Bohstedt, Major Professor

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and Dean of The Graduate School

FEARGUS O'CONNOR AND THE CHARTIST LAND COMPANY, 1845-1851

A Thesis

presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

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Bradley Clark Cowart

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ABSTRACT

The Chartist Land Plan represented a significant phase in later Chartist history and served to illustrate the poignancy of the agrarian impulse among the working class. The Land Plan is important because it attempted to modify capitalism to include the working class as small farmers. Therefore, the Land Plan represented a path that socialism could have taken but did not, a path that would have included the working class in a wider definition of capitalism rather than the path that was taken which opposed capitalism. In the past the Land Plan has been viewed as a step in the wrong direction because of its marriage with capitalism. Historians interpret socialism in the light of what has happened in the twentieth century and apply this measuring stick to the Land Plan. However, in 1842 socialism did not mean what it has come to mean now, so the Land Plan must be reexamined in the context of its times and not judged a failure for goals it never espoused. Furthermore, the Land Plan is important as much for the hopes it inspired as for the forces that shaped it. The conclusion of this paper is that the Land Plan represents a continuation of long-term radical ideas coupled with an acceptance of capitalism in an attempt to move the working class into a more vital productive role in British society.

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Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Land Company 1845-1851

Introduction

The social upheaval created by the Industrial Revolution inspired the Chartist Land Plan of 1845-1851. The aim of the Land Plan was to eliminate working class dependence on the capitalist wage system by granting to those interested a farm of two to four acres. In this way, the Plan offered an alternative to industrial capitalism. It sought to restore to the working class a spirit of rugged individualism and thus make every man dependent on his own abilities for his success.

The Land Plan did not advocate a national removal to the land but rather a selective exodus of those who thought they could better provide for their families on the land rather than in the factories. This exodus would aid not only those who received land but also those who remained in the factory by reducing Britain's labor surplus, thereby decreasing competition for jobs and causing wages to rise. The Land Plan envisioned a new Britain by juxtaposing agriculture and industry. The Land Plan did not reject capitalism outright, rather it accepted many capitalist ideas and values, such as private property, thrift, and hard work.

Overall, the Land Plan wanted to improve the economic, social and political status of the working class: economically, by making them participants in the capitalist system; socially, by giving them land; and politically, by demonstrating the "respectability" of the working class through self-help and profitably run farms. The hope behind these changes was that this new status and respectability would demonstrate to the ruling class that the working class was ready for enfranchisement and full participation in Britain's political

structure. Yet how was the Land Plan to achieve such goals?

The key was the cooperative principle. The only way for the working class to survive in the harsh capitalist world was to work together, lend mutual aid, and thereby present a united front. The method of capitalization the Land Plan used fostered cooperation because thousands of small subscribers would have to contribute to raise the money necessary to buy land and place people on it. This system made each subscriber dependant on every other for mutual success.

On an individual level, the goal of the Land Plan was to provide each member with two to four acres, a cottage, and enough cash to start the farm. This was a tremendous payoff for a subscriber who could have invested as little as £5 for his two shares. The dream of owning land inspired thousands to subscribe. From the first subscription in April 1845 until the last in February 1851, more than 70,000 families sent in over £300,000. The Land Plan certainly struck a responsive chord in people's hearts, and their early enthusiasm carried the company forward from 1845 to mid-1848.

On May 1, 1847, the company placed the first allottees on the O'Connorville estate in Herefordshire near Rickmansworth. This activity represented the height of excitement and success for the Plan. The dream of owning the land was now a reality, if only for a few.

Although the Land Plan's early success seemed to indicate that it would achieve all of its goals, by July 1848 the Plan began to disintegrate. The original enthusiasm ebbed as Parliament investigated the feasibility and legality of the Land Plan and as the original allottees failed in farming. The success of the Land Plan was called into question and

subscriptions dwindled to practically nothing. Once lost, the excitement was never regained. Eventually in 1851, the directors of the Land Plan wound up the company's operations.

The Land Plan is interesting because of its many levels. On the first level it attempted to improve the lives of individuals by giving them access to the agrarian mode of production, thus granting them independence. On the second level, the Plan tried to set a wage standard by forcing capitalists to increase pay to attract and keep their factory labor. On the third level, the Plan represented political hope for Chartism by increasing awareness and demonstrating what could be accomplished through cooperation. Furthermore, workers could establish their worth and respectability by becoming agrarian capitalists. This new status would help the Chartists achieve their political goals, whereas previously, petitions and the threat of violence had failed. Finally, the Land Plan sought to unite the working class into a mutually supportive body.

Still another reason the Land Plan is fascinating is the way in which it fit into a tradition of radicalism. It synthesized several elements: a yearning to return to the land as expressed by radical agrarianism, the revulsion against a harsh, competitive environment as expressed by Robert Owen and the cooperative movement, and the desire for political reform as expressed by Chartism. Not only did the Land Plan fit into English radicalism but also into a European-wide, long-standing desire for land reform reaching back to the Gracchi in Rome.¹

¹Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome: An Account of the Events and Persons from the Conquest of Carthage to the End of the Republic* (Clinton, Massachusetts: Meridian Books, 1958), pp. 53-54.

Since the Land Plan attempted to give the working class control of agrarian production something must be said about the nature of the Land Plan and a definition given to the term radicalism. In the 1840s socialism did not have the same connotation it did at the end of the nineteenth century. The Land Plan can best be categorized with other Utopian socialist projects of the mid-nineteenth century. The idea was not that the state should own and operate production but that the working class should have access to agricultural production. By its advocacy of private property the Land Plan validated capitalism.

However, the Land Plan was not a de facto acceptance of capitalism. Instead, it attempted to use capitalist ideas to lift and sustain the working class, accepting rugged individualism while tempering it with cooperation and mutual aid. The Land Plan believed that each man worked best when his produce was his own, but it also urged its members not to engage in harsh competition within the estates. As for Radicalism, this paper is only concerned with English radicalism manifested by the desire for political and agricultural reform. The Land Plan was radical because it reversed the trend toward large farms. Socially and politically it attempted to reverse the trend to industrialization by proposing independent small agricultural entrepreneurism as an alternative to wage work and its attendant powerlessness. The Land Plan was neither a sell-out to capitalism nor a deviation from socialism. The Land Plan was a unique attempt to bring capitalistic, middle-class ideology to the working class so as to give them an escape from their subservient role in society.

The various interpretations given the Land Plan by historians indicate that from its

inception the Land Plan has been misunderstood. Critics in 1845, including many prominent Chartists, viewed the Land Plan as a deviation from Chartism's political goals. They believed that if land became a major issue then the working class would embrace it as their only hope for change and lose interest in the Charter itself. Bronterre O'Brien opposed the Plan for fear that once the allottees gained their own land they would forsake radicalism for a conservative viewpoint opposed to change and would then become part of the establishment the Chartists fought. For these Chartists the Land Plan was an aberration from political reform, a method by which the Plan's instigator, Feargus O'Connor, could increase his demagogic control over Chartism.

According to a second interpretation, the Land Plan sought to reject the Industrial Revolution by promoting an exodus back to the land. Proponents of this interpretation believe that the size of the farms and the use of spade husbandry imply that the Land Plan was promoting peasant small holdings to repudiate industry and progress.

However, the Land Plan was neither a perversion of Chartism nor a backward-oriented escape from industry. Rather, I will argue that the Land Plan drew from established radical tradition and represented a culmination of Chartist goals. It also offered a critique and a modification, not a rejection, of capitalism as it sought to establish the working class as a vital productive force within capitalist society.

Chapter One: The Background of the Land Plan

1. Feargus O'Connor

Until recently, Feargus O'Connor has been castigated by historians as the evil demagogue of Chartism. While O'Connor would have welcomed the title demagogue, he would have rejected the other adjective.¹ O'Connor saw himself as the great Chartist agitator; he believed that the movement needed a national leader who could serve as a focal point. Many historians have seen this egotistic aspect of O'Connor's character as a flaw. They read his readiness to serve as a sign that he desired to be the only Chartist leader. Because of the prominent position he assumed and the failure of the Land Plan, many historians have found in Feargus O'Connor a convenient scapegoat for the demise of Chartism. Recently this view of O'Connor has been revised, chiefly through the work of James Epstein and Gareth Stedman Jones.² Both historians have formulated interpretations which contradict long-accepted views about Chartism and Feargus O'Connor. These new interpretations require a reevaluation of the Land Plan. If Chartism had been a step toward socialism, then anything which detracted from the establishment of a socialist state would be viewed negatively (i.e. O'Connor and the Land Plan). However, if Chartism is studied

¹Julius West, *A History of the Chartist Movement* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, originally published 1920, reprinted 1968), p. 84.

²James Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom: Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement 1832-1842* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 8.

Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 154-155.

in terms of its historical origins and not by the standards of later socialism then O'Connor and the Land Plan must be judged in the context of their own time and not criticized for failing to accomplish an objective they never sought. These new views of Chartism and O'Connor as put forward by Stedman Jones and Epstein provide the basis for this study.

O'Connor was born on July 18, 1794 in County Meath, Ireland into a family with strong radical principles.³ Both his father, Roger, and his uncle, Arthur, were members of the United Irishmen. Arthur even served as that group's agent to France and was made a general by Napoleon. O'Connor grew up in a household that struggled against established political power. In 1822 he espoused Irish radicalism with the pamphlet, "A State of Ireland," which attacked the greed of Irish landlords. O'Connor was always conscious of his homeland even while struggling for land ownership and the Charter in England. Periodically, he published tracts or letters decrying Ireland's problems. The next eight years O'Connor devoted himself to running his estate and preparing to be a lawyer. By 1832 he was recognized as a champion of Irish rights. He joined O'Connell's Irish Party and was elected to Parliament in 1833.⁴

Although both O'Connell and O'Connor agitated for Irish rights, they did not agree on many issues. Basically, O'Connell believed that O'Connor was too radical, that he wanted to change society immediately without waiting for a more natural process of reform to occur. O'Connor saw O'Connell as a one-time radical who had sold out his

³Sally Mitchell, ed., *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Press, 1988), p. 556.

⁴Epstein, p. 8.

beliefs for the power and position available through aligning with the middle class.

O'Connor would have no such pact with the middle class.⁵ O'Connor's mistrust of the middle class began with the agitation for the Reform Bill of 1832. Although the Bill was passed due to both middle-class and working-class pressure, it gave the vote only to part of the middle class. This exclusion of the working class convinced O'Connor that he could expect no real support from the middle class. Consequently, this experience alienated O'Connor from cooperating with middle class reformers for the rest of his life.⁶

In the 1830s two actions of O'Connor endeared him to English radicals. The first was his defense of the radical journal *True Sun*⁷ whose editors had sought to establish a fairer tax system for Britain. They advocated a boycott of certain taxes in favor of a property tax. When the government prosecuted them for libel, O'Connor rose to their defense and petitioned Parliament to pardon the editors. This was O'Connor's first contact with the radical press. Defending the editors enabled him to establish contacts that later aided him in publishing his own radical paper, *The Northern Star*. It also made him aware of the influence the radical press exerted over the working class.

Another action of O'Connor's endeared him to an even wider audience of radicals: his defense of the Dorchester laborers. In 1835 six workers from Tolpuddle were deported to Australia for administering oaths to recruits for an agricultural laborers union, at that time an illegal organization. Workers interpreted this trial as a form of government

⁵Ibid., p. 49.

⁶Edward Royle, *Chartism* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1986), p. 15.

⁷Epstein, p. 18.

oppression and sympathized with the six workers. When O'Connor came to the martyrs' defense, he identified himself as a leader of the working class rather than simply an Irish radical. These two events served as O'Connor's introduction to English politics. When he left Parliament in 1835, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to English radicalism and was welcomed with open arms by the radicals.⁸

O'Connor's speech-making and organizational skills were remarkable talents. From the platform he could inspire people with his oratory and motivate them to fight for their rights. In fact, he saw himself as the successor to Henry Hunt, a great early nineteenth century orator who was the speaker of the day on the Peterloo massacre.⁹ As an organizer, O'Connor spent much of 1835 forming radical associations in the North where working men could meet and discuss how to secure their rights. O'Connor's successful efforts at organization are attested to by the many associations he formed or helped to shape. The first was the Great Marylebone Radical Association in 1835.¹⁰ The G.M.R.A. had been agitating since 1827 for a decentralized government and a reduction of the poor rates. When O'Connor joined three years later he immediately began expanding the scope of this association's aims. He then toured the North to establish similar radical associations. In 1836 O'Connor established the Universal Suffrage Club.¹¹ The U.S.C. sought to elevate the working class intellectually and politically to prove its worthiness

⁸Ibid., p. 20.

⁹Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹Ibid., p. 30.

and readiness for political power. The Central National Association sought to unite radicals of London with those in the North under the idea that universal suffrage was the means to social reform.¹²

However, arguments were frequent between the London radicals and O'Connor. The Londoners seemed more willing to embrace middle class reformers like O'Connell, whom O'Connor believed watered down radicalism. Consequently, O'Connor concentrated on organizing the North in 1837 into the Great Northern Union by combining the many radical associations he had already established. This new organization was solidly established by late 1838 and early 1839 and served as a base for Chartism.¹³

While O'Connor was important as the North's chief radical, he also assumed responsibility for healing the breach with London by agitating for the first Chartist petition in 1839. The London Workingmen's Association, with which O'Connor had contacts, published the embodiment of Chartist aims in petition form in 1838.¹⁴ These ideas were not new--they had been advocated in radical circles for years. What O'Connor brought to these demands was a great fervor and the beginnings of a national organization. *The Northern Star*, founded in 1839, additionally helped buttress this new movement by giving the working class a national focus and voice.

O'Connor was the chief leader of the Chartist national movement. His powers of speech and organization, along with his zest for the cause, might have given the

¹²Ibid., pp. 31-32.

¹³Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁴West, p. 89.

impression that he was a demagogue, but Chartism needed a strong leader who could inspire the people and achieve a national consensus. Consequently, O'Connor drew the reins of command to himself.

What motivated O'Connor to become a radical? Not only did he come from a family of radicals, but O'Connor also had a keen sense of fairness and hated oppression of any kind. While in Ireland he fought against the tithe, which he deemed unfair to those not Anglican. When elected to Parliament he expanded his desire to see Irish-English relations improved. When he entered the English radical scene he was no less vehement in his support of the oppressed working class. He fought tirelessly against the new Poor Law, founded *The Northern Star* as the people's voice, and originated the workers' organizations that attracted local working class involvement in political reform. O'Connor sought to end oppression by raising up individual members of the working class. O'Connor wanted to provide the opportunity for each man to improve himself. "O'Connor captured the artisan consciousness concerned with independence and self-reliance--this was the heart of the English radical since 1790."¹⁵

O'Connor was also greatly influenced by the system of Irish small holdings. He believed the existence of small farms and the use of spade husbandry allowed for a closer cultivation of each acre. He believed this allowed more people to participate in agriculture. What angered O'Connor about the Irish situation was that few owned land while most were tenants. Many times in *The Star* O'Connor wrote long letters to the Irish landlords imploring them to share land tenure, all to no avail.

¹⁵Epstein, p. 256.

So in 1845 when O'Connor began his last crusade for the people, his actions were a culmination of much of his previous work. In his early life he saw firsthand what agricultural life was like. As a young man he managed his own estates and learned to respect and love the land. When he began agitating on behalf of the working class he saw the abundant hope the land held out to those who despaired of the present system. When the first two Chartist petitions of 1839 and 1842 came to naught, O'Connor initiated the Land Plan as the social wing of Chartism to offer independence and success and help raise interest in the political goals of the Charter. Far from being a deviation, the Land Plan was an outgrowth of O'Connor's longstanding efforts at reform and improvement for the working class.

Perhaps the best summation of O'Connor's life and his thwarted hopes was given by William Jones in his eulogy at O'Connor's funeral.

He was unguarded in his confidences and often deceived, unthinking in his generosity and often imposed upon. He was unbounded in his desire for the public good and sometimes miscalculated the means necessary for success in an over-anxiety to succeed.¹⁶

2. Chartism

Agitation for political reform had a long history in Britain. The Chartist agitation of 1839-1848 was able to capitalize on this tradition and use the voice of popular protest to form a national organization. The goal of Chartism was to gain the vote for the working class so that reforms beneficial to workers could be enacted. In 1845 Chartism was losing

¹⁶G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The British Common People 1746-1946* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), p. 327.

its cohesion and strength, so it was at this time that O'Connor proposed the Land Plan. As with Chartism, the goal of the Land Plan was to strengthen and uplift the working class. For this reason, we will briefly examine Chartism to better understand the soil from which the Land Plan grew.

The Chartists demanded six reforms: universal male suffrage, secret ballots, equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, no property qualification for members of Parliament, and payment of members of Parliament. While all these demands would give the working class a voice in government, male suffrage would enable it to greatly alter Britain's political landscape. A secret ballot would permit men to vote free of the influence of landowners or factory bosses. Equal electoral districts would put an end to rotten boroughs and over-representation by small districts. Annually elected parliaments would hold members of Parliament more responsible to the people. No property qualification and payment of members of Parliament would allow working men to serve in government. To British rulers giving into these radical demands was completely unthinkable for they challenged their concept of social hierarchy and order. If the working class had a political voice the rulers' monopoly on power would quickly disappear.

These ideas were not new with Chartism but were part of a radical tradition reaching back to the seventeenth century. At the end of the English Revolution a group calling itself the Levellers demanded an extension of suffrage and the empowerment of the House of Commons over the House of Lords.¹⁷ The Levellers sought to reestablish

¹⁷Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution* (London: Schoken, 1958), pp. 75-78.

common rights they believed belonged to all Englishmen, rights stolen by William the Conqueror in 1066.¹⁸

Both the French and American Revolutions gave a boost to British radicalism by emphasizing natural rights and the rule of reason.¹⁹ In *The Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine refuted Burke's assertion that society is a compact among the dead, the living and those yet to be born. Burke believed that society was organic and that tradition and precedent were the foundations of Britain. Paine believed tradition was useless--why let the past dictate present society? Let reason determine the way society should be constructed.²⁰ Paine's ideas about government were also radical. He believed that government was responsible for insuring each man's happiness and the rewards of his labor. Government, he believed, should be responsible to the people instead of the people being responsible to the government; consequently, working class radicals adored him because he tied reform to their everyday economic concerns.²¹

Chartism added the dimension of class struggle to the radical tradition. O'Connor believed Chartism was essentially a class movement. Edward Royle and James Walvin qualify this view when they conclude, "Chartism was built not only on class consciousness

¹⁸Ibid., p. 75-76.

¹⁹For a full discussion of the influence of the French Revolution on British Radicalism see: H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

²⁰E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pp. 91-93.

²¹Ibid., p. 94.

and conflict but on the compromises which it was still possible to work out with radicals such as Thomas Atwood and Francis Place."²² Another influential Chartist historian, Dorothy Thompson, writes, "Most social historians of all schools, though, have agreed in finding Chartism strongly informed by a sense of class and by class-determined stances on a whole range of questions."²³

Chartism grew out of the anti-Poor Law agitation. When Parliament rejected John Fielden's petition to repeal the Poor Law in 1838, O'Connor began agitating for the people to petition Parliament once again, this time demanding political rights.²⁴ Chartism already had a solid organization with the radical associations and reading societies previously established by O'Connor. Chartism sought to deepen these organizations by adding new members and by tying the organizations closer together. The Chartist demands were publicized in *The Northern Star* and in speeches throughout England. The plan was to circulate a petition, obtaining as many signatures as possible. Once the petition had completed its tour of England, a national convention would be called with members elected at the local level. This convention would then present the petition to Parliament.

The Chartist convention met in February 1839 in the British Hotel on Cockspur Street in London and was divided from the beginning.²⁵ The divisive issue was what

²²Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (University Press Kentucky, 1982), p. 159.

²³Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 238.

²⁴Royle, *Chartism*, p. 238.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 24.

action, if any, should be taken when the petition was rejected, for the Chartists believed Parliament would never grant their requests. One group advocated moral force in securing the Charter, which entailed non-violent pressure such as exclusive dealing (shopping only at shops which supported Chartism). Another group advocated physical force: workers would strike for thirty days to exert pressure for the Charter. However, a third group led by O'Connor believed that the threat of violence and not the action itself would bring the desired results.²⁶ There could be no agreement on such a divisive issue. In fact, the Birmingham representatives left after only a few days of meetings. Slowly, others trickled away until the ones remaining could scarcely claim to represent England. With much of the vital force of the convention absent, once Parliament rejected their demands the remaining Chartists could do little but go home.

The Newport working class did not give up so easily. Fueled by economic distress and anger at the government over the rejection of the Charter, the men of Newport rioted for several days, shaking the town and giving Chartism a reputation of being subversive and revolutionary.²⁷ The riots' instigators hoped that the Newport uprising would inspire a nationwide uprising to focus attention on the plight and demands of the working class. Unfortunately for the Newport Chartists, their example did not inspire any other uprisings. At that time, the Chartists did not have a sufficient national organization to attempt an activity of this nature. Additionally, the government acted quickly to contain the Newport

²⁶Thomas Milton Kemnitz, "Approaches to the Chartist Movement: Feargus O'Connor and Chartist Strategy" *Albion*, V (Spring 1973), pp. 67-73.

²⁷Royle, pp. 55-56.

incident and to prevent similar occurrences elsewhere. With this quick suppression and lack of planning, the Newport uprising did not have the chance to serve as a focus for revolution, and after four days the riots ended.²⁸ The first Chartist petition of 1839 was weakened by disorganization and division. The Charter was denied, and while its supporters dealt with alienation from the political system, its leaders sought strength for their next battle with the government.

From 1840 to 1842 Chartism did not manifest itself nationally. While there still remained Chartists and radical political demands the movement overall was in a period of quiescence. Asa Briggs, an English historian who studied both nineteenth century England and Chartism, traced this time of inactivity to the economic situation in Britain.²⁹ He viewed Chartism as mostly a social issue, a response to harsh economic times. Hunger kept Chartism alive, but only national economic distress could motivate the working class to make Chartism a viable movement. According to Arthur Gayer, an English economic historian, the British economy hit a trough in 1842 and again in 1848 with a slight peak in 1845.³⁰ Perhaps this explains why the last two Chartist petitions were in 1842 and 1848.

The second Chartist petition was presented to Parliament in 1842, a year also noted for its many strikes. In early June the coal miners of Staffordshire struck, effectively

²⁸Ibid., p. 28.

²⁹Asa Briggs, *The Making of Modern England 1783-1867* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 309.

³⁰Arthur Gayer, W. W. Rostow, and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy 1790-1850: An Historical, Statistical and Theoretical Study of Britain's Economic Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), vol. 1, pp. 306-307; pp. 339-340.

closing down the local potteries for lack of fuel. There were also widespread strikes in Lancashire. A historical debate exists on whether these strikes were meant to support Chartism or were merely attempts to raise wages. In *The Chartists* Dorothy Thompson explained why she believed these strikes had political significance.³¹ Her most impressive evidence is from the workers themselves. They were willing to strike to support the Charter and thus solve their long-term problems, not just to secure higher wages, which was merely a stop-gap measure. Clearly, the striking workers identified with the Chartists. However, their efforts were to no avail--Parliament once again denied the Charter.

Following this, the government attempted once and for all to halt the Chartist agitation. More Chartists were arrested in 1842 than in any other year. With its leaders fighting in the courts and its followers defeated, Chartism appeared dead.

But O'Connor did not see things that way. Now, more than ever, he believed the people needed to secure their rights. One of these last rights was land ownership. O'Connor decided to promote this latent desire for land to bolster support for Chartism. This desire would again excite the people and influence those who had not formerly been Chartists to join the Chartist ranks.

During the excitement surrounding the Land Plan and the economic hardships of 1848, the third Chartist petition was presented to Parliament on April 4, 1848. The fact that Chartism could rise again and circulate a third petition directly resulted from the Land Plan, which helped revive the hopes crushed by two resounding defeats in 1839 and 1842. The third petition was to be the largest, being reputed to contain five million signatures.

³¹D. Thompson, pp. 284-285.

O'Connor had arranged for a great parade to start at Kensington Common to carry the Charter to Parliament, a parade consisting of thousands of workers to demonstrate the strength behind Chartism. Once more, uncontrollable events thwarted his hopes. Rain on the morning of April 4 kept many from joining the procession. In addition, the government enlisted 50,000 special constables to control the bridges leading to Parliament. Parliament would endure no mobs as France had earlier in the year. In the end, the petition was carried by only a small procession after O'Connor convinced the majority of those assembled to disperse.³² The petition that O'Connor claimed had over five million signatures actually contained only one and a half million legitimate signatures, the rest being names of dead or fictitious people such as King Ludd or Victoria Rex. However, these names could have been pseudonyms for those apprehensive about signing their real names.³³

The Charter once again was defeated, this time never to be resurrected. The Land Plan survived, but barely. In June 1848, a select committee of Parliament examined the Plan. At the end of their hearings in July the committee found that the Land Plan would probably not fulfill its members' expectations. Consequently, the majority of the people lost confidence in the Plan. With the third defeat of its Charter and the disintegration of the Land Plan, Chartism lost its focus and split up into several different movements (e.g. temperance, self-help, and education).

A great debate continues regarding the nature of Chartism: was it a political or a

³²Royle, pp. 44-45.

³³D. Thompson, p. 326.

social phenomenon? In fact, it was both. It represented a radical tradition that demanded political rights for all Englishmen based upon their birthright. Socially, Chartism envisaged the benefits to be gained by the new political rights. To emphasize either one is to detract from the full meaning of Chartism. Chartism's main goal was to end the oppression of the working class politically, economically, and socially, a goal echoed by the Land Plan. Thus, the Land Plan represented merely a shift in methods, not goals.

3. Radical Agrarianism

While advocating land ownership Feargus O'Connor was not setting a new course for radicalism. In fact, radical agrarianism was deeply rooted in radical tradition. One significant reason the land served as a goal for the radical program was because of the belief that the land belonged to the people. This belief arose from the view that the natural employment of man was in working the soil and that access to the land was a natural right of every Englishman. The common people were estranged from this natural condition because while many worked the land they did it as tenants and not for their own. This frustration manifested itself as a suspicion against the lords who owned the land and governed Britain. This suspicion helped foster the spread of radicalism. Over time as a means to describe how the common people lost the land the idea of the Norman yoke was born. According to Christopher Hill, the mythical idea of the Norman yoke greatly influenced the working class. This myth envisioned a time before William the Conqueror when the Anglo-Saxons had a free government and representative institutions which

worked for the good of all society.³⁴ However, the conquest of England in 1066 upset this harmony when "... the greatest ruffians, seizing on the principal shares of the spoils ... introduced into this world all the cursed variations of lordship, vassalage and slavery as we see it at this day."³⁵ O'Connor said, "Aristocracy-seized land, the common lands, are the people's right."³⁶ The blame for appropriating the land was not confined to the Normans of 1066 as O'Connor's quote shows. This theme accepted that since 1066 the aristocracy had continuously taken the land for themselves. At times they even gained the sanction of the government as during the enclosure movements from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Enclosures were seen as a real blow to the limited access to the land that the common people had. At this time many lost rights of usage of commons and large farms came into dominance. Furthermore, radicals believed that land was capable of fully employing all available people. This O'Connor used as a main plank of his plan as well. Malcolm Chase in *The People's Farm* acknowledges the belief that many had in the land and its abilities to deal with problems the working class experienced in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. "Many felt land could solve working class problems. This was only slowly eroded by the course of the Industrial Revolution."³⁷

So land hunger had a long tradition in British radicalism. This desire was

³⁴Hill, p. 75.

³⁵Ibid., p. 106.

³⁶*The Northern Star*, May 31, 1845. (Hereafter *N. S.*)

³⁷Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 17.

exacerbated by the problems of the Industrial Revolution and the fact that many new urban workers were only one generation removed from the land and keenly desired land ownership.³⁸

As the Industrial Revolution progressed workers looked back on the land with fondness, and a desire for a return to the land was heightened. The traditional radical program of natural rights and misappropriation of the soil were strengthened by new beliefs in the land as a rescuing force for the working class. Land offered a person control over his own labor and produce. A worker did not have this same element of control as an industrial laborer. Agriculture also presupposed a certain level of skill and granted a measure of security and status. Additionally, this skill when applied to the land would increase its productivity and worth and subsequently the produce of the farmer.

With the Norman yoke symbolism, land ownership became associated with radicalism by the idea of lost rights. E. P. Thompson points this out by stating that a sense of lost rights was prevalent among the workers especially as they moved into the cities for work. Furthermore, their memories were those of personal experience, and these ideas helped radicalize urban workers. In O'Connor's belief that the land was the people's inheritance he was echoing radical agrarianism, not introducing a new concept. James Epstein points out that radicalism had always attacked landlords and that O'Connor's ideas about the land should not be viewed separately from this fact.³⁹

³⁸Patricia Hollis, *Pressure From Without in Early Victorian England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), p. 147.

³⁹Epstein, p. 250.

Following the English Revolution, a group subscribing to the Norman yoke and calling itself the Diggers attempted to establish farming communities on several English commons. Their largest project was to convert St. George's Hill into an agrarian paradise. Led by Gerhard Winstanley, this group eventually failed to establish any lasting communities but contributed to O'Connor's political theory with their belief that the land existed for the use of all and that if landlord supremacy was eradicated a democratic rural community would flourish.⁴⁰ O'Connor accepted these two ideas but did not accept the Diggers' belief in common ownership. Although the land was the people's O'Connor believed in "the system, mine and thine, tempered with the cooperative spirit."⁴¹ He thought that only private ownership could inspire a man to work hard to improve himself. This idea separated O'Connor from many other land reformers, most notably Thomas Spence.

Spence and O'Connor shared a desire to remake British society. (Spence was a major thinker in the latter 18th century. He viewed the land as belonging to everyone, not just the landlords because, according to him, the land was the people's farm.) However, while O'Connor sought to reform part of society, Spence wanted to totally redesign society and government. Spence's plan was comprised of two major parts: land nationalization and local government at the parish level. Spence believed England would benefit if everyone returned to a simpler life on the land. He also thought agricultural

⁴⁰Hill, p. 85.

⁴¹*The Labourer*, vol. 1 (1846), p. 154.

interests should supersede commercial interests.⁴² Each parish would be organized as a business--some men would act as executive officers while others farmed. The goal of each parish was to produce a good standard of living for each member and distribute profits among all. In Spence's utopia each parish would acknowledge an English central government but the central authority in daily life would be the parish corporation.⁴³

Spence shied away from private ownership because he believed it was unjustifiable.⁴⁴ Privatization forced men to compete against each other, and while some won, many lost. The losers would then fail to reap the benefits of their work which Spence believed should be the foundation of agricultural society. Spence also recognized that economic and political powers were tied to land ownership. O'Connor accepted this as well. Since land gave status, working class landowners would benefit not only economically but politically. Additionally, the law in Britain bestowed voting privileges on landowners. O'Connor tried to illustrate that land ownership gave one political power: "Land becomes political power,"⁴⁵ and "Consider: land equals power, which equals the vote."⁴⁶ Once again, O'Connor tied land agitation to the desire for Chartist political reform. Rather than being landless wage workers, they could establish respectability

⁴²Olive Durant Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and His Connections* (New York: A. M. Kelley, originally published 1927, reprinted 1966), p. 164.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁵*N. S.*, August 1, 1846

⁴⁶*N. S.*, June 7, 1845.

through hard work and their success as farmers. In fact, O'Connor believed that a small demonstration of the land's value would decisively confirm the working class's respectability.⁴⁷

I believe in my conscience that the establishment of one home colony consisting of thirty independent small farmers would present to your minds the miniature of that great evolution which at any given moment you are capable of producing without reference to or dependable upon the will, the policy or the caprice of your rulers.⁴⁸

The idea that each man should control his own production and that Britain's wealth should be dispersed is perhaps Spence's greatest contribution to radicalism and to the beliefs of O'Connor. However, in Spence's acceptance of communal ownership he stood in contradiction to O'Connor and in agreement with another Chartist land reformer, Bronterre O'Brien.

Bronterre O'Brien, whom O'Connor had once called the "schoolmaster of Chartism" for his intellect, was violently opposed to the Land Plan because he thought the creation of a petty agricultural class would destroy Chartism. He went so far as to propose his own scheme to nationalize the land in Britain and distribute it to the people. This plan called for the government to slowly purchase land as it came on the market, then to parcel it out freely to interested parties.⁴⁹ However, this land was to be given for use and not ownership. The government would retain the rights to the land. O'Brien's theory about

⁴⁷N. S., June 7, 1845.

⁴⁸N. S., May 31, 1845.

⁴⁹Alfred Plummer, *Bronterre: A Political Biography of Bronterre O'Brien 1804-1864* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), pp. 183-184.

land ownership was totally opposed to O'Connor's. O'Brien believed it was necessary to "get down to bedrock and work from the proposition that there should not be and should never have been private ownership of land."⁵⁰ O'Connor believed the only way to properly utilize the land was through private ownership because only private ownership could supply the incentive for a man to improve his property.

O'Brien led the Chartist opposition to O'Connor's plan because he thought that if O'Connor was successful in creating a class of petty capitalists they would forget the struggle for political rights and join the conservatives in upholding the status quo. O'Brien also feared that the Land Plan would draw funds away from Chartism's political goals.⁵¹ Because O'Brien had a longstanding feud with O'Connor one wonders whether O'Brien's opposition was not directed against O'Connor primarily for personal reasons. (A reading of O'Connor's *Northern Star* and Bronterre's *National Reformer* reveals that by 1839 these Chartist leaders were diametrically opposed. The Land Plan was simply another issue to divide them.)

O'Connor was not the only land reformer who advocated private holdings. William Cobbett was a journalist and reformer who published the "Political Register." Cobbett attacked Britain's oligarchic government and felt the way to relieve economic stress and the depressed condition of Britain was to return to an agricultural world where each man owned and worked his own land. William Cobbett was a firm believer in small private holdings as the only path to economic and personal expansion. Cobbett also believed that

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 180.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 187.

the individual owed a responsibility to society paid by helping his fellow man in times of distress. Although O'Connor accepted this, he and Cobbett differed in the scope of their plans. O'Connor's goals were less sweeping if not less radical. Cobbett believed that all Englishmen would be better supplied if everyone owned and worked a piece of land. Cobbett's radical agrarianism was not motivated by a fear or dislike of an industrialized Britain but by what he believed was the natural employment of man as ordained by God. At one point he stated:

We are all . . . deserters from the plow. God said to mankind this is ground, these are plows, use the latter on the former and bread and meat and flax and wool and leather and wood shall come, and you shall eat, drink, be clad and lodged.⁵²

O'Connor was more realistic in his acceptance of the emerging industrial world. He merely sought the co-existence of agriculture and industry, while Cobbett wanted to exchange the industrial world for an agrarian one.⁵³

Another contemporaneous land society was the Freehold Land Movement (F.L.M.).⁵⁴ It attempted to create voters by placing men on 40s. freeholds, thus qualifying them for the vote. As the Land Plan was formed many hoped it would fill this function for the working class, but later it was discovered that allotments did not constitute freeholds. Even so, the Land Plan did share many ideas with other freehold land groups, including the ethic of self-help. The F.L.M., as well as the Land Plan, sought to elevate the working

⁵²Alun Hawkins, "Deserters from the Plough" History Today, 43 (Feb. 1993), pp. 32-38.

⁵³Hollis, pp. 135-137.

⁵⁴Malcolm Chase, "Out of Radicalism: The Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement" English Historical Review, CVI (April 1991), pp. 319-345.

class and establish its respectability by thrift and hard work, which would culminate in home ownership.

Yet the Freehold Land Movement went farther than the Land Plan in its attempts to create voters and relieve pressure on urban centers. Some F.L.M. societies sought to distance themselves from O'Connor's Land Plan as it fell apart, fearing they would be caught its downfall. The F.L.M. learned the importance of careful planning, class cooperation, local organization, and limited goals from the failure of the Land Plan.⁵⁵

The Land Plan definitely fit into the stream of radical agrarianism. Its foundation was drawn from the longstanding desire for land that the common people felt was their right. It combined this desire with the reality of a new industrial England. Additionally, it served as a learning tool for future land reformers. The Land Plan both drew from and altered radical agrarianism.

4. Cooperation and the Land Plan

Besides political and agrarian radicalism, a third concept the Land Plan drew from was cooperation, which was the key to the initial success of the Land Plan. As it developed in early nineteenth century Britain cooperation provided an escape for the working class from the harsh world of cut-throat competition under capitalism. Since no one from the working class could amass enough capital to establish a business or buy land to farm, the capitalist system had excluded most people from property ownership and subsequently from the enjoyment of the fruits of their labor. Cooperation allowed many

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 345.

individuals to invest together and work toward a common goal. Cooperation became a major part of working class radicalism by proposing that labor could compete with capitalism only if it worked as a class to ameliorate its circumstances.⁵⁶ It presented an alternative to socialism or centralized common ownership. The cooperative principle did help tangibly as the Land Plan and mutual aid societies illustrate, but it also helped establish solidarity among the working class, its greatest achievement.

In attempting to shape a new moral world, Owen used the idea of cooperation as an ideal to which man should strive. He abhorred the idea that man should prey upon his fellow man through competition. He believed that capitalists stripped laborers of the fruits of their work through profit, and he sought to end this system. Owen believed cooperation would promote harmony and working together for the common good. To illustrate the benefits of his system, he established model communities to serve as examples. Owen greatly influenced O'Connor, who also set up the Land Plan's communities as models, enclaves where the cooperative principle was to be the guiding force.

The cooperative principle was not exclusive to Robert Owen. In fact, the largest cooperative union was the Rochdale Cooperative Store. Founded in 1844 by leading workers in the city of Rochdale, it was an effort to operate a general store by and for the working class.⁵⁷ The store offered more than discount prices and profit; it was a way for the working class to assert itself as respectable petty capitalists. The rules of the Rochdale

⁵⁶J. F. C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World; Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1969), p. 200.

⁵⁷G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Cooperation* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1944), p. 59.

Cooperative reveal that there were no restrictions or qualifications on who could join; each member received one vote to determine the store's policies and procedures. These points illustrate the democratic nature of the cooperative. Furthermore, the cooperative was to be run profitably, and like any other business it would distribute the profits evenly among its members. But the cooperative also endeavored to improve the community by pledging to sell only unadulterated goods and by promising to educate others about the value of cooperation.⁵⁸ The Rochdale Cooperative has since evolved into a successful national chain.

O'Connor drew on this idea of cooperation, using it as the focus of his Land Plan. "Cooperation is the great lever by which the political Archimedes is lifting the dead weight of slavery into the light of freedom."⁵⁹ With this statement O'Connor tied together hope for the land and hope for the Charter: through collective non-violent pressure the Charter could be gained; through cooperation the land could be obtained.

Cooperation would aid the Land Plan in three significant ways. First, the cooperation of thousands of working men sending in small contributions would raise the considerable amount of capital necessary to purchase an estate. The Land Plan considered an estate to be a large piece of land subdivided into several allotments. An allotment was an individual small holding of between two to four acres which would be given to individual allottees who held shares in the Land Company. To buy land, build houses, and provide the necessary start-up money for farming would cost over £80 per allotment,

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 64.

⁵⁹*The Labourer*, vol. 2 (1847), p. 141.

while the cost of each share was £1 5s. With this system many would have to join before the company could get off the ground.

Cooperation would then allow the Land Plan to raise the initial capital required to purchase land and settle the first families. It would also influence the Land Plan through the cooperative spirit that would pervade each community. While O'Connor believed in private ownership and hard work for self-improvement, he also believed in friendly competition, basically a system of mutual aid. Each man could work for his own profit, but in times of hardship, he would be responsible for helping his fellow allottees for the good of the whole community.

Clearly, the Land Plan drew from the British tradition of dissent and radical politics in forming its ideology. From Feargus O'Connor came radical demands for change coupled with his boundless energy as a platform speaker. From Chartism came the Land Plan's organization and main base of support, although the Plan also interested many who formerly had not been Chartists; in this way, the Land Plan directly strengthened Chartism. From radical agrarianism came the belief that the land was the people's inheritance, and while it did not support the leftist view that all land should be nationalized or held in communal tenure, it did embrace the more moderate if less popular view that the land should be owned by small proprietors. From cooperation came the idea that only by mutual help could the working class change its plight. Thus, the Land Plan was set in a tradition of radicalism. It was not an aberration from radicalism because radicalism provided the foundation on which the Land Plan was built.

Chapter Two: The Genesis of the Land Plan

1. The Land Plan and Capitalism

The Land Plan offered hope to the working class. The plan's goal was to create an environment which would allow the working class the chance to become petty capitalists. The Plan was not conceived to be a rejection or overthrow of capitalism. O'Connor sought to raise the status of the working class, not by bringing others in society down, but by elevating the working class to the rank of middle class by land ownership. He did not abhor capitalism and industrialization. What he hated was the unequal distribution of wealth and the attendant powerlessness the working class experienced. In O'Connor's mind the elevation of the working class would benefit not only the worker but the entire British economy and society.

In order to excite the working class to join his Plan O'Connor used the theme of class antagonism. In an effort to bind together the workers who would join the Land Company he played upon the differences between those who had wealth and those who did not. O'Connor believed that class antagonism was not a platform to attack the wealthy but a spur for the working class to join hands and work together to lift up themselves. Furthermore, he urged his followers to recognize that the old world of deference and paternalism was out-dated, and that in the nineteenth century everyone needed to fight to secure his place.

Since Henry VIII (the) artificial system of competition has split labor and owners. In the past, labor was tied with master; now labor must

demand its own political rights for no one else will.¹

In this quote O'Connor outlined his thoughts on labor. Like Owen, he viewed competition as a negative that tore people apart and created classes. O'Connor felt the workers needed to assert themselves and break the exploitative power of the capitalists.

At the Chartist conference of 1843 where the Land Plan was adopted, O'Connor declared, "The only way for labor to compete with capitalism is by land."² In "A Practical Guide to Management of Small Farms" he stated, "The system does not present equal opportunity to all," and "Other classes live off the working class so the working class has a right to this (the land)."³ This theme of class struggle and exploitation was a favorite of O'Connor's and a large part of his radical program. This harsh line separated O'Connor from middle class reformers for he insisted that the working class must end their petty divisions and work together, for improvement could only come from the working class's efforts.⁴

O'Connor sought not to repudiate capitalism as much as to create a class of petty capitalists so the working class could enjoy the fruits of their labor and share in the progress of industrial Britain.

In fact, a man with a spade and a hut to cover him and as much land as he can cultivate by his own industry is a capitalist capable of discounting

¹Feargus O'Connor, "A Practical Guide for the Management of Small Farms," (1843), p. 131.

²*The Northern Star*, April 26, 1845.

³"A Practical Guide," p. 136.

⁴*The Labourer*, vol. 1, (1847), p. 189.

his health and strength as a means of independence.⁵

With this statement, O'Connor illustrated the core of his plan, which was to create a new type of agricultural petty capitalist to exist alongside industrial capitalists. A petty capitalist was a small farmer of two to four acres who fully controlled his own labor and produce. Petty describes the size of the farm and the size of the labor force--the farmer and his family worked the land without outside help. Subsequently, each farmer gained independence and control and the opportunity to profit from the sale of surplus produce.

O'Connor modified capitalist ideas to allow the working class to participate in capitalism and to establish their respectability as a precondition to securing political rights. O'Connor chose the land as the vehicle of redemption because it represented a basic longing of many. It would allow independence because a man could grow his own food and obtain the land cheaply.

In *The Labourer* O'Connor wrote that much of the land was in the "raw state." Once labor was applied to it, the land would be improved for the good of all. He also said he believed that agricultural advances would continually be made and that in ten years agriculture would be vastly different.⁶ O'Connor believed the land would be easy to purchase since it was in the "raw state."⁷ He could buy waste or marginally usable land and through the hard work of many raise the value of each holding.

⁵"A Practical Guide," p. 45. By discounting O'Connor meant the desire of a man to spend his health and energy to make a living for himself and his family.

⁶*The Labourer*, vol. 1 (1846), p. 154.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 154.

Secondly, O'Connor believed redemption of the land would aid not only the working class but all British consumers. Once marginally usable land was improved and made profitable, the agricultural production of Britain would increase, causing a fall in prices. This was O'Connor's way to deal with high prices and scarcity.

Land, if cultivated properly, could support the working class. It will give independence and employment for everyone in England and can produce enough corn and wheat for everyone.⁸

O'Connor believed that his system would enable the land to support 150 million people.⁹

Yet how was the Land Plan to accomplish these lofty goals?

By privately owned small holdings. As mentioned earlier, O'Connor believed private ownership would provide the incentive to succeed that communal ownership could not.¹⁰ This is a crucial point--it illustrates how O'Connor, while criticizing the competitive environment, embraced the idea of private property. In *The Labourer* he said,

Communism is not good for all would want common property at the same time. Cooperation will let each help when another needs it. He (O'Connor) is for the system of mine and thine tempered with the cooperative spirit.¹¹

The Land Plan was a hybrid which attempted to combine the incentive for success inherent in capitalism with the belief that all men should work together to achieve individual and group goals.

⁸Ibid., p. 154.

⁹Ibid., vol. 4 (1848), p. 269.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 286.

¹¹Ibid., vol. 1 (1846), p. 154.

Besides the idea of private property other major tenets of middle class capitalist ideology contributed to the foundation of the Land Plan. One of these tenets was the belief in progress, supported by the tremendous number of technical improvements made since the turn of the nineteenth century. This progressive spirit pervaded all aspects of life including the building of better societies such as Robert Owen's New Lanark. O'Connor also sensed this spirit of progress. He believed that nothing could stop the progression of the working class from an abused group toward a group with full participation in the new political, social and economic landscape of Britain. "But the spirit of progress and improvement is abroad and none can set bounds to its march."¹²

Another core belief of O'Connor's was the value of self-help. Each new allottee could improve his own life by applying himself to working the land. As each allottee improved his holdings the value of the estate would rise, thereby helping every member of the Land Plan get his chance for land through the use of replication discussed below. O'Connor's thoughts are echoed by Samuel Smiles, the Victorian proponent of self-help. Smiles believed that government's only responsibility was to insure freedom for an individual to succeed on his own. Smiles thought that the value of a civilization depended on the character of its people and their dedication to individual industry and energy. Government aid was enfeebling. The working class could only expect to prosper by leveling themselves up instead of leveling others down.¹³

¹²Ibid., vol. 3 (1848), p. 18.

¹³J. F. C. Harrison, *Society and Politics: A Selection of Readings and Comments* (New York: Harper Row, 1965), pp. 211-214.

One way a man could help himself was by practicing thrift. While most of the working class owned little, O'Connor believed their money could be spent more wisely. He recommended that each man either reduce or abstain from beer consumption so that the money ordinarily spent there could be applied toward joining the Land Plan.¹⁴ O'Connor was not advocating total abstinence but thrift. He felt too much money was wasted in taverns when it could be invested. Additionally, the restraint that each would enforce on himself would add to the respectable image O'Connor desired to create.

As discussed earlier, competition for O'Connor was a destructive force. To temper competition for markets and production on the estates, O'Connor originated the idea of friendly competition.¹⁵ This is a somewhat nebulous concept which counted on the goodwill of each allottee for its success. Basically, O'Connor wanted each allottee to push himself to improve his estate and be successful but he did not want this success at the expense of the fellow allottees. The estates were to be models of what the working class could achieve. If one allottee were to fall on hard times the others were to support him financially, work his land in his sickness, or help in any other way to succeed through his troubles. O'Connor desired the freedom and personal rewards of private ownership, but he also wanted to control competition by class cooperation and a sense of responsibility among the allottees.

O'Connor also criticized and sought to revise the need for large capital outlay to participate in socialism. The initial outlay to build a mine, start a factory or cultivate a

¹⁴N. S., May 8, 1847.

¹⁵*The Labourer*, vol. 1 (1846), p. 154.

large farm was beyond the wildest hopes of any working man. O'Connor's system of small farms was the answer to this problem.¹⁶ Yet the cost of starting a farm even on O'Connor's small scale was prohibitive, which is why O'Connor used cooperation to gain the capital necessary to begin his land company.

Another criticism of the capitalist system O'Connor made was in its use of large machines. He believed that machines degraded the working class and denied them the status as producers they deserved. Therefore, O'Connor did not advocate the use of machines on the estates for either farming or manufacture. This stance on machines for O'Connor extended to the use of the plow. There were two main reasons O'Connor did not like the plow.

First, he believed that the plow increased the cost of starting a farm. A plow necessitated the use of horses or oxen to pull the plow which increased the cost of upkeep. Secondly, for the plow to be efficient it required the use of much land to cultivate. Therefore, O'Connor advocated the use of the spade over the plow. The spade required no special upkeep and was easily obtainable. Furthermore, O'Connor, who had used the spade on his family's estates, believed that it could outproduce the plow by three times.¹⁷

Another benefit of the spade for O'Connor was that it would allow more men to participate in agriculture because each spade worked less land than each plow. O'Connor was not alone in his advocacy of the spade. In fact, much of his thought was drawn from a

¹⁶Feergus O'Connor, "The Land: the Only Remedy for the Prevention of Poverty and Impending National Ruin" (1843), p. 10.

¹⁷British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter B. P. P.), Select Committee on the National Land Plan (1848), vol. 19, p. 171.

farmer named John Sillett who was successful on his farm by using the spade.¹⁸

To some degree O'Connor's stance on plows and machines are antithetical to his ideas concerning progress. Perhaps it even highlights his ignorance of the plow and the produce it could yield. However, O'Connor was advocating a system of farms, the largest of which was four acres. A plow would not be feasible to operate under these conditions. O'Connor also wanted to limit the investment put into each estate, therefore, upkeep for animals for the plow was also prohibitive. If O'Connor was intending solely to increase the agricultural output of Britain then his spade advocacy would be questionable. However, O'Connor was attempting to create an outlet for surplus labor and limit the investment required to give the working class the land. Under these conditions his desire for the spade can be understood.

O'Connor wanted above all to give the working class a prominent role as producers and consumers in society. He did not seek to replace an industrial society with an agricultural one. In fact, he declared, "Of all things I wish to guard myself against the idea that I expect anything like a complete observance of my plan."¹⁹ He did not advocate a complete return to the land nor advocate the overthrow of capitalistic individualism and its replacement by socialism. What he wanted was a system that worked for all. Once the worth of the working class was proven economically, then perhaps their worth politically would be recognized and the points of the Charter granted.

¹⁸Sillett was a small farmer who authored a popular pamphlet on farming techniques entitled "A System of Spade Husbandry."

¹⁹"A Practical Guide," p. 159.

2. The Land Plan and Chartism

From its inception until now the Land Plan has been criticized on the ground that its success would obviate the desire for other political reforms. A letter to *The Northern Star* in May 1845 made two complaints. "The Land Plan would draw activism away from the Charter and once people were in comfort they would have no desire for the Charter."²⁰ However, to view the Land Plan in this light is to misunderstand its true purpose. Instead of repudiating political reform, the Land Plan embraced it and strengthened Chartism by proposing social reform to accompany political reform. Chartism had tried the platform, strikes and petitions to secure the vote; all had failed. The Land Plan represented a shift in methods to the idea of self-help and cooperation.²¹ Several times in *The Star* O'Connor explained the respective rules of political and social reform.

At other times O'Connor reiterated this same point. "The Charter is no good without the land"²²; "Without the Land Plan Chartism would be dead"²³; "The Land and the Charter both are important."²⁴

Even Ernest Jones, the poet of Chartism, wrote in his poem "Factory Town":

Up in one united band,
Both farming-slave and factory martyr!
Remember that to keep the land,

²⁰*N. S.*, May 24, 1845.

²¹D. Thompson, p. 306.

²²*N. S.*, February 7, 1846.

²³*N. S.*, March 21, 1846.

²⁴*N. S.*, December 25, 1847.

The best way is to gain the Charter!²⁵

In O'Connor's mind no separation existed between activism for the land and activism for the Charter. Yet how, specifically, was the Land Plan to aid Chartism? O'Connor believed the land served two important purposes: first, it gave the working man the chance to be free of capitalists and secondly, it would help the Charter become law speedily.²⁶

O'Connor believed that political reform would benefit the working class only peripherally without a solid society to permit them to share in the benefits of their labor. In a pamphlet entitled "The Land: The Only Remedy for National Poverty and Impending National Ruin: How to Get it and How to Keep it" (1843) O'Connor expressed contempt for all political reform that did not have a social objective. If the land was locked up and unobtainable, O'Connor declared, he would not "give a fig for the Charter."²⁷ By this statement O'Connor showed the importance he placed on social reform to accompany the political. He felt that the Charter would not help the working class as long as they were shackled by subsistence wages and little economic hope. Therefore, O'Connor believed the land and the Charter represented two equal attempts to secure economic and political freedom for the working class. In January 1847 O'Connor stated that the real goal was to obtain the people's Charter.²⁸ He further called for four million signatures for the third

²⁵*The Labourer*, vol. 2 (1847), p. 78.

²⁶*N. S.*, May 3, 1845.

²⁷"The Land: The Only Remedy," p. 11.

²⁸*N. S.*, January 16, 1847.

petition. Later that year in February he declared that when he finished preparing the O'Connorville estate for settlement that he would start a tour of the third petition.²⁹ Even when the Land Plan was enjoying its greatest success, O'Connor was still mindful of the importance of passing the Charter.

Another way the Land Plan would aid Chartism was by the fact that land constituted political power. It was no coincidence that members of Parliament and ministers were usually among the landed classes. However, O'Connor wanted these offices to be open to the working class. "The land possessed, the allottees will want political power."³⁰ Instead of being satisfied and losing interest in further reform, the new landowners would clamor for more reforms.

In late 1847 and in early 1848 O'Connor spent less time agitating for the land and more time promoting the third Chartist petition, believing the Land Plan would raise support for the petition. He boasted in 1848 that the third petition would have five million signatures while the petition of 1842 contained only three million. O'Connor attributed the extra two million to the fact that some were attracted to Chartism because of the land, a view corroborated by a Leeds paper: "Many will join the Land Plan who are not Chartist members."³¹ This is exactly what O'Connor wanted--to use the land agitation to bolster Chartism and use Chartism to bolster land reform so that both goals would be reached.

Generally, the Land Plan strengthened Chartism nationally by infusing it with new

²⁹N. S., February 27, 1847.

³⁰N. S., February 7, 1846.

³¹N. S., May 31, 1845.

life. Dorothy Thompson believed that the Land Plan helped hold together later Chartism when it had a tendency to split into separate agitations, an opinion O'Connor shared.³² In 1847 he claimed "that since the Land convention in 1845, unbroken harmony prevailed" and that except for the land, the Chartist movement would be confined to ideologies.³³ This was not altogether true--leading Chartists did attack O'Connor's plan, but by and large, the rank and file Chartists accepted the Plan with O'Connor as its head, evidenced by the fact that 70,000 joined the company.³⁴

In 1845 O'Connor spoke at a meeting of the local Chartist and Land Plan group in Middleton and hailed the gathering as the resurrection of Chartism. *The Star* reported that the meeting hall was full but could have been filled if it were seven times larger. However, *The Star* did not indicate the size of the hall. At this meeting those present promised never to abandon the land or the Charter because they were the only means to be free.³⁵ Finally in December 1846 O'Connor explained his views on the Land Plan's success. He wrote that in the past Chartism suffered during good economic times due to a reduction of pressure on the working class, but that now with the Land Plan people could buy shares and maintain their interest in political reform.³⁶

So the Land Plan provided a stable social alternative and strengthened the Chartist

³²D. Thompson, p. 303.

³³*N. S.*, January 16, 1847.

³⁴*B. P. P.*, p. 299.

³⁵*N. S.*, August 23, 1845.

³⁶*N. S.*, December 19, 1846.

movement when it was losing cohesion after the defeats of 1839 and 1842. The Land Plan infused Chartism with a new life and made possible the third petition of 1848.

3. The Mechanics of the Land Plan

O'Connor often outlined the goals of the Land Plan from both the platform and in the pages of *The Star*. At times the emphasis he placed on each shifted; however, each goal was complementary to every other goal. The two most important aims of the Land Plan were to first bestow economic independence so that each man could provide well for his family "that each may be independent of everyone for his daily bread" and to secure a standard for judging wages in the artificial market of factory labor.³⁷ "(The) object of the Land Plan is to locate members on land where working classes may be afforded an opportunity of judging the real value of their labor in a free market."³⁸

O'Connor believed that Britain contained a labor surplus which drove down wages because the supply of workers was greater than the demand. This he termed the artificial market because the working class had little alternative to industrial work and no control over its wages. O'Connor designed the Land Plan to provide the working class with a choice to pursue either agricultural or industrial labor. O'Connor believed many would leave the factories to work the land. This would draw off excess labor so that the wages of those who remained in the factory would increase. O'Connor was proud that his plan

³⁷"A Practical Guide," p. 5.

³⁸*N. S.*, December 13, 1846.

offered a choice that had not previously existed.³⁹ By no means did he want everyone to embrace land ownership because he believed Britain's progress depended on both agriculture and industry.

In his "A Practical Guide for the Management of Small Farms" O'Connor listed the Land Plan's goals:

- 1) To create certainty in the labor market,
- 2) To give a standard whereby labor can be judged in the artificial market
- 3) So that men can be hired at a good (real) wage.
- 4) To prevent capitalism from flooding the market with cheap goods
obtained by low wages
- 5) So Parliament will make laws for the promotion of morality,
- 6) To do away with taxes,
- 7) To give self-respect to the working class,
- 8) To let the people do for themselves, thereby destroying the power of the
demagogue.⁴⁰

These goals are the basis for O'Connor's dreams for the working class. He wanted to provide the working class with the opportunity to secure fair wages. He also sought respectability and self-reliance for the working class. O'Connor also expected the working class to use their new-found economic freedoms to secure political reform.

How was the Land Plan to reach its multiple goals? The Land Plan promised everyone two, three or four acres with a house and aid money to help a family get started. All this money was to come from subscribers who would join the company by buying shares. Each share cost £1 5s. and one could purchase shares in denominations of two, three or four. Therefore, if a person paid £2 10s. he would receive two shares in the

³⁹"A Practical Guide," p. 9.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 149.

company and be eligible for a two-acre allotment on an estate. Likewise, three shares represented three acres and four shares four acres. The amount of shares one could purchase was unlimited, therefore, one could purchase ten two-share amounts and increase his chance to gain an allotment.⁴¹ Additionally, one had the option to pay his subscription in installments or in full. The company was divided into sections based upon the date a subscriber joined by sending in his share payment. When the directors thought a sufficient number had joined a section destined for a particular estate they closed that section to new subscribers and opened another. (There was never any select number required to close an estate. It was an arbitrary decision by the directors.) They did this for ease of operation and to limit the number of subscribers eligible for any one estate. Originally, O'Connor had wanted only four sections, but due to the people's interest he was persuaded to add a fifth section in 1847.⁴² Again in 1848 after the company ceased taking new subscribers O'Connor started a second land company for those who did not have the opportunity to join the first.⁴³

Once the company received sufficient money to buy a piece of land the directors began looking for a suitable place to establish an estate. When the land was purchased, the company got the estate ready for the location of the subscribers. (Since the first sections contained fewer subscribers there was less money to invest in the estate, therefore, the first estates were smaller than the later ones, which received more subscribers due to the

⁴¹B. P. P., p. 10.

⁴²N. S., August 21, 1847.

⁴³N. S., January 8, 1848.

company's apparent success.) Much work went into preparing an estate. First the land had to be divided into holdings. Since most of the subscribers bought two shares, the majority of holdings were two acres, though there were three and four acre allotments. Once again, there was no set formula for dividing up the land; the decision was left to the directors. Once this was completed, the land had to be cleared, crops planted and houses built. As work progressed, the company had to decide who, of all the subscribers, would receive an allotment.

The ballot was the first method the company used to determine who would get the land. At this time, the names of all paid subscribers in one section were put in one barrel, and the number of allotments were signified by the word "prize" and put in another barrel, along with extra blank slips of paper. A drawer would pick a name, call it aloud, then pick a slip from the other barrel. If the word "prize" was drawn that man won a parcel of land. If a blank was drawn he won nothing and the process was repeated until all the prizes were awarded.⁴⁴ The ballot entitled the winner to the land (two to four acres), a house and aid money to begin farming. However, the land did not belong to the allottee but to the company. The allottee was to receive a permanent lease which meant he could not be thrown off the land at the whim of the owner. However, the allottee did have to pay a yearly charge to remain in good favor and keep his lease. This was termed "rent charge" which was unfair due to the connotation of the word "rent." However, this charge was necessary because of the company's need for money to locate other members. The allottee had the option of buying his land outright from the company. He would own the land

⁴⁴B. P. P., p. 107.

solely and the company would gain capital to locate others. Since the company did own the land, they had full rights to mortgage the estates in order to raise more capital. This was O'Connor's first plan to increase capital and was called replication.

Once the estate was ready for the allottees the company would sponsor a huge fair at the estate. This was a time of great excitement and was called "Location Day." Location Day became an occasion for joyous day-long celebrations to congratulate the new landholders and prepare them for what lay ahead. O'Connor reminded them that they owed a debt to those who, while not lucky in the ballot, had sacrificed just as much as the winners had. Now that the allottees had their land, the real challenge came. Now they had to improve the estates to replicate the money used to locate themselves.

Chapter Three: The History of the Land Plan--Its Rise and Fall

1. 1845-1846

The rules of the Land Plan were formally adopted during the Chartist conference of 1845 in London.¹ The Land Plan enjoyed the success it did because many Chartist leaders and most of its followers saw in it a new hope. At this meeting the rules of operation were formulated and an executive council was established. Its officers included Feargus O'Connor, Thomas Clark, P. McGrath, C. Doyle, and T. M. Wheeler.² Once the mechanics of the Plan were set, O'Connor and the other executives started spreading the message of the Land Plan both in speeches and in the pages of *The Northern Star*.

The Land Company's early existence was marked by its leaders' abundant enthusiasm, which soon infected the working class. This enthusiasm flowed from two things: first from the fact that Chartism, which appeared to be in decline, was now on the move again. It had a definite objective--to obtain the land--and once again enormous crowds converged to hear the Chartist orators. Secondly, the hoped-for land was now within reach, and according to O'Connor, expected to provide a cornucopia beyond one's wildest dreams.

O'Connor understood the challenges posed by implementing the Land Company, yet he realized that excitement and hope were vital to its continued success. He fed this

¹*The Northern Star*, August 23, 1845.

²R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement 1837-1854* (London: Merlin Press, originally published 1894, reprinted 1976), p. 250.

excitement by reminding the people of their lost right to the land.

The land is the people's inheritance, and kings, princes, peers, nobles, priests and commoners who have stolen it from them hold it upon the title of popular ignorance rather than upon any right, human or divine.³

He also proposed that Parliament repeal the enclosure acts that deprived men of the land and called for money to be allocated to help locate people on the land.⁴ The whole goal of the Land Company was to restore a lost right, and few things can bind together a group or so motivate them to extremes of action than the feeling that they have been cheated or oppressed. O'Connor hoped a shared sense of oppression would bind together the working class so that they could obtain the land. The camaraderie that the Land Plan established was its lasting monument to working class radicalism.

O'Connor also enhanced the excitement with detailed predictions of what the land would produce. On January 30, 1847, he listed for his *Star* readers his predictions. Although his letter was addressed to the Plymouth shopkeepers it was intended for anyone considering investing in the Land Company. O'Connor predicted that if his instructions were followed, a four-acre farm could produce 15 tons of potatoes, 200 stones of wheat, fodder for cows, flax and enough vegetables for the family for one year.⁵

O'Connor then estimated what percentage of the produce would be consumed by the family and used for the upkeep of the farm. Cows would eat two tons of potatoes. The family would eat one and a half tons and the four pigs would consume eight tons. This

³N. S., May 24, 1845.

⁴N. S., May 31, 1845.

⁵N. S., January 30, 1847.

would leave three and a half tons to be sold at a profit. In addition to this sale, the family would have cow's milk for itself as well as for the market. At one time, O'Connor reported that Rebecca, the Chartist cow, produced 28 quarts of milk per day in summer and eight quarts daily in winter.⁶ The family would also have vegetables and the bacon from four pigs. This enthusiasm helped convince the subscribers of the Plan's feasibility.

O'Connor still was not finished calculating. He wanted to convince the English people that his plan would work. His discussion next moved to economic concerns. If this were the produce, how profitable would it be? The following chart shows the projected expenses and income for each family.

TABLE 1: Estimates of Produce and Expenses for a Small Farm

<u>INCOME:</u>	<u>Pounds</u>	<u>Shillings</u>	
Milk	36	10	
Pigs	20	--	
Wheat	7	10	
Potash	14	--	
Flax	12	10	
Fruit / Vegetables	5	--	
SUB-TOTAL	95	10	
<u>EXPENSES:</u>	<u>Pounds</u>	<u>Shillings</u>	
Rent	13	10	
Hay	8	--	
Clothing	15	--	
Fuel	8	--	
Pigs	6	--	
Implements	10	--	
SUB-TOTAL	51	10	76
TOTAL SURPLUS	44	0	0

⁶N. S., February 13, 1847.

A family would earn £95 10s. and spend £51 10s., resulting in a surplus of £44 for one year's work.⁷

Compared to what most of the working class was earning this figure represented a very good earning for a year's work. O'Connor concluded his exposition with two statements that made life on the farm seem even sweeter. First, he said that these were low estimates. Someone who worked harder, received better land, or was knowledgeable about farming would likely produce much more than these estimates. Secondly, O'Connor said that to accomplish these goals a man had to work only 157 days a year, far fewer days than the average factory employee worked in a year.⁸ Additionally, this work could be performed at one's own leisure, outdoors rather than in a mine or a dirty factory, and the worker would not have to live in a slum. He could live on his own farm for only a £5 initial investment.

O'Connor addressed the feasibility of the Plan with great thoroughness. He had to convince people to send in their money, and the ones he was appealing to had little money to send. O'Connor had to persuade them that the benefits of the land would far outweigh their hard-earned investment. O'Connor believed this was not a question of whether one would receive the land, but when he would receive the land.

A good method of gauging popular support for the Land Plan is by noting the amount of money subscribed to join the company and purchase shares. *The Northern Star* reported subscriptions in monthly intervals. In 1846 the subscriptions ranged from £115 in

⁷N. S., January 30, 1847.

⁸N. S., January 8, 1848.

January to £470 in December. July peaked at £475, the highest for that year since the share price had to be paid for a subscriber to be eligible for the ballot.⁹ This pattern repeated itself during the life of the Land Company. Whenever a ballot was approaching, people rushed to pay off their shares. The Land Company generated enough excitement to maintain an adequate number of subscriptions. As 1847 began excitement was still building.

2. 1847

For several reasons 1847 was a year of great activity for the Land Company. Most importantly, people took possession of their allotments on the first estate at O'Connorville near Rickmansworth in Herefordshire on May 1.¹⁰ Secondly, land for two other estates, Lowbands near Redmarly in Worcestershire and Snigs End near Staunton in Gloucestershire, were divided into allotments and preparation for location was begun.¹¹ Thirdly, the purchase of another estate, Minster Lovell, near Oxford, was completed.¹² Finally, at the start of the year the Land Bank was established to help provide more money for the Land Plan. (The Land Bank was outlined in *The Northern Star* in January 2, 1847 and will be discussed later.) In August a land conference was held at the second estate,

⁹N. S., subscription lists for 1845-46.

¹⁰Louise Jebb, *The Small Holdings of England: A Survey of Various Existing Systems* (London: John Murray, 1907), p. 140.

¹¹Ibid., p. 137.

¹²Ibid., p. 124.

Lowbands, which further detailed company operations. All this activity, coupled with the vast amounts of money subscribed, made 1847 the high water mark of the Land Company.

The most exciting event of the year was the location of the first allottees at O'Connorville. In a speech to open the estate, O'Connor declared that for a long time much had been promised to the working class and that finally through the Land Plan all their hopes would be fulfilled. He also gave an added incentive to succeed by promising a bonus of £7 to the man who fared best on his allotment the next year.¹³ The decision would be based on the farm's output and on the degree of love and devotion each allottee showed his family. O'Connor was interested not only in economic production but also in the creation of blissful families.

With the assumption of this estate the Land Plan's future seemed secure. Accordingly, more people joined the company. The subscriptions soared as people's confidence soared. Each month's level was higher than any month in 1846 with the exception of January, subscriptions peaked at £2,415 in July and £1,948 in August. Seeing the apparent success at O'Connorville, people wanted to be a part of the Plan, and subscriptions climbed to between £500 and £700 weekly.¹⁴

3. 1848

1848 started as 1847 had ended--with excitement and great activity. By June, however, the Land Company's weaknesses were evident. The first blow came with the

¹³N. S., May 1, 1847.

¹⁴N. S., subscription lists for 1847.

Parliamentary Select Committee hearings, summoned to determine the legality and feasibility of the Land Company. The second blow came from the allottees who did not pay their rent charge. With these two developments some subscribers began to lose faith in the promise of land.

In May 1848 O'Connor petitioned Parliament for a special act to legalize his company as a friendly society. This request was denied, but a Select Committee was empowered to study the Land Company and report back to Parliament. At this point the Land Company was large and had the appearance of success. Yet it was still not fully registered, and its members received no protection for regaining their investment if the Company failed. O'Connor's special petition highlighted this problem and called the government's attention to his endeavor. For six weeks the Select Committee interviewed government officials, small farmers, opponents and supporters of the Land Company. It concluded that the Land Company could not be registered as a friendly society because it provided none of the insurance benefits of a friendly society. In addition, it found the company books were imperfectly kept. Ultimately, the Land Company was declared beyond the scope of legal protection, and the Select Committee recommended that it wind up its operations to protect those who had invested in good faith.¹⁵ However, its findings did not automatically end the Land Company.

O'Connor took an apparently belligerent attitude toward the Select Committee. In his testimony, he declared, "I am ready to admit to this Committee that I have violated

¹⁵Alice Mary Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1970), p. 64.

every law in my attempt to carry out this plan but that I have violated no question of honor; and I am ready to submit myself to the most searching and rigid examination upon all questions of finance now and all questions of management hereafter."¹⁶ O'Connor believed the Select Committee's findings vindicated himself and his plan because the findings showed that O'Connor was innocent of any financial misconduct and in fact was in arrears of the Land Plan. Additionally, since the Select Committee did not order the closure of the company, O'Connor continued operations as before. He did attempt to reassure the subscribers that the only real legal protection they needed was faith in him.¹⁷

The Select Committee had a tremendous impact on subscription levels. 1848 started well with £1,532, but this level dropped off to £452 in April. The subscriptions slid again to £180 in May and to £80 in July.¹⁸ At this time the findings of the Select Committee were released and subscriptions fell to £49 in August and to £32 in October, the lowest level ever. The Select Committee had pointed out the illegal status of the Land Company, but this was not the only factor that sustained the subscription slide. Many by this time had paid off their shares because the company had been in operation since May 1845. There were also problems on the estate. The land was not producing up to O'Connor's expectations. New members were apprehensive about joining and older members had paid off or were waiting to see what the future held for the Land Company.

O'Connor tried to rally the people's support but the old fire was gone. In August

¹⁶B. P. P., p. 168.

¹⁷N. S., November 4, 1848.

¹⁸N. S., subscription lists for 1848.

O'Connor insisted that subscribers pay on at least two thirds of their shares before September 29, 1849, or they would be expelled from the company and would forfeit any amount already subscribed. O'Connor calculated that £273,000 was promised but only £90,000 had been received.¹⁹ The Land Company was reeling from numerous blows, but it continued to operate.

4. 1849-1851

Despite all the problems the Land Company was experiencing, there was still interest in the land. O'Connor published many letters received by *The Star* to demonstrate the remaining hope people had for the land. A letter from Edward Waddington of Doneaster declared that he had experimented with twelve perches and did not doubt a family can live on a small farm. "Mr Editor: I am an enthusiast with regard to the land and ask for nothing more than to be placed on two acres of land with nothing more than a cottage and a few pounds to maintain me till the crops are ready." Another person wrote, "The idea of five people not being able to get a good living off two acres even in the worst season is contrary to authentic facts."²⁰ These and other letters revealed a core of interested people, but the subscription lists told another story as the receipts continued their downward plunge.

Another problem the Land Company faced in 1849 through 1850 was the rent refusers. The company had received no rent payments in 1848 because O'Connor had

¹⁹*N. S.*, August 12, 1848.

²⁰*N. S.*, August 25, 1849.

postponed them due to the allottees' inexperience and bad harvests.²¹ However, the allottees from both Snig's End and Minster Lovell refused to pay rent because they felt the Land Plan could not fulfill its promises of production. These men petitioned O'Connor, asking for relief from the rent charge.²² O'Connor fumed against them: "Men who get and don't pay are rascals" because they attacked the very principle upon which the Land Plan was based--cooperation.²³

For weeks O'Connor railed, pleaded and cajoled these men to pay, all to no avail. Eventually, O'Connor gave up and sent local magistrates to evict the rent refusers from the land that he had tried so hard to give them.²⁴ This is perhaps the saddest chapter of the whole Land Plan story. The hope and excitement that the Land Plan had once given the people could no longer sustain it. Throughout 1849 to 1851 the directors and O'Connor tried to save the Plan, but with little or no money they could not. In mid-1851, with O'Connor out of the country recuperating from illness, the directors wound up the company's affairs and ceased its operations. On July 19, 1851, the act to wind up the Land Company was read for the mandatory third time in Parliament, signifying its end. No refunds were sent to existing members. The allottees got to keep their land while the masses of unlocated subscribers lost their investments. O'Connor said he would start a new company and this time assume full responsibility without the assistance of other

²¹*N. S.*, December 23, 1848.

²²*N. S.*, January 5, 1850.

²³*N. S.*, December 8, 1849.

²⁴*N. S.*, January 19, 1850.

directors. Members of this company would be given land based on personal character.

However, no further mention is made of this company.

The subscriptions for 1849 through 1850 are hardly worth mentioning. The highest level was reached in February with £50. From there the slide continued until December 1849 and January and February 1850 when the subscriptions fell under £10 a month.²⁵ After this no other subscriptions were sent in. The Plan that had inspired thousands to join could not live up to their expectations. The dream of owning land would have to wait.

²⁵N. S., subscription lists for 1849-51 .

Chapter Four: Evaluation of the Land Company

1. Financial and Legal Woes

Perhaps if the Land Company had had a less disastrous ending, history would have treated it and O'Connor more kindly. But the Land Company literally fell apart after 1848. Two problems that haunted the Land Company from its inception were money and legality.

Originally, the Land Company was to function on a very limited basis. O'Connor worked out the financial aspects of the Company anticipating only 2,000 members. These 2,000 were to each pay £2 10s. for two shares in the company, which would entitle them to two acres of land each. O'Connor calculated the cost to locate 50 families on a 100-acre estate was £4,125. Since the original investment was £5,000, the company would retain a surplus of £875 after the first 50 were placed on the land. Critical to the success of this plan was the ability of the original allottees to replicate the money spent to put them on the land. O'Connor used the term "replication" to mean that after a time of hard work the first allottees would increase the value of their estate so that the company could mortgage the first estate to raise money to establish another estate of 100 acres for the second group of 50 people from the original 2,000. O'Connor calculated that he would be able to mortgage the estate for £4,000. This, combined with £125 of the £875 surplus, would allow the company to open another estate.

TABLE 2: Estimated Cost of Land for Estates

Cost:	100 acres of land at £18, 15s.	= £1,875
	50 houses at £30 each	= £1,500
	50 allowances of £15 per family	= £ 750
Total Outlay:		<u>£4,125</u>
Cost Per Member Located (50 members)		= £ 82.5
Capital:	2,000 members at £2, 10s.	= £5,000
Surplus:	£5,000 to £4,125	= £ 875
TOTAL COST:		<u>£4,125</u>

This system was self-perpetuating because each new estate would be mortgaged to provide money for the next.¹ However, after this process was repeated eight times a problem arose: each estate cost £4,125 and the money raised by mortgage was only £4,000. By the eighth purchase the original surplus of £875 would be gone and the Land Plan would have located only 400 members. O'Connor believed this was not a problem. He calculated that new capital would come from further improvements made on each estate. He estimated that the first 400 men located could further improve the land so that combined estates could be mortgaged for £27,000.² Whether O'Connor intended to continually mortgage each estate for a higher value to raise capital he never clarified, but his reliance on the value of improvements and mortgages would make it seem so.

Another problem was that O'Connor never estimated the amount of time required to increase the value of the estates for mortgages. Obviously, this could not be accomplished in only a few months. Therefore, if one wasn't one of the first 50 allottees one might have to wait years to be located. Additionally, this final plan was set up to

¹*The Northern Star*, July 26, 1845.

²*N. S.*, July 26, 1845.

benefit only 2,000 members. When interest in the Land Plan soared and 70,000 subscribed, the time to locate each member increased tremendously. O'Connor recognized this, and while he retained the idea of replication, he did not retain his plan to locate 50 men on an estate but placed 60 to 80 families on the first estates. Furthermore, in his desire to place more members on the land faster than replication would allow he altered many times the ways in which the Land Company secured capital.

However, O'Connor did not stick with this financial plan once the Land Company's operations began in earnest. The main reason for this is that the Land Company attracted more than 2,000 members. The basis of replication remained a foundation of the Land Company but the scale of operations from 50 members per each estate was altered. Unfortunately, O'Connor did not substitute a certain plan for the old one. Like every other operational aspect O'Connor showed no consistency in purchasing or in placing people on the estates. For instance, the first estate Herronsgate contained 34 allotments and only 103 acres, while Minster Lovell contained 80 allotments and 297 acres. In abandoning his original plan, O'Connor had no anchor of stability. When receipts for the company were up the Land Company purchased a larger estate, when money was down the company cut back. O'Connor did continue to rely on the allottees' ability to increase the value of the estates and thus raise capital for future locations. This change of plan was not the only change that was forced by the weight of so many subscribers.

In January 1847, O'Connor announced the formation of the National Land and Labour Bank.³ The purpose of this bank was to "give Labourers the opportunity to earn

³N. S., January 2, 1847.

interest like the wealthy."⁴ The money deposited would be invested in Land Company farmers to improve the land and thus provide a return to the investor.

The bank would have three branches: deposit, redemption, and sinking fund. The deposit branch was to function as a regular bank. The money would be loaned to the allottees, and the bank would pay 3.5% interest per year. However, there were restrictions on deposits and withdrawals:

TABLE 3: Amounts and Withdrawal Notification for the Land Bank

<u>Amount of Balance</u>	<u>Withdrawal</u>
Under £10	Withdraw on demand
£10 to £20	Must give one week's notice
£20 to £50	Must give two weeks' notice
Over £50	Must give one month's notice ⁵

The redemption branch was open for allottees to make deposits. This branch would pay 4% interest on the deposit which would automatically be deducted from the rent charge, thereby decreasing the liability of each allottee. No more than half the money could be withdrawn and one month's notice had to be given to withdraw any amount. The sinking fund branch would have acted as a depository for purchasing new land, but it was never initiated due to lack of funds.

The Land Bank illustrates two points about the Land Company. The first is O'Connor's impatience. His ideas were accepted by thousands. In his eyes all were looking to him for land and independence, so he sought new ways to raise capital. The second point is that O'Connor began realizing that uneducated workers might not function well on

⁴N. S., January 2, 1847.

⁵N. S., January 2, 1847.

farms. Consequently, the whole process of replication was in danger. The bank was to forestall this lack of money, however, even it could not provide all the capital the Land Company needed.

Another way the Land Company attempted to cope with the increased demand for money was to change the rent charge. At the start of 1846 the rent charge was 4%, levied on only the improvements an allottee could make in one year. Later, in 1846, this 4% charge was increased to 5%.⁶ In 1847 O'Connor added the cost incurred in setting up an allotment (building the houses, buying, clearing and draining the land, and aid money) to increase the base from which the 5% would be assessed. This charge could tremendously affect allottees since they would now be taxed on an additional £85 to £100 per year (the value of the house and land). At 5% this would mean an additional £4 to £5 rent charge annually per family.

Another major policy change was incorporated into the rules in November 1846. This change allowed a subscriber who made a premium payment on top of the share price to be located immediately on the next estate without having their name drawn in a ballot.

TABLE 4: List of Premium Payments

Premium for:	4 acres	£12 10s.
	3 acres	£10
	2 acres	£7 10s. ⁷

This was a significant change since it destroyed the equality of the ballot and allowed those with money to pay and receive company benefits for substantially less than

⁶N. S., August 29, 1846.

⁷N. S., November 4, 1848.

they could buy land on the open market and establish themselves as farmers; additionally, they did not have to take a chance in the ballot. At this point, land speculators could take advantage of the Land Plan and make a handsome profit. Like the rent charge, O'Connor believed the premium payment was only a slight alteration. In the end everyone would get land; this step would only ensure that final goal. What he did not realize was that he was starting down a road that would put the land out of the reach of those for whom it was originally intended, and the loss of their support would prove fatal.

One final change was introduced into the Land Company's financial policies--the bonus payment, adopted in 1849.⁸ Bonus payments were a modified premium. Instead of paying the normal price per share plus the premium, whoever paid the highest bonus would get his pick of land on the next estate. These bonuses ranged as high as £250. This idea met much opposition; there was fear that the bonus would make the land inaccessible to the poor. However, this modification was accepted because the Land Company needed quick capital to continue its operations and because the Select Committee had declared that members could not be assigned land on the basis of a ballot, which they deemed illegal.

The Land Company depended too much on constant support through subscriptions and rent. When subscribers lost faith in the Land Company they stopped their subscriptions. When the allottees failed to produce what O'Connor had predicted, they did not pay their rent charge. The bad harvests of 1847 and 1848 also scared potential investors. Consequently, the Land Company was forced to wind up due to lack of funds.

⁸N. S., March 10, 1849.

The problem of capitalization might lead one to suspect the entire Land Plan was unfeasible. However, the root of the problem was the scope of the Land Company's operation and expectations. It attempted too much too soon.

Additionally, O'Connor had tried to make the rules as he went. This provided flexibility but did not allow the setting of long range goals. Perhaps if the Land Company had tried to locate fewer people and been more selective in whom it gave land, the allottees could have been more experienced and therefore more successful in farming. With this success capital could be generated at a faster rate to locate others with experience. Financial troubles plagued the Land Company's subscribers, while its legal problems attracted the attention of the government.

Another major problem the Land Company faced was the fact that it was never legalized or given sanction by the government. In the early years this illegality did not concern the working class because they were caught up in the excitement of the moment, not realizing the company's status since it was seldom addressed. Before the Select Committee hearings O'Connor often reassured the subscribers of his good intentions and of the fact that he was the only security they needed. The government was reluctant to confer a legal status on the company because the Land Company did not meet the requirements of a friendly society. O'Connor went as far as introducing a bill to Parliament to amend the friendly society act but this was unsuccessful as well.

O'Connor next tried to register the company as a joint stock company. However, a quarter of the members needed to sign the charter and the company had to pay a small fee

for every member.⁹ Due to the size of the Land Company this was a time-consuming and costly venture. Thus, O'Connor's efforts at legalization as a joint stock company also came to naught. Until the wind-up of the Land Company, however, O'Connor reassured the people that legalization was imminent. In February he declared that registration of the company was complete. In April he reiterated that registration would proceed if the registrar gave no objection. In September O'Connor again reassured his subscribers that if for any reason the company was not legalized he would personally ensure that everyone who so desired would receive 20s. to the pound for their investment. O'Connor believed this was another attempt of the government to block the progress of the working class.

The lack of legalization did not alone kill the Land Company. For three and a half years the Land Company functioned on trust in Feargus O'Connor. When the Select Committee examined the Land Company it concluded that its only security was O'Connor and that the Land Company was incapable of fulfilling its goals.¹⁰ The auditors calculated that the Land Company would only raise £819,114 through subscriptions and mortgages. Therefore, only a small fraction, or 9,868 subscribers, would ever be located. The auditors concluded that although the plan as outlined by O'Connor was impractical, placing men on the land successfully was not impossible.¹¹ When this fact came to light and the subscribers saw the struggle of the new allottees they lost faith in the Land Company. This is why O'Connor labored in late 1848 and through 1849 to get the Land Company fully registered

⁹*The Labourer*, vol. 2 (1847), p. 226.

¹⁰B. P. P., p. 148.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 310.

as a joint stock company. When he failed no recourse remained but to cease operations.¹²

One other legal problem the Land Company faced was in determining who owned the land, the company or the allottees. Technically, the allottees were to receive a permanent lease granting them security and the benefit of improvements. Also, since the rent was based on improvements and not left to the whim of the landowner, O'Connor felt the allottee had more security. Each man also had the option to purchase the estate outright from the company by paying off the amount spent to establish the allotment.¹³ However, many subscribers were confused on this point--they thought the land became theirs upon location. This caused problems when the time came to pay the rent charge, especially when the harvests were bad and the farmers were struggling. In fact, the allottees of Minster Lovell refused to pay rent because they felt they had won ownership of the land in the ballot and that if they paid rent they would be admitting a tenant status. O'Connor simply needed to raise money by assessing an annual rent and by mortgaging the estates after improvements were made. The allottees even had the option to purchase the allotment from the Land Company if they so decided. O'Connor believed these allottees were not following the Land Company's method of replicating the money spent to locate them. Eventually, many allottees were evicted because of their refusal to pay the rent charge.

¹²N. S., July 12, 1851.

¹³N. S., November 3, 1849.

2. Feasibility of the Land Company

Was the Land Company a feasible venture? The Plan contained two parts which had to work together for its success. First, the methods of raising support would have to supply enough money to locate all the members. Second, the land had to produce the amounts O'Connor projected. These are closely tied because if the land failed to produce what O'Connor said then the company could not raise more capital based on the improvements made on the estates. Additionally, if O'Connor's estimates were shown to be inflated then fewer people would join the company in the first place.

During the Select Committee hearings much debate was centered on the Land Company's ability to raise and replicate enough money to locate all 70,000 members. Two auditors concluded that £21 million would be required to locate every member. Furthermore, they found that the company could not raise enough money through the mortgage of existing estates to locate all the members. Since each acre could be mortgaged for only two-thirds its value, the amount of money raised would diminish with each investment.¹⁴ The auditors calculated that 2,730 people could be located on three-acre plots before the money would be exhausted.¹⁵ Their calculations differed from O'Connor's original scheme in that O'Connor believed the mortgageable value would exceed the cost of the estate. The auditors did not see how the Land Company could operate under its present financial system. However, they believed the Land Company was practical given time and outside investment, probably from a private company. They were

¹⁴B. P. P., p. 309.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 104.

not questioning the feasibility of placing people on the land but the mechanism by which the Land Company proposed to do so.

The ability of the land to produce the amounts estimated by O'Connor was also questioned. As documented earlier, O'Connor carefully calculated what he thought the land could produce. But were these estimates valid? John Revans, a Poor Law inspector who testified at the Select Committee, thought the estimates grossly inflated. He examined each estate and found that the land was incapable of yielding O'Connor's estimates. He also refuted O'Connor's estimates: for example, O'Connor had claimed that one acre could produce 18 tons of potatoes while Revans charged that at best six to ten tons could be grown on the land he saw.¹⁶ O'Connor was incensed that Revans was destroying his credibility as a farmer. He asked, "(What) if a professor backs up my claims?" Revans responded, "He is only a professor."¹⁷

Revans was also against the use of the spade. He believed that after two or three years the plow would outproduce the spade because it could cultivate a greater area of land.¹ On this issue O'Connor and Revans clearly disagreed. As a Poor Law commissioner, Revans was interested in keeping down the cost of poor rates, hence his desire for greater and cheaper food production obtainable through large farms and the use of plows. O'Connor sought to create a class of small property holders, thereby giving independence to the working class and relieving the labor surplus.

To prove that the spade was superior to the plow, O'Connor brought in John

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 250-254.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 260.

Sillett. Sillett reported that he and his family lived on two acres as well as they had when he worked as a draper, and that at the end of 1847 he had £74 left after caring for his family's needs.¹⁸

Still, Revans was not convinced. He concluded that the Land Company was unfeasible in its production goals and predicted that the new farmers would fail and be forced to turn to the poor rates for relief.¹⁹

What of O'Connor's estimates and Revans' charges? Both had facts on their side and could document their claims. O'Connor carefully calculated the amount of produce he felt the land could yield. In his insistence on these estimates he can be criticized for oversimplification. In his excitement about the Company and in his desire to communicate his ideas clearly to the subscribers, he overgeneralized. He surmised that he could always purchase land at the same price he had in 1846.²⁰ (In 1845 O'Connor bought a tract called Carpendor's farm, paying £18 10s. per acre. Since then he based his calculations of land value on this purchase. This was not accurate, as the following table shows:

TABLE 5: Actual Cost of Land for the Five Estates

<u>Estate</u>	<u>Cost per Acre</u>
O'Connorville	£23 10s.
Lowbands	£52 16s.
Snigs End	£48 5s.
Minster Lovell	£37 7s.
Great Dodford	£37 13s. ²¹

¹⁸Ibid., p. 251.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 272.

²⁰Ibid., p. 233.

²¹N. S., July 4, 1846.

Furthermore, he assumed that the cost of building each house would remain at £30 for each estate. He did not account for regional variations or price increases because they did not fit his model. This is not to say he purposely misled, rather he was naive in his calculations.

The question of O'Connor's production estimate interconnects with his idealism. The theme of the Land Plan was not food production or agrarian justice but a resurrection of the value and independence of the working class. This is what motivated O'Connor, and his desire to rescue the working class contributed to his narrow-mindedness in dealing with real problems the Land Plan faced.

First of all, the allottees were not experienced farmers. Yet the company only provided the land, tools and seed without training on farming techniques. This was a serious oversight. Also, O'Connor did not account for differences in the land on each estate nor the effect bad weather could have on harvests. O'Connor believed that if his estimates seemed sound on paper they were valid in the real world.

Since the success of the plan depended on O'Connor's produce estimates O'Connor made a grave mistake in his idealism concerning his estimates. Another problem he did not address was the never-ending nature of the Land Company's operations. Earlier it was mentioned that with replication one might have to wait years for his land. O'Connor never acknowledged this to the members. But he did exhort those who had not subscribed to the first Land Company to join the second which was started in 1849. O'Connor, it seems, was not misleading the people to secure more capital. He fervently wanted to help the working class and this blinded him to reality.

A third problem the Land Company faced was one that was outside its scope of operations. This was Parliament. After the Select Committee hearings, Parliament really treated O'Connor and the Land Company gently. It bestowed legal sanction for the company to wind up its affairs so that its members would not be hurt financially. O'Connor had treated the law contemptuously by operating the company without legal sanction. He never realized that Parliament could wield power to shut down the company. If O'Connor had proceeded slowly and shaped the Land Company to fit within the law to gain registration then Parliament might not have intervened and studied the Land Company. Also, slowing down the pace might have given O'Connor the time to work out the other legal and financial problems discussed here. But he was impatient and assumed wrongly that he could handle problems on a day by day basis. The Land Company suffered from a lack of careful planning which crippled it in times of crisis.

The fact that the allottees did fail, with some selling their allotments and others seeking work in surrounding towns, does not preclude the possibility of the Land Company's success. In fact, the Great Dodford estate did experience prosperity when it was converted into a strawberry farm. The idea of a family living off its own land was valid in the 1840s. The use of a spade rather than a plow was feasible on a small farm. The idea that everyone should have an economic choice and independence was very appealing to a working class family losing hope. But O'Connor and the Land Company, while offering a promise, did not deliver the goods. O'Connor's "best of times" estimates and inability to deal with critical problems doomed the Land Company to failure. On a limited basis with legal sanction the idea of placing families on the land was feasible.

Unfortunately, O'Connor tried to accomplish too much too soon and ended up accomplishing nothing.

O'Connor's estimates of production were possible under the best conditions with knowledgeable farmers. The allottees were not knowledgeable. Many came to the land from factories and had little if any idea of how to farm. Perhaps the Land Plan could have worked if the farmers had been given more instruction in farming techniques. Furthermore, as historian Julius West pointed out, O'Connor may have been confusing Irish with English acres. Irish acres were three-fifths larger than English acres.²² This could account for O'Connor's seeming inflated production estimates.

The fact that the allottees did fail, with some selling their land and others seeking work in surrounding towns, does not preclude the possibility of the Land Company's success. In fact, the Great Dodford estate did experience prosperity by growing strawberries until 1880. The Land Company faced serious obstacles, not the least of which was O'Connor's flawed produce estimates. He relied too heavily on "best of times" estimates and did not account for differences in the quality of land and people. Since the whole idea of replication was based on these estimates in retrospect it can be seen that the Land Plan was built upon an unstable foundation. This, coupled with the large numbers of subscribers and investigation by the Select Committee, caused the Land Plan to fail.

3. Historiography

The historiography of Chartism and the Land Plan begins with R. G. Gammage in

²²Jebb, pp. 125-140.

his *History of Chartism* (originally printed 1854, reprinted 1969). He was actually a Chartist in the later years of the movement and a friend of Ernest Jones, a one-time supporter of Feargus O'Connor and the Land Plan. Gammage showed no sympathy for O'Connor. He believed that O'Connor was a demagogue with no real concern for the people and was in politics only for selfish gain. Gammage believed the Land Plan was a way for O'Connor to mislead and defraud honest working men and secure their hard-earned money for himself. "It had taken a life of hard labour to enable them to raise £5. Away went the poor result of this labour into the land lottery, in exchange for which they hoped to grasp the millennium."²³ Gammage also believed that agitation for the land would draw away support from the real goal, the granting of the Charter. "And it was one of the best schemes for dividing and breaking up the Chartist movement that could possibly have been invented by the genius or folly of men."²⁴

Gammage was greatly influenced by his times and his desire to see working class radicalism move toward socialism. From Gammage's perspective, the Land Plan and the years 1845 through 1848 were disastrous for the working class and his brand of socialism. In the wake of these failures he looked for a scapegoat and chose O'Connor and the Land Company. He believed the Land Company's failure, coupled with the debacle of April 10, revealed the weakness of Chartism, thereby disclosing the weakness of the leader of both failures.

Gammage exerted a tremendous influence on later studies of O'Connor and the

²³West, p. 212.

²⁴Gammage, p. 286.

Land Plan. Until recently, virtually every historian who wrote about Chartism reviled O'Connor as the destroyer of the Chartist movement and viewed the Land Plan as an unrealistic utopian scheme, that is, if they mentioned the Plan at all.

In Reg Groves' *But We Shall Rise Again*, the Land Plan's popular support was acknowledged. Groves believed the Plan attracted those in declining trades, especially the hand loom weavers.²⁵ Groves also noted that everywhere O'Connor went he held mass meetings to demonstrate the popularity of his plan. In Manchester in 1847 O'Connor spoke before a large audience which expressed complete confidence in him.²⁶

In recognizing that the Land Plan inspired the support of thousands, Groves parted with Gammage. Yet he did not abandon Gammage completely. Groves saw the Land Plan as not only impractical but reactionary because it sought to bypass normal economic and industrial development and advocated returning to a pre-industrial society.²⁷ To support his argument of O'Connor's anachronism Groves stated that Chartist leaders O'Brien and Ernest Jones were in the 1840s and 1850s seeking communism.

As with Gammage, Groves' interpretation was influenced by his desire for socialism. Groves was narrow-minded in believing that socialism was the only means of regenerating the working class. Perhaps the legacy left by the Land Company was its success in pushing many working class leaders further into socialism.

²⁵Ibid., p. 248.

²⁶Reg Groves, *But We Shall Rise Again: A Narrative History of Chartism* (London: Marten, Secles and Warburg, 1938), p. 158.

²⁷Ibid., p. 159.

In Asa Briggs's book, *Chartist Studies*, Joy MacAskill studies the Land Plan by conducting extensive research in primary sources, most notably *The Northern Star*, the Chartist paper *The Labourer*, and the Parliamentary Select Committee reports. She tries to show that the Land Plan was not merely a haphazard plan of O'Connor's contrived to preserve his power, but that O'Connor had preached the value of the land for several years before 1845.²⁸ Furthermore, she lists the goals of the Land Company: to provide more food, to relieve fear of famine, to give independence to the working class, and to relieve the problem of surplus labor, problems that faced Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. MacAskill explains how the Land Company attempted to relieve these problems.²⁹

MacAskill also seeks to determine the reason for the Land Company's failure. She sees as its main problems the need to collect sufficient money from small subscribers,³⁰ O'Connor's instability, and marginal democratic conduct.³¹ O'Connor was unstable, at times changing the rules and focus of the company which led to a lack of direction. In many ways this is an apt critique, however, O'Connor changed the rules in an effort to legalize the Land Company and gain acceptance by the government. He also changed the focus on which problems the Land Plan would solve. This was due not to vacillation but to the fact that the Land Plan was to solve so many problems that all could not be dealt

²⁸Joy McAskill, "The Chartist Land Plan," *Chartist Studies* ed. Asa Briggs (London: MacMillan, 1965), p. 309.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 306-307.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 323.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 314-315.

with immediately.

MacAskill's excellent article attempts a detailed study of Chartism through primary sources and seeks to establish a better understanding of the Land Plan instead of labeling it as an utopian failure from the start. It mentions that even after his death, O'Connor inspired desire for land reform. Radical socialist leaders could not ignore the support the Land Plan received, and they saw the necessity of land reform as a political tool.

Nevertheless, the essay fails to place the Land Company in the wider tradition of Chartism and radical land reform. It isolates the Land Company and limits its importance. Also, MacAskill does not acknowledge the tie that O'Connor made between the land and the Charter. She believes that O'Connor cared less for the vote than the land, when in reality he saw both as equal goals of Chartism.

Edward Royle in *Chartism* seeks to rehabilitate O'Connor as the most perceptive Chartist but considers the Land Plan a great distraction.³² However, this dichotomy should not be drawn. O'Connor was the Land Plan and the Land Plan was O'Connor. Royle sees the Land Plan as an outgrowth of radical agrarianism. He traces O'Connor's view about the connection of the land and political power from Paine and Spence and even back to the Diggers and Levellers. This tie between the tradition of land reform and the Land Plan was ignored by previous writers and is the chief benefit of Royle's study. However, Royle still persists in the belief that the Land Plan, instead of looking forward, looked back to a golden age.³³ As demonstrated in the previous chapter, this view does not correspond with

³²Royle, *Chartism*. p. 40.

³³Ibid., p. 40.

O'Connor's writings.

The study of the Land Company has always been relegated to small sections of larger histories of Chartism or has been studied in short articles. This trend is reversed by Alice-Mary Hadfield in *The Chartist Land Company* (1970). Here for the first time the Land Plan is studied in-depth. The book is divided into two sections. The first traces the history and development of the Land Plan as a national movement, and the second studies in detail each estate of the Land Company.

In Hadfield's book, the Land Plan is again studied in isolation and not as a part of radicalism. Hadfield traces the history of the Land Plan and shows its inherent weaknesses. She believes the Land Company fell apart because of its lack of legality.³⁴ Hadfield seeks to place O'Connor at the center of the movement but attributes the decline of the Land Company to O'Connor's desertion after 1848. The book's value is in its compilation of a full history of the Land Company and its overview of each estate. However, it fails to provide an interpretative framework or a detailed study of the Land Company.

James Epstein in *The Lion of Freedom* (1982) goes furthest in seeking to rehabilitate O'Connor as a conscientious working class leader. Epstein studies the origins of O'Connor's political radicalism and traces his career through 1848. This work emphasizes O'Connor's boundless energy and devotion to the working class and gives us a fresh view of O'Connor, which greatly aids in rehabilitating the Land Company.

In a collection of essays edited by Epstein and Dorothy Thompson entitled *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Culture 1830-1850* two

³⁴Hadfield, p. 81.

articles stand out. The first of these, John Belchem's "Feargus O'Connor and the Collapse of the Mass Platform," traces the importance of platform agitation. Belchem notes a connection with old-style radicalism and its use of the platform as a confrontational tool which helped weld together the working class and O'Connor's use of the platform as a means to direct public opinion. Belchem states that O'Connor believed social regeneration was as important as political renewal. But he thinks that O'Connor was inconsistent and abandoned political agitation to concentrate solely on social goals. O'Connor's and Chartism's shift of attention to special interests, such as the land and temperance, destroyed the base of national Chartism. This, coupled with the middle-class fear of working class revolution, effectively killed Chartism. Belchem's article acknowledges O'Connor as a social reformer yet fails to support O'Connor's political and social reforms.

Belchem suffers from the same narrow-mindedness that afflicted earlier Chartist historians. Since O'Connor concentrated on social reform (i.e. the Land Plan) from 1845 to 1849, they conclude he must have lost hope in political reform. This was not true. Not only did O'Connor tour Britain in 1848 for the third petition, but the petition contained more signatures than the previous two. Not only was the Land Plan intended to increase interest in Chartism, but it was to develop a new social system to help the working class thrive once they obtained political reform. Belchem should not accuse Chartism of declining support after 70,000 joined the Land Plan and millions agreed to support the petition. He is correct in citing the collapse of the platform but this collapse is due to the increase of other forms of agitation such as print journalism and not the loss of working class support.

The second article, Eileen Yeo's "Some Practices and Problems of Chartist Democracy," studies the organizational problems of Chartism and the Land Plan. She sees the Land Plan as a reflection of a general trend of cooperation which gained importance from 1839 and helped locate the Land Plan in a tradition of radicalism.³⁵

Yeo views the problems the Land Plan faced as a result of its success. As it located more subscribers and attracted more investors, government pressure increased. The government would not, in the 1840s, tolerate a local organization with branches for fear of a framework for revolution. Consequently, the government blocked the Land Plan's location method by declaring it illegal according to the laws against lotteries. The government also did not approve of the Land Bank, fearing its collapse could affect the British economy. These governmental limitations were intended to thwart any special interest group gaining enough power to challenge the government.

Yeo views cooperation as the key to the Land Plan and a major element that united the working class. She is also correct in attributing the failure of the Land Plan to its huge success. When 70,000 people joined, the original mechanics of the company had to be modified, and O'Connor had to search for ever-increasing capital. Furthermore, once the Land Plan received the attention of the government Yeo believes it was doomed. This confrontational stance needs to be modified somewhat. The Select Committee hearings were in the interest of protecting the Land Plan's members, not for the express purpose of ending their hopes. Also, the government did not block the Land Plan's registration as

³⁵Eileen Yeo, "Some Practices and Problems of Chartist Democracy," *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Culture 1830-1850* ed. by James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (MacMillan, 1982), p. 348.

much as they upheld the existing laws concerning first registration of friendly societies and then joint stock companies. The government was not against the Land Plan but it did want it to abide by the laws of the land.

Gareth Jones, in "Rethinking Chartism" in *Languages of Class Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982*, provides a major reinterpretation of Chartism which also affects the Land Plan. Jones believes the class character of Chartism has been overemphasized. He sees Chartism as an outgrowth of popular radicalism reaching back into the eighteenth century. He does not believe that political agitation was merely a means to achieve Chartist social reform but rather a central goal of the Chartists in their effort to reform the present political system they felt was oppressive.

How does the Land Plan fit this view? Jones is unclear. At one point in his essay he recognizes the close tie between the land and political power.³⁶ The land was just another monopoly the ruling group could control through political power. Therefore, that power must be broken.

After saying this, Jones blasts the Land Plan: "It (the Land Plan) represented a far more fundamental breach in the radicalism of the 1830s since it implied that improvement was possible within the existing political system."³⁷ He wrongly overemphasizes O'Connor's desire for the land to the point that he sees the land as O'Connor's only goal. The Land Plan was not a move away from traditional radicalism but an outgrowth of it. O'Connor pursued the theme of appropriation as he reminded the people that the land was

³⁶Jones, pp. 154-155.

³⁷Jones, p. 167.

taken from them by the politically powerful.

Secondly, O'Connor never preached acceptance of the political system. The Land Plan was to raise support for a national political reform movement which would culminate with the inclusion of the working class in the political system. Thirdly, the Land Plan was to relieve the artificial system of wage labor which Jones mentioned as one of the oppressive features of the political system. Finally, O'Connor never separated agitation for the land from that for the Charter. They were two ends of one spectrum.

The study of the Land Plan has had to suffer from preconceived notions and until recently, a lack of study of its primary sources. The Land Plan represents an important step in radicalism, a culmination of Chartism, and the largest collective effect to attain land for the people. It can no longer be relegated to a backseat in the history of Chartism.

Conclusion

The Land Plan was by no means doomed from the start. It was an attempt to secure social well-being for the working class. Most importantly, it did not seek to inspire a pastoral revolt from the industrial world. Rather, it was an escape valve whereby excess labor could be siphoned from the labor force. It offered a choice to the working class.

Historians have neglected a careful study of the documents of the Land Plan. They see the Land Plan as a side road from Chartism and not worthy of much attention. This should not be the case. The Land Plan represented a broadening of Chartist attention. It was proposed to aid the working class economically and politically. It attempted to give the means of production (the land) into the hands of the working class. It made the working class more aware of what cooperation could do. True, it did fail, but the hopes and dreams it inspired remained.

Additionally, the Land Plan should be seen as a triumph of capitalism. O'Connor proposed the Land Plan to meet a need and to allow the working class to share in the economic boom of England. He did not advocate, as did Marx, the overthrow of the state and a worker-led revolution. Nor did he advocate, as did Cobbett, a retreat to a pastoral wonderland. What the Land Plan stood for was a way to let the working class become petty capitalists. As outlined, O'Connor believed in many capitalistic ideologies. What he did not like was the unequal distribution of capitalism and he worked fervently to secure hope for the working class.

The Land Plan revived and sustained the Chartist movement. It also represented a

high point of capitalism. After the Land Plan's fall the working class turned increasingly to socialist alternatives.

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