



‘Do the magistrates think of putting down our meeting by acts of violence? I for one think they do, and should we be attacked today, come what will, life, death, or victory, I am determined no house shall cover my head tonight. I am quite ready to stand by the law, and not to give our tyrants the slightest advantage in attacking us in sections; but should they employ force against us. I am repelling attack by attack.’

**Feargus O’Connor, Speech to the General Convention
of the Industrious Classes, 24th August 1837**



O’Connor’s statue in Nottingham’s Arboretum

Feergus O'Connor (1794-1855)

*Mike Pentelow
&
Peter Arkell*

Mike Pentelow has been a newspaper reporter and member of the National Union of Journalists for more than 40 years. Peter Arkell has been a photographer for a similar period, specialising in social issues and the environment.

‘Chartism had all the characteristics, except experience, that mark a modern Labour movement, including the doctrine of the class-war, and the conflict as to political and industrial methods. Its chief organ, the *Poor Man's Guardian*, defied the stamp-tax to which all newspapers were liable, and appeared at a penny, with the announcement on each number: ‘Established contrary to Law to try the power of Might against Right’. Nowadays such a contest would be quickly decided, but in those times the State was less powerful or less determined. The *Poor Man's Guardian* was closely connected with ‘The London National Union of the Working Classes’, founded in 1831, a body of great importance in the history of Socialist ideas. Starting from Owenism, it gave rise to the Chartist movement and to discussions in which such modern policies as Syndicalism were (except in name) invented and first advocated.’

Bertrand Russell

Our attention was caught by the following entry about the Chartist, Feergus O'Connor, in Pentelow & Arkell's entertaining guidebook, A Pub Crawl through History: The Ultimate Boozers' Who's Who (Janus Publishing, £16.99)

* * *

*Land of Liberty, Peace and Plenty
Long Lane, Heronsgate, Rickmansworth,
Herts, WD3 5BS
(Tel: 01923 282226). Free house*

This pub takes its name from an adjoining Chartist settlement called O'Connorville, after its founder Feergus O'Connor. This was

a land experiment, organised by O'Connor, to provide smallholdings to working men as an alternative to factory employment. Shares were advertised in the *Northern Star* in 1845 and those who bought them for a few pennies a week qualified for a lottery for plots of land. Enough money flooded in to purchase five settlements around the country, the first of which was 103 acres at Heronsgate, which was to be divided into thirty-five plots, each with a cottage; previously the entire farm was cultivated by three men and a boy.

Because of legal difficulties setting up the Chartist National Land Company, the land was bought by O'Connor for £1,860 in March 1846. He also supervised the building of the cottages and captained the bricklayers in a cricket game on the village common in which they beat the carpenters. A school was also built, and crops sown in time for the grand opening on May Day 1847, when the settlers took over their land.

They were welcomed by O'Connell, who warned them,

'There is a beer shop adjoining your land; avoid it, I beseech you, as a pestilence, for if any enemy can be the means of ousting you from the lovely spot on which it was my pride to locate you, it will be man's greatest, most vicious and inviting enemy, drunkenness.'

Apparently, he liked a drop of brandy himself. That particular beer shop became the Land of Liberty, in honour of the Chartist settlement, by the 1870s; although it did not get a full licence until after the Second World War, which meant it could not sell spirits up until then.

In 1848, a parliamentary select committee ruled that the National Land Company scheme was illegal and had to be closed down. In 1851, a Winding Up Act was passed and all the plots of land were sold in the years from 1853 to 1858. It had been a controversial experiment even in Chartist circles, many of whom saw it as a distraction from the main political thrust of the movement.

O'Connor was the most charismatic of the Chartist leaders and an impassioned orator, who always drew huge crowds. In 1837, he founded the *Northern Star*, a weekly Chartist journal published in Leeds, which had a national sale of over 40,000. In 1840, he was prominent in setting up the National Charter Association, which was the first national membership based organisation in Britain.

An article he wrote in the *Northern Star*, after the Newport uprising of November 1839, led to him being found guilty of seditious libel in 1840 and he was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment in York Castle. When he was released in August 1841, after sixteen months, there were huge celebrations and poet Thomas Cooper wrote of him:

The lion of freedom comes from his den,
We'll rally around him again and again.

An O'Connor Liberation Medal was also struck with a portrait of him and the words 'Universal Suffrage and No Surrender'.

In March 1843 he was charged again, this time at Lancaster, for sedition, conspiracy, tumult and riot, after 'exciting disaffection by unlawfully encouraging a stoppage of labour'. But a procedural error meant he, and fifty-seven others, were never sentenced. In the same year, he published a book called *A Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms*.

In November 1847, he was returned to Parliament for Nottingham as a Chartist MP; in 1835 he had been elected as MP for County Cork, but was not allowed to take his seat, because of lack of property qualifications.

In June 1852, he was pronounced insane (possibly in the final stages of syphilis) and he was confined to an asylum in Chiswick, where he remained until the month of his death, when his sister took him into her care at home. His funeral at Kensal Green, on 10 September 1855, was attended by 50,000 people.

O'Connor lives on through a statue in the south-east corner of the Arboretum in Nottingham (known as the People's Park), near the corner of Peel Street and Addison Street, and a plaque at the Memorial Hall in Chorleywood, which marked the 150th anniversary of O'Connorville.

Charlie Chaplin was a regular in the Land of Liberty when filming at the nearby Denham Studios. He particularly liked the cold ham on the bone served by landlady, Vi Cornhill. One day, she ran out of ham and offered to provide any other order he wanted. So he suggested the order of the boot (the sack). So she found an old boot, cooked it and displayed it on the bar; reminiscent of Chaplin's film *The Gold Rush* in which he ate an old boot.

We are grateful to the authors and publishers for their permission to reprint this text (www.januspublishing.co.uk)