In 1848, with the presentation of the third petition praying for universal suffrage, Chartism reached its third and final climax. This was less intense than the two preceding ones of 1839 and 1842, and foreshadowed the movement’s definite decline. As in 1839, the petition’s rejection sparked off clandestine preparations for violent outbreaks, this time both in the north and in London, but the Chartist risings at Bradford and elsewhere were soon overpowered by the combined forces of police and military. Wholesale arrests of the movement’s leaders – both national and local – began in June 1848. Within a few months, the futility of all attempts to establish the Charter by force had been brought home to even the most militantly inclined.

Those few who remained committed to the cause despite this major – and, as it turned out, lethal – defeat assembled in London at the end of March 1851 and adopted a Programme of Agitation, which spelt out what had by then become encapsulated within the slogan ‘The Charter and Something More’. This programme differed from the previous petitions in that the emphasis had shifted from the Six Points to the social reforms to be introduced subsequent to the winning of the Charter. Foremost among these was the nationalisation of land and the exclusive levying of tax on land and accumulated property.¹

Despite the shift of emphasis, which testified both to the attempt at tapping fresh reservoirs of support and to the influence exerted by socialist ideas, the programme essentially failed to transcend the radical frame of reference that had been the hallmark of Chartist ideology (as argued in Chapter 2). Still attributing the ultimate cause of working-class misery to ‘class government’, the programme put forward the extension of the franchise to working men as the precondition for implementing the social changes outlined. This inability to accommodate the

J. Schwarzkopf, Women in the Chartist Movement
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reforms enacted by the state over the past decade or so (as claimed in Chapter 2) lay at the heart of the utter failure to restore to the movement the mass following it had once commanded. Thus Chartism petered out, although the NCA dragged on a crippled existence until 1860 when it was finally dissolved.

The falling away of mass support was of course also reflected in the dwindling number of women involved in Chartism after 1848. There are, however, indications of some degree of female presence where local associations did survive.² *The People's Paper* was devoted to chronicling Chartist activities, and judging by it reports in 1858 – the last year of its existence – social events had by then come to preponderate over directly political ones, and it was predominantly in the former that women continued to participate. In the period of Chartism's long-drawn-out death, they were completely marginalised.

In Sheffield, however, women, at least initially, adopted a rather different course. The Sheffield Female Radical Association had evolved in 1839³ and was one of the longest-lived FCAs in England, continuing until 1851. In that year, it began a new phase in its existence. In January, Mrs Rooke, one of Sheffield FCA's members, received a letter from the Chelmsford Quaker Anne Knight. She had been born in 1792 and was to live until 1862, devoting her life to conducting a single-handed campaign for women's rights. She had been involved in the anti-slavery cause, but the refusal of the Anti-Slavery Conference held in London in June 1840 to accept female delegates deeply affronted her, hardening her determination to advocate women's rights. Apart from lecturing on this issue at peace and temperance gatherings, she brought out two-inch leaflets with quotations from whatever source she could find in support of female suffrage. The first of these seems to have appeared around 1847. In it she based her demand for female franchise on the necessity of bringing to bear on the country at large the combined qualities of men and women, conceived of as complements, in order to ensure the best possible government of the nation.⁴ Moreover, she wrote copious letters and followed and tracked down every person or organisation that could remotely be influenced in favour of female enfranchisement. One of her correspondents was Isaac Ironside.

Ironside, a Chartist and Owenite, had by the late 1840s become the undisputed leader of Sheffield Chartism. In 1851, he passed on to Anne the names of seven local Chartist women eager to take