

Early Banners

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The interest in popular movements which has been shown by historians since the last war is now moving away from the purely organisational and institutional aspects, to take in a greater concern with the culture and the artifacts of the movements. Many radical movements borrowed ideas from the traditions of carnival, fairground and religious procession to bring forward their ideas. The silken flag and the painted or embroidered banner evoked something of the atmosphere of a carnival, but at the same time the ideas of loyalty and dedication of a military flag or a religious icon. In many of the clashes with authority in the early days of the labour movement, troops or police moved in to capture the banners, as they did at Peterloo and at the breaking of Chartist demonstrations.

The banners which these earlier radicals carried represented the co-operation of men and women. Women embroidered and designed many of the most striking emblems, and in the Chartist period they carried their own special banners as well. Alas, we have only written descriptions in the main, and shall never see, for example, a banner which the Carlisle Female Chartists carried at a meeting they held to raise money for the Chartist leaders arrested after the 1839 rising in Wales. The banner was white with, on one side, the keeper of the Bastille about to part the mother and her children, with the motto: *'Tyrants beware — think ye a mother's love is not stronger than your laws.'* and on the other, the same inhuman monster parting man and wife with:

'Whom God has joined together let no man put asunder'.

They were, of course, protesting against the Whig Poor Law which ruled that families should be separated in workhouses before any relief was given to unemployed families. This was the women's own protest joined to the wider demand for working class suffrage. For them the vote was a protection against the attack on the working class family and the working class community. Later in the century, when the Suffragette movement came out on to the streets, the banners its members carried made the specific demand for votes for women, and in doing so produced their own contribution to this branch of popular art.

