

ART. XVI – *The trade union and Radical activities of the Carlisle handloom weavers.*
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IT is perhaps difficult for us today to realise that before the introduction of the power-loom to textile manufacturing in the late 1820s every piece of cloth, from the huge spreads of canvas carried by sailing ships to the handkerchief of finest lawn, had been produced on the handloom: and that in the early 19th century, after agricultural workers and domestic servants, the handloom weavers were the third largest occupational group in the Kingdom.¹ The weaving trade had been enormously boosted in the cotton manufacturing districts of Lancashire, Central Scotland, the North East and the Carlisle area by the increasing production of yarn from the spinning mills in the last decades of the 18th century, when many were attracted to the loom by the promise of plenty of work and good wages. Within the space of forty years, however, as a result of the complex social and economic circumstances brought about by industrialisation, and particularly the introduction of the power-looms and the overcrowding of the trade by those flocking to the towns, the weavers had declined into conditions of poverty and distress which almost defy description. The widespread suffering that accompanied the drastic collapse of the trade, as the weavers found themselves at the mercy of periodic economic depressions, while also being forced to compete with machines that could outstrip their production many times over, is one of the most disturbing aspects of the Industrial Revolution, and the fate of the handloom weavers has rightly been seen as “the largest case of redundancy or technological unemployment in our recent economic history”.²

By the late 18th century, when the trade was expanding rapidly, the textile workers in common with men employed in almost every other craft and trade, had organized themselves in trade associations, which in many instances had sprung from the last remnants of the earlier craft guilds and were regulated in much the same way, with apprenticeship restrictions, entry fees, and provision for members on tramp and those in need. They were also frequently associated with friendly societies and benefit clubs, particularly after the passing of the anti-combination legislation in 1799, when this was the only legal way in which trade associations could operate.

The usual form of industrial action undertaken by combinations of weavers in the early 19th century was to organize “memorials” to their employers, or to the Justices of the Peace when negotiations with their employers broke down, and when all else failed they had resort to strikes and food riots. The other form of action open to them was their traditional right to petition Parliament and the Throne. But when, after the passing of the Combination Acts and the failure of their petitioning in 1807, it became clear that Parliament was on the side of Free Trade and the employers, the weavers could only turn

to Radical politics, in the hope that by bringing about a reform of the system of parliamentary representation, they might in some measure be able to halt the deterioration of their condition. As "out-workers", the weavers were not an easy group to weld into a trade association: although some worked in the weaving sheds or "factories", for the most part they wove in their own homes or in small weaving shops, and it was difficult to persuade them into organized action for any length of time. Nor did any strike action that they might undertake seriously inconvenience their employers, who had no money tied up in expensive machinery, unlike the owners of the spinning mills. By the end of the 18th century, however, there were more than forty acts of Parliament inhibiting workmen and their employers from combining "in restraint of trade", suggesting that such action was widespread.

Early trade unionism amongst the handloom weavers has been investigated by several social historians, whose work has recently been evaluated by A. E. Musson.³ Musson stresses the gradual evolution of trade associations from the skilled craft societies to the emergence of unions with a nation-wide membership. He emphasises the influence of the trade cycles of boom and slump upon union activity and observes that trade unionism tended to advance in times of full employment, while in times of depression men were more likely to seek political solutions, a circumstance which explains why so many weavers involved themselves in the Radical Reform movement from 1817 to 1820, and again with Chartism in the late 1830s and 1840s. Duncan Bythell, while admitting the continued existence of local associations among the weavers, stresses their ineffectiveness, thereby underlining his thesis that by the late 1820s the trade was being carried on for the most part by women and children, and by men only as a part-time occupation. This, however, was not the case in the Carlisle area, where weaving was regarded as a full-time occupation for men until well into the 1870s. In spite of this, E. Hughes⁴ found little evidence of trade union activity amongst the Cumberland weavers. E. P. Thompson and Bythell go little further than to acknowledge the efforts made by the Carlisle weavers in their attempts to secure a fixed minimum wage in 1812. Nevertheless, in the early 19th century Carlisle was an important textile centre, considered to be the fourth most important in the United Kingdom,⁵ with its geographical position ensuring a steady stream of delegates passing through between the Scottish and Lancashire textile areas, as well as from the North East, and it can be shown that throughout the period under review, the weavers in the Carlisle district always kept up an association of some kind, and maintained links with the weavers of other districts, both in trade affairs and in the sphere of Radical politics.

By the end of the 18th century the Weavers' Guild, which had existed as one of the city's eight Trade Guilds since medieval times, was more of a political than a trade association, and the majority of the textile workers who had been attracted to the city by the increasing opportunities for employment were not eligible for membership. These immigrants were mostly "industrious Scots" from Dumfriesshire and families from Northern Ireland, some of whom found employment alongside native Cumbrians in the city's calico-printing works and spinning mills; for the most part, however, they were employed at the loom, weaving the yarn given out by such manufacturers as the Dixons and Fergusons in the small houses and weaving shops that proliferated in the Caldewgate, Shaddongate and Botchergate districts of Carlisle, and in Dalston, Brampton, Longtown, Wigton and Warwick Bridge, and returning the finished lengths

of cloth to the various warehouses where they received payment for their work. For the most part the fabrics that they wove were of the coarser varieties, checks, campers, stripes and gingham, the cuts measuring from 25 to 60 yards in length, and taking the weaver about a fortnight to weave.⁶ It is not possible to be precise as to the numbers employed in the district, as many weavers chose to lead an itinerant life, working where the opportunity offered and moving off "on tramp" after a month or two, while others occasionally turned to casual labouring or seasonal farm work. In 1812, when the total population of Carlisle numbered 12,531,⁷ over a thousand weavers signed the *Carlisle Weavers' Memorial*, representing about a third of the town's workforce; and although the population had increased to nearly 20,000 by 1838, a census of weavers in the town revealed that they and their dependants still accounted for almost a quarter of this number, a fact also borne out by the findings of the Commissioners investigating the state of the larger towns in 1844, the handloom weavers being the only Carlisle occupation group of any numerical significance.⁸

Although the 1790s marked the emergence of Carlisle as an important textile manufacturing centre, weaving on a commercial scale was being undertaken in the district at a much earlier date, and as early as 1775 the weavers and their employers were entering into combinations to protect their respective interests. At this time, as the masters were having to advertise over a large area for weavers to cope with the increasing production of yarn from the spinning mills, the weavers were able to negotiate for wage increases from a position of some strength. If any time can properly be referred to as a "Golden Age" of handloom weaving, an age to which the weavers later looked back and directed most of their effort to restoring, then this was it.

In July 1775 the weavers employed by the Carlisle firms staged a mass walk out in an attempt to raise wages. Having stopped work, they adopted the novel device of inserting an advertisement in the *Newcastle Chronicle*, complaining of low rates of pay and long hours of work, a move that was clearly intended to discourage any weavers from the North East from coming to Carlisle to fill their places. The employers retaliated in a joint advertisement in the *Cumberland Pacquet*, refuting the weavers' claims and offering employment to "any who may chuse [sic] to apply for work".⁹

In spite of the efforts of the weavers to restrict entry to the trade by insisting on a seven-year apprenticeship, weaving was an easily learnt trade which could be picked up in a matter of weeks, and it was not long before many were ignoring the craft regulations and flocking to the trade in the developing textile areas, so that by 1785 the employers were powerful enough to be able to press Parliament for legislation against combinations of workmen in the cotton-weaving trade – a step which resulted in widespread agitation on the part of the weavers. In Glasgow, a combination of weavers in a letter to their employers dated 14 April 1786 threatened dire consequences for "breaking the prices of the Poors' work":

We hear in the Newspapers that you and your combined beggarly Crewe (sic) are designed to oppose the operative weavers . . . upwards of One Hundred of us have made an oath and entered into a Bond to set your warehouse on fire about your ears.¹⁰

And the following week the Carlisle weavers also took measures against their employers, although they preferred to act within the law. In a *Representation to the Justices for the County of Cumberland*, dated 25 April 1786, they complained:

that some of the Carlisle Manufacturers, having entered into a combination, had deputed one of their number, a Mr. Clerk, to contact manufacturers in Hindley inviting them to co-operate in reducing the prices paid for weaving, and dispersing his letter to the manufacturing towns . . . that the Carlisle combination may be extended all over the Kingdom to the cruel oppression of poor working men.

In their account of the circumstances of their dispute with their employers they say that:

the Workmen being informed of the said Combination unanimously agreed to work none for the Proposed Prices, but Peacably to finish their work and take some other employ. The Combination of Masters was so strong against them, that although a number of them who had Families and were reluctant to leave the Place, entreated the Masters to give them check to weave, they would not employ one of them, although they knew them to be good Workmen, and at the same time employing Strangers every Day.

The weavers went on to complain that more than the legal number of apprentices were being taken on, and asserted that the masters were doing everything possible to antagonize them – even ignoring a legal judgement given in their favour by one of the Justices:

with an intent that we, being provoked by them may Comit (sic) some outrage against them which might arm them with a Proper ground of Prosecution against us . . . Challenging us to do our worst against Them.¹¹

It is not possible to ascertain if the Carlisle weavers were acting in conjunction with those in Glasgow, but there is a similarity in the wording of their respective missives. Both emphasize the intention of the combinations of employers to deprive “the Poor” of the just reward for their labours, and the dates are close enough to suggest that there may have been as much collaboration between the weavers of different places as there was between their employers.

In 1799 the cotton weavers made their first concerted approach to Parliament in an effort to improve their rapidly deteriorating position, as the war with France had resulted in a disruption of trade and a series of bad harvests had brought about a serious drop in wages and a rise in the price of food. They hoped that the Government might be persuaded to fix statutory minimum wages for cotton weavers as they had previously done for the Spitalfields silk weavers. But following the French Revolution, the authorities were inclined to see the sinister hand of Jacobinism in every organization of the lower orders, and Pitt passed instead legislation which was intended to prohibit combinations entirely, the 1799 Act against the Combination of Workmen. At considerable financial expense and effort, the weavers’ organizations fought to retain the right to go to arbitration in disputes with their employers, and in 1807 renewed their demands for a minimum wage below which the manufacturer could not go. But in 1809 a select committee set up by the Board of Trade found that “fixing a minimum price of labour in the cotton manufacturer is wholly inadmissible in principle . . . and even if practicable would be productive of the most fatal consequences”.¹² However, the Carlisle weavers were active in spite of the Combination acts, and in the *Carlisle Journal* of 21 August 1802, an advertisement inserted by a committee of local manufacturers alleged that a “dangerous and illegal combination of workmen has been entered into by several journeymen weavers of Carlisle” and offered £5 reward for the apprehension of one Richard Bailey of Botchergate. At this time the Carlisle cotton printers were certainly involved in a wider sphere of action: William Cookson of Leeds, writing to Lord

Fitzwilliam in September 1802, claimed "there arrived here two delegates from Carlisle on their way to Manchester, summoned by the Lancashire cotton printers to agree to an advance in their wages, who made no secret of their mission".¹³

In the first years of the 19th century the Cumberland Quarter Sessions conviction books also contain evidence of several successful prosecutions for combining. In 1804 Samuel Haggerson was sentenced to one month's confinement for unlawful combination, and in the years 1810-11 several weavers were prosecuted for attending illegal meetings and entering into combinations to advance their wages, although it is not stated whether these were purely local associations or part of a wider organization. Clear evidence that the Carlisle weavers were involved in a large-scale weavers' organization is the *Address* issued by the Committee of Delegates of The General Association of Operative Weavers of Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland and Durham and the Southern Counties of Scotland meeting at Carlisle on 16 October 1809. An item in the *Cumberland Pacquet* in March 1809, announcing that Francis Smith, "one of an illegal combination of weavers in the four northern counties" had been given three months imprisonment, is an indication that the authorities regarded it as unlawful and were prepared to act against it, but this did not deter its council from summoning district delegates to a meeting in Carlisle in October 1809, nor from publishing an *Address* afterwards, setting out the aims and organization of their association.¹⁴

From the *Address* it is clear that this union had taken part in the widespread petitioning of 1807, and it seems likely that it was also part of the impressive nation wide union mentioned by Alexander Baillie Richmond, "the Scottish Spy", which had headquarters in Glasgow and strongholds in southern Scotland, Lancashire, Carlisle and Northern Ireland.¹⁵

"The Government", the *Address* stated:

has listened to the tale of our distress; they did more . . . they examined or pretended to examine the various symptoms of our disorder, but they have pronounced our claims inadmissible, our plans impracticable, and our claims they have dismissed as irremediable. The subject, therefore . . . that calls for the serious consideration of every cotton weaver is to enquire if the state of our affairs be desperate . . . must we break up and dissolve an organization already attained with so much trouble and expense . . . and yield ourselves an individual and defenceless pray (sic) to merciless avarice and encroaching monopoly. Or . . . have we any expedient in reserve – are there any means or measures yet in our power whereby we may recover our lost rank and situation in society?

The *Address* concluded by expressing the Committee's gratitude to their brethren "in connexion" (sic) for the liberal manner in which they had supported the late application to Parliament. Though these generous efforts had proved unsuccessful, they hoped that in a short time their funds, "managed with dexterity and prudence", would enable them once more to petition Parliament in the full confidence that their prayers would be answered and their grievances redressed.

The *Articles of the Association* set out the organization, thus:

That as Carlisle is the centre of the trade for Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland and Durham, it is necessary that a permanent committee should exist there to receive communications from the districts in connexion, to apprise them of every material alteration in trade and transmit at least quarterly, the prices of weaving, that our brethren should have

it in their power to avail themselves of the highest prices, as well as to prevent agents at a distance from Carlisle from imposing on the weavers employed by them.

Other clauses provided for the collection of a weekly subscription (one penny from journeymen and a halfpenny from apprentices), the provision of help for brethren in times of misfortune and when "on tramp", the serving of a seven-year apprenticeship and the stipulation that no female was to be taken on, unless a member of the weaver's own family. Finally, it was suggested that members be inserted on the roll from time to time

till the whole of the cotton weavers of the united kingdom be of one uniform regulation, and the remains of the funds necessary to carry into effect the design of the regulations be kept in each district for the purpose of applying to Parliament for an act upon the principle of 5 Eliz C4, whereby it is enacted that it shall not be lawful for any person other than has (sic) now do use or exercise any art, mystery or manual occupation, except he shall have been brought to therein seven years as an apprentice.

The statute of 5 Eliz C4 that the weavers wished to invoke was part of the Tudor "paternalist" legislation introduced to protect trade in the 16th century. By the end of the 18th century it was generally regarded as obsolete. Nevertheless, it was still on the Statute Book, and in 1812 the Carlisle weavers, along with the weavers in Glasgow, having taken legal advice, decided to test it by asking the magistrates to fix a minimum price for weaving and to enforce the seven-year apprenticeship.

The fate of the Glasgow weavers, who won their case at great cost (said to have been in the region of £3,000), lies outside the scope of this study, but events in Carlisle contributed in no small measure to the changes that were taking place at this time not only in Carlisle itself but also in the wider sphere of working-class activity.

In the spring of 1812, a poor harvest and a severe winter, combined with a falling off in trade, caused considerable hardship in the weaving districts. Throughout the woollen manufacturing districts of Yorkshire and the East Midlands the "Luddites" had engaged in machine-breaking, rioting, fire-raising and other violence. In March and April 1812, trouble spread to the Northern cotton-weaving districts. As to have been implicated in such activities was to court certain death, it is not surprising that there is little evidence left by the weavers themselves. Some of the story may be pieced together from fragments of information found in the reports of magistrates and their spies in the Home Office records and in newspaper accounts, but much of what happened must remain open to conjecture.

In Carlisle and the surrounding district the weavers' committee collected signatures to a petition, *The Carlisle Weavers' Memorial*. Together with one from Brampton, this was to be presented to the Magistrate at the Easter Quarter Sessions of 1812, asking them to fix an agreed minimum price for weaving as they were required to do under the existing legislation. It seems likely that the Carlisle committee, like the Glasgow committee, were resolved to act within the law as far as possible, as they had been in 1786; but there is evidence that others, recognising the futility of further petitioning, were becoming restless, "blaming those who had acted on their part as wanting spirit" according to Thomas Whittaker of Stockport.¹⁶

The communications of the informer "B" [Bent, in the Home Office papers] tell of a meeting held in Manchester on 13 February 1812, to discuss the petition. The meeting was attended by delegates from Nottingham, Glasgow and Carlisle, but "B" also claimed to have had a meeting with a delegate engaged in insurrectionary preparations who was

passing through Manchester on his way to Glasgow by way of Preston and Carlisle.¹⁷ And from Manchester J. Mayer reported, "We have plenty of delegates from Nottingham, Carlisle and Glasgow instigating our men to riot".¹⁸

The Carlisle Weavers' Memorial was presented to the magistrates on Tuesday 7 April, 1812, against a background of food rioting that had flared up in the market-place on the previous Saturday and was to continue intermittently throughout the district for almost two weeks. There can be no doubt that this rioting was to some extent connected with the weavers' petition. The *Carlisle Journal* of 11 April reports that the weavers agreed to give up several cartloads of grain that they had appropriated on condition that their wage demands should be given consideration. Jollie, the editor of the *Journal*, felt that the high cost of provisions and the slackness of trade were the real causes of the unrest and refused to comment further. Nevertheless in the same week, the *Journal* carried reports of civil disturbances in Stockton, Middleton, Bolton, Stockport, Huddersfield and Birmingham and included an account of the celebrated attack on Rawfolds Mill, where the Luddites and the army fought it out, and an unfortunate soldier of the Cumberland Militia was ordered to receive three hundred lashes for refusing to fire on his "brothers".

The Memorial was rejected by the Magistrates and no mention is made of it in the Quarter Sessions records, so it is not to be wondered at that the market place became the scene of another ugly riot, in which the pregnant wife of a soldier was accidentally shot and killed by the military who had marched into the town to beat the customary evening tattoo, "a custom that should have been dispensed with that night" according to the *Journal*. Spasmodic rioting continued throughout the neighbouring villages of Newtown, Dalston and Sandsfield for the next two weeks, chiefly the work of boys and young men urged on by a few middle-aged women; but there was little actual physical violence reported, apart from one instance when the watchman at Home's Mill at Denton Holme was beaten up by several masked men for passing information. Otherwise the action was all directed at food stores and warehouses.¹⁹ A month later, commenting on "the late events" (the riots which had swept the country occurred in no fewer than 23 other places in the week of 11 April, 1812), the *Journal* of 18 July noted that the disturbances "had every feature of organization and premeditated riot", a view that was shared by many, although nothing was ever proved conclusively.²⁰

From the account of these disturbances given by the *Carlisle Journal*,²¹ it is possible to discern a variety of motives underlying the unrest. First, it was a traditional form of protest against market irregularities and the export of produce from the district; but it was also a form of "collective bargaining by riot" employed by the weavers to underline their wage demands. Furthermore, an aspect of the rioting which cannot be overlooked is the manifest irritation of the crowd with the self-electing magistrates of Carlisle and with the military, stationed in the district as part of Pitt's scheme to keep the growing industrial areas under control: in the summer of 1812 no fewer than 12,000 troops were stationed in the disturbed Northern Counties, a greater force than Wellington had under his command on the Iberian Peninsula.

On the rejection of their appeal, the weavers' committee resolved to pursue their wage demands in the law courts and engaged Henry Brougham, (afterwards Lord Brougham, the Lord Chancellor), to conduct their case. On 6 June 1812, in the Court of King's Bench, Brougham obtained a *mandamus* requiring the magistrates to fix a rate for weaving, (*Rex v. The Magistrates of Carlisle*), but the Lord Chief Justice, Lord

Ellenborough, observing that the case had important bearings on trade generally, ordered that it should be held over, and it was delayed until the following year, after which the repeal of the apprenticeship clauses of 5 Eliz C4 in 1813 and those requiring the magistrates to fix a minimum wage in 1814 made further appeals to the Courts useless. All the money, which it was said had come from the weavers' benefit clubs, had been spent in vain.

After 1814, the only legal course of action open to the weavers was their right to petition Parliament and the Throne. It is not possible to establish if the union machinery set out in the 1809 Address was still in operation after the disappointments of 1813 and 1814, but that they were still active in some way is borne out in a letter to Lord Lonsdale from Sidmouth, the Home Secretary dated 14 October 1814,²² in which he mentions a combination of weavers and calico printers in Glasgow, Manchester, Dublin and Carlisle, and urges caution in eliciting information about them, "as the excitement of alarm would destroy the means which we now possess of obtaining information from that quarter".

By 1819 conditions in the weaving districts were desperate. In Carlisle and Glasgow the weavers petitioned the Regent to send them all to British America, and in yet another attempt to persuade the government to intervene on their behalf in the matter of wages, the weavers in Glasgow, the south of Scotland and the Borders went on strike. Writing of these years, William Fairish,²³ a Carlisle weaver, remembered the heart-rending stories his mother used to tell of the hunger and hardship they endured. A public subscription was opened, from which the weavers were paid 1s or 1s 6d a week to labour on the walk leading from the Castle to the Eden Bridges. But the weavers did not want this work – they wanted to earn a living wage at the loom. "They are exceeding ungrateful and insulting", complained the Town Clerk, William Hodgson, to Lord Lonsdale, "they have set up a large stone with the inscription written in chalk 'A Great Charity', alluding to their employment, and those who administer the benevolence of the public can scarce calculate upon civility".²⁴

Apart from drawing the attention of the authorities and the public to their plight, and demonstrating their solidarity, there is little that the weavers could have expected to gain from a strike, as their employers were also experiencing difficult times. However, they convened a large meeting drawn from both sides of the Border, to be held on the Sands on 3 June 1819, and issued a handbill, signed by their leaders, Murdoch and Barr, pledging themselves for the good order of the meeting. On the appointed day the weavers marched through the streets of Carlisle "in regular files, their mournful silence and their peaceful laurel boughs bringing them considerable public sympathy".²⁵ There was little evidence of any violence or disturbance in the city during the strike, although the military were held in readiness. The only incident reported in the press was that "a considerable body of men burnt with vitriol, yarn being taken home by a "black-leg" weaver – after having first asked him to take it back to the manufacturer's house, which it seems he would not do". The *Journal* goes on to remark that the weavers' committee regretted "that politics had been introduced into a meeting convened solely for the purpose of procuring relief" and petitioned the Regent to send them to America. Many of the distressed weavers, it was said, "would be glad to receive assistance from the great disbursements charged on the country for the support of destitute prisoners".²⁶

However, after the repeal of the legislation that had protected their interests, the weavers had increasingly come to feel that only when they had a vote would they be able

to improve their situation. Thus, from 1819 onwards, the Carlisle weavers became closely identified with the Political Union movement, campaigning for a Radical Reform of Parliament, a reform which would include universal suffrage, annual parliaments and voting by ballot. From this time on, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from reports in the press whether the weavers' meetings were solely concerned with trade matters or were political in character, as even when they were ostensibly held to petition Parliament or the Regent on matters of trade, their petitions were in fact accompanied by demands for parliamentary reform.

Organized radicalism amongst the Carlisle weavers certainly had its beginnings in the strike of 1819. On New Year's Day 1817, Jeremiah Jollie of the *Carlisle Journal* had called a meeting to support Major Cartwright's demands for reform, but it was poorly attended by the Carlisle working classes. By the autumn of 1819, when they turned out for meetings of protest against the "Peterloo Massacre", the Carlisle weavers were well organised, with a Committee Room where they met to read the *Manchester Observer* (a Radical publication), regular open air class meetings, evening drilling exercises and route marches, a Female Radical Association, weekly subscriptions and a leader possessed of considerable powers of oratory and unbounded energy in the diminutive Scotsman Jemmy Weems, who seems to have arrived in Carlisle during the weavers' strike and who subsequently made full use of the opportunity it offered to set up the radical Political Union.

During the widespread strikes in the cotton districts that marked the early months of 1820, the spy Richmond claimed to be in touch with a "physical force" group of Radical weavers in Glasgow that had made contact with those in Carlisle,²⁷ but the only violence that seems to have taken place among the Carlisle weavers in the spring of 1820 is an incident mentioned in the *Carlisle Patriot* of 11 March, which also gives an interesting glimpse of the way the weavers ordered their affairs:

a court martial of weavers sentenced two of their number (one of them a committee member at the last turn out) to twelve lashes each for begging instead of minding their work. The one submitted with a good grace, the other ran off in search of a magistrate for a warrant.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Carlisle Radical Reformers were in contact with similar groups throughout the weaving areas. Late in 1819 they were visited by Brayshaw of Yeadon²⁸ who played a prominent part in the Scottish radical movement, and for a time tried to follow his suggestion of abstaining from all excisable articles, such as tea, sugar and snuff, as a protest against the burden of taxation. But the passing of the Six Acts which prohibited the weavers' drilling exercises, severely curtailed public meetings and placed heavy restrictions on their reading matter, effectively finished a movement that for a few months had raised the weavers' hopes of uniting beneath their tri-colour flags and Caps of Liberty to bring about a reform of Parliament.

The Acts against combinations were repealed in 1824, but by this time the great distance of Carlisle from the large centres of the trade was resulting in the loss of orders and other business opportunities, and the quality of the weavers' work was suffering from the numbers of unskilled men who were turning to the trade, so that any attempts they might make to increase the effectiveness of the union were almost inevitably foredoomed to failure. Moreover, the weavers were now faced with the introduction of the powerloom, which further depressed their employment at a time (1826-27) when they were to suffer the most serious peace-time recession the cotton trade had yet known.

Deprived of any legal protection for their trade since the repeal of 5 Eliz. C4 in 1813-1814, and with their Radical activities circumscribed by the passing of the Six Acts in 1820, it was hardly surprising that many of the weavers should have had resort to violence. In Carlisle, this was particularly evident in the events of the 1826 election when a man, a young woman and a child were accidentally killed when the military were given orders to fire over the heads of a mob in Caldewgate, and Sir Philip Musgrave was imprisoned in a weaver's house where, some claimed, he was given a forcible lesson in weaving. But other weavers, still seeking to act within the law, took the quite unprecedented step of nominating their own candidate – “Radical Billy” James of Barrock Lodge. Although James had represented the city since 1820, he had been passed over in favour of Sir J. G. R. Graham, because the local whigs felt that his politics were too extreme. When James did not campaign himself, a poor weaver, “Honest Tom Blacklock”, supervised every aspect of this stormy election on his behalf, the first occasion on which a member of the Carlisle working-classes had stepped out of the crowd and taken an active part in the conduct of a Parliamentary election.²⁹

In November 1826, the Carlisle weavers petitioned the House of Lords, declaring that they could not expect to survive their present distress, if at all, but by some lingering disease: and thousands of persons debated whether it were better for them to die of hunger or on the scaffold . . . for they could not, even with their utmost labour procure when in employment more than 4s a week, which must be obvious to all mankind, cannot maintain them in existence.³⁰

But the weavers did have some bright moments. In the renewed agitation for Parliamentary Reform in 1830 and 1831, they played an active part. On 1 May 1831, James Weemys the weaver who had led the Radical Reformers in 1819, addressed a meeting of over 3,000 weavers on the Sands, urging them to refrain from taking employment as tory “Bludgeon” men at the next election, so that the whigs might be returned and the Reform Bill become a reality. It would not give them the reform that they had hoped for, but it was the first step. In the Grand Procession organised to celebrate the passing of the Reform Bill, the weavers claimed, and were reluctantly accorded, pride of place at the head of the Trades’ section, pointing out that they had been the first to agitate for reform and producing a banner from 1819 to prove it. As the most numerous section of the working community they were well represented, bearing the flags of their trades and districts on which were inscribed such slogans as “The Rights of Man”, “The Majesty of the People”, “Cheap Bread – Cheap Government” and “The Producers of the Nation’s Wealth Deserve their Rights”.³¹ Unfortunately, their euphoria was to be short-lived: with the cholera epidemic sweeping the country, the *Carlisle Journal* feared that the destitute weavers were likely to fall an easy prey to the disease. Investigating the conditions in Caldewgate:

the committee set up to relieve the distress did not find half a dozen serviceable blankets among fifty families. In many instances whole families of five, six or seven individuals were found huddled in one small bed, the covering of which consisted of little more than a few rags. The miserable beds and utter destitution of all bedding which the houses of hundreds exhibited will not be easily effaced from the memories of those who witnessed them . . . great numbers had no beds but merely a little straw with an old wrapper thrown upon it.³²

Although there was a little improvement in 1836, the weavers had come to realise that the only way that weaving could provide a livelihood was for the Government to regulate the trade by means of Boards of Trade, and to this end they now directed their efforts,

eventually succeeding in having a Royal Commission set up to look into their affairs in 1838.

In 1836 the Carlisle weavers, in an attempt to break the monopoly of the Dixons and Fergusons, sent J. B. Hanson to Glasgow to ask the manufacturers there to put out work in Carlisle. One Glasgow manufacturer told Hanson that they could purchase in Manchester goods produced by the Messrs Dixon of Carlisle, and take them to Glasgow more cheaply than they could manufacture them in Glasgow itself. Because of yet another recession in trade this suggestion came to nothing.³³ The Royal Commission of 1838 sent their Assistant Commissioners to tour the weaving districts. Their experience in Carlisle is set out in the *Carlisle Journal* of 30 June 1838, and provides a graphic description of the local weaving trade. By 1838, even the best and most experienced weavers earned no more than 10s a week for a 12- to 14-hour working day, and when the necessary deductions were made for candles, coal and rent of loom, they were left with only about 3s 6d to feed and clothe their families. Many families managed on less: Fairish as a child could not remember a joint of meat of any kind upon his father's table, "and once, for six long and weary weeks no bread entered the door".³⁴ The weavers' committee calculated that there were 994 families (a total of 3,814 persons, and approximately one fifth of the population) employed in the trade at this time, and although the number of looms had remained constant in the town for the previous sixteen years, there was now a considerable decline in the surrounding villages.

From the evidence given by J. B. Hanson, who had been apprenticed to the trade in 1818, and was at this time prominent in the Chartist movement as well as being the weavers' spokesman, it appears that the union in Carlisle was at an end because the men could not afford the subscriptions. With this opinion John Barr concurred:

and whether it was or not, he did not think it calculated to raise the condition of the weaver . . . but men in a state of desperation will catch at straws, and this induces designing men to get them into unions which can effect no good purpose . . . nothing can save the trade of the weaver if the Government cannot intervene.

Barr believed that weaving "was a business at which no man can ever again obtain a comfortable and respectable livelihood".

But Carlisle had little to offer in the way of alternative employment apart from labouring, an occupation to which the weavers were normally physically unsuited. Nor were they properly clothed and shod for outdoor work. Other trade associations did their best to keep them out, especially the spinners, for when spinners went on strike the manufacturers would try to get weavers to take their place. In December 1841, at the height of the Chartist agitation (which the weavers strongly supported), the Mayor, aldermen and council petitioned the Commons claiming that there were no fewer than 398 families living on casual charity, and more than a quarter of the working people were unable to earn more than 1s 2d a week, "of which the greatest number are handloom weavers, numbering some 572 families".³⁵ And ten years later, things were no better, as the *Carlisle Journal* noted on 7 February 1851, when pawn shops were overflowing with the possessions of weavers who had pawned even their pitiful bedclothes to provide food.

A striking feature of the Carlisle papers in the 1850s is the number of letters from emigrants in Canada and Australia, whose glowing and highly literate accounts of life in the colonies urged those at home to follow them. Those at home, led by Hanson, decided to oppose the manufacturers once more by setting up their own Carlisle Co-operative

Society of Weavers into which about 200 weavers each undertook to pay £1, and bound themselves to work in the “free” weaving shops – those that were not bonded to the manufacturers.³⁶ There is evidence too of a weavers’ co-operative known as The Cumberland Free-Labour Gingham Company which received cotton from non-slave American estates, and wove gingham to send in exchange.³⁷ The manufacturers, however, did their best to put a stop to these enterprises by negotiating with the proprietors of the free shops to take their premises on lease for a fixed and sure payment, a move which further restricted the weavers’ opportunities.

Handloom weaving lingered in Carlisle until the late 1870s,³⁸ but in the latter years of the trade, emigration and opportunities for other kinds of employment ensured that there was work to go round. By the beginning of 1864 the *Journal* was able to report that the weavers were now pretty well employed and receiving better wages, and that none were on the Relief Committee’s books.³⁹

The chroniclers of Carlisle’s history have devoted little attention to the affairs of the weavers. Casualties of the Industrial Revolution, theirs was not a success story, and apart from a few tiny, dark houses in the closes off Caldewgate and the roads they were set to make in order to earn the charitable disbursements of their fellow men – the Weavers’ Walk by the Castle and the paths by the Hyssop Well – few traces of them remain. For many life must have been full of suffering and despair. Yet, despite the fact that Carlisle people may have had cause to be alarmed by their actions, it was more frequently reported that they were “deserving men, who bore their afflictions in an exemplary manner, and who well merited the charity of their more fortunate neighbours”.⁴⁰

Notes and References

- ¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin edition 1963), 344.
- ² Duncan Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers* (Cambridge 1967), 139.
- ³ A. E. Musson, *British Trade Unions 1800-1875* (Macmillan, 1972).
- ⁴ E. Hughes, *North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century*, London, II (1965), 362-3.
- ⁵ E. Baines, *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain*, (1835), 417.
- ⁶ *Carlisle Journal*, 5 May 1933.
- ⁷ M. Creighton, *Carlisle* (London, 1889), 193, for summary.
- ⁸ *App. to Second Report of Commissioners . . . State of Large Towns and Populous Districts, 1845, sub.*, Carlisle, p. 213. Copy in C.R.O.
- ⁹ D. J. W. Mawson, “Langthwaite Cotton Mill”, CW2, lxxvi, 160. This paper provides a background to the Carlisle cotton industry and quotes this advertisement in full.
- ¹⁰ D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, E. P. Thompson, *Albion’s Fatal Tree* (London, 1975), 318.
- ¹¹ D/MH, vol I, C.R.O. (weavers’ petition, 1786). The journeymen weavers of Kendal were also trying to improve their position in 1786, and in the late summer were involved in several riots and outrages (F. Nicholson and E. Axon, *Nonconformity in Kendal* (Kendal, 1915)).
- ¹² *Report from the Committee on the Petitions of Several Cotton Weavers, etc.*, P. P. 1809, (LII) 111.
- ¹³ Letter, William Cookson, Leeds, to Earl Fitzwilliam (Public Record Office, H.O. 43/66).
- ¹⁴ *Address of the Operative Cotton Weavers*, M8. 03, Jackson collection, Carlisle Public Library.
- ¹⁵ For a full account of the Scottish Weavers see A. Aspinall, *The Early English Trade Unions*, (London, 1949), 138 ff., and also W. Roach, “The Career of Alexander Baillie Richmond and the Scottish Radicals”, *Scottish Historical Review*, April 1972.
- ¹⁶ Deposition of Thomas Whittaker, H.O. 42/121 (1812).
- ¹⁷ Report of the spy “B” or Bent, H.O. 40/1. (Apr./May 1812).
- ¹⁸ J. Mayer to unknown correspondent, 11 Feb. 1812. (H.O. 42/120), quoted by Aspinall, *op. cit.*, 120.
- ¹⁹ *Carlisle Journal*, 25 April 1812.

- ²⁰ *Carlisle Journal*, 18 July 1812.
- ²¹ *Carlisle Journal*, 11 April 1812.
- ²² Sidmouth to Lord Lonsdale: H.O. 42/140, quoted by Aspinall; *op. cit.*
- ²³ William Fairish, *Autobiography* (privately printed n.d. [1889]), Carlisle Public Library, ref. 53B.
- ²⁴ Hodgson to Lonsdale, C.R.O. D/Lons/Lett. 1819.
- ²⁵ *Carlisle Journal*, 26 June, 1819.
- ²⁶ *Carlisle Journal*, 26 June 1819.
- ²⁷ Roach, *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ Hodgson to Lonsdale, C.R.O. D/Lons/L/168.
- ²⁹ R. S. Ferguson, *Cumberland and Westmorland M.P.'s 1660-1867*, (Carlisle, 1871), 286-9.
- ³⁰ *Carlisle Patriot*, 1 Dec. 1826.
- ³¹ *Carlisle Patriot*, 8 June 1832.
- ³² *Carlisle Journal*, 14 June 1832.
- ³³ *Carlisle Journal*, 14 July 1838.
- ³⁴ Fairish, *op. cit.*
- ³⁵ E. Hughes, *op. cit.*, 364-5.
- ³⁶ *Carlisle Patriot*, 4 June 1853.
- ³⁷ The Cumberland Co-operative Free-Labour Gingham company is mentioned in *The Slave*, an anti-slavery magazine published in Newcastle, July 1853. I am indebted to K. Corfield, Manchester, for this information.
- ³⁸ *Carlisle Journal*, 29 April 1933, 5 May 1933.
- ³⁹ *Carlisle Journal*, 7 Feb. 1864.
- ⁴⁰ *Carlisle Journal*, 14 Feb. 1851.

