5 The League, Cheap Bread and the Irish

Amid the early-morning gloom of 2 June 1841, the final preparations were under way for an open-air ACLL meeting to be held later that day in Stevenson Square, Manchester. Even at this early hour the die of confrontation was cast. During the previous few days ‘bills in great profusion’ had been posted on the walls, not only of Manchester, but of towns across south Lancashire summoning Chartists in ‘countless thousands’ to put down the ‘humbug claptrap of the League’. For its part the League was also well prepared; its speakers list included the Mayor of Manchester, Sir Thomas Potter, and the most prominent national leader of the League, Richard Cobden. Also on the platform were to be Frederick Warren, President of the OACLA, and Father Daniel Hearne, the leading Catholic priest of Manchester’s large Irish population. Anticipating interference from the Chartists, Cobden’s lieutenant, Edward Watkin, had assembled what he called the Anti-Corn Law ‘Police’ – ‘about a score of “boys” all ready for work’ and armed with ‘good blackthorn sticks’. By and large the Anti-Corn Law ‘Police’ were members of the Manchester Irish community.

Arriving at the Square shortly after 6.00 a.m., Watkin found a few Chartists already there, and ‘cheek by jowl’ with the hustings being assembled for the League meeting a platform for Chartist orators was under construction. By the time the League proceedings commenced at about 10.30 a.m. the crowd had built up to an estimated 20 000, densely packing the Square. A large group of Chartists occupied an area close to the League hustings, and no sooner did the speakers commence than they raised a number of flags and banners so as to obscure the view of the remainder of the crowd. Archibald Prentice, a League stalwart and historian, recalled ‘One of a large size inscribed “Down with the Whigs”’ which ‘especially obscured the sight’. Other Chartist banners displayed equally provocative sentiments such as ‘No New Poor Law’. Over the next few minutes a scene of extraordinary violence and tumult ensued which the Northern Star described as a ‘Second Peterloo’. When the Chartists refused to remove the offending banners League supporters attempted to pull them down, but, according to Watkin, the Chartists ‘immediately resisted’ and ‘showed their preparedness for a row by drawing forth short staves…which they began to lay about them’. Watkin’s Anti-Corn Law
'Police' put their blackthorn sticks to good use in response. Thus Prentice's description of those being bludgeoned by the Chartists as 'unarmed' and innocent was as fanciful as the Northern Star's claim that harmless protesters had been ruthlessly set upon by the League. The mêlée ended as abruptly as it had commenced, when the Chartists beat a retreat through the crowd and left the Square by Lever Street.

In the aftermath of 2 June, charges and counter-charges of 'brutal conduct' were exchanged with righteous indignation; flags and banners were repaired; and a few heads were bandaged. An event of notoriety at the time, this clash has set the tone for much of the historiography devoted to the relationship between the two great movements. Modern historians of Chartism have often portrayed the 'middle-class' ACLL and organised 'working-class' Chartism as divided by a chasm that was difficult to bridge. Repeated references to violent confrontations have tended to promote the view that in Manchester, the home of both movements, the relationship was characterised by a peculiar ferocity. David Jones, for example, mentions the cooperative agreements between Chartists and the League in a handful of towns, but in his only reference to Manchester he points to the 'bloody' confrontation in Stevenson Square in June 1841. Similarly, Edward Royle contrasts the background to Chartism at Birmingham and Manchester which in the latter precluded 'any brotherly co-operation between the Chartists and the League' and resulted in 'friction and mistrust' from 1839 to 1842. Donald Read quotes a disgruntled supporter of the League who had written to the Manchester Guardian in 1842 that since its inception the League 'have not had a meeting where the public were admitted, which has not been upset by the Chartists', to justify his emphatic statement that the agitation of the League 'added to the atmosphere of class difference in Lancashire'.

The emphasis on violent confrontation, however, obscures the rank-and-file Chartist attitude to corn-law repeal. It also fails to account for the Irish dimension of the conflict or the role of the OACLA, and it offers no explanation of Watkin's admission that the crowd in Stevenson Square had been 'Chartists to a man'. There is a need then to return to the Square to linger over the dramatis personae with more care as a starting-point to a better understanding of the Chartists' attitude to repeal and their relationship with the Anti-Corn Law movement and the Manchester Irish community.

As their banners made clear, the Chartists sought to disrupt the proceedings of 'the Whigs'. It is important to work out what this meant in Manchester in 1841. First, it meant the owners of the hated factories, the 'hospitals of disease', that dominated the Manchester townscape; the 'blood