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THE NORTHEASTERN MINERS' STRUGGLE
FOR THE FRANCHISE, 1872-74*

It is a common assumption that the Second Reform Act of 1867 met the franchise demands of industrial workers who were adult householders, and that the deficiency of the legislation was its omission of the agricultural laborers. This is largely true, but not entirely so. For, due to the ways the act was interpreted in practice by electoral officials, some qualified urban industrial workers remained excluded, while all industrial workers outside of borough boundaries remained voteless.

Such was the case with a large portion of the coal-mining population of Northeastern England. The broadened franchise was applied unevenly in boroughs, so that miners living a few miles from one another who were heads of households and residents in borough districts were nevertheless treated differently. Meanwhile, their co-workers on the other side of the boundary between the borough and the county grew restless at their total exclusion. From this anomalous condition there developed in 1872 an agitation, which extended over the next dozen years. Ironically, the broad demand for the wholesale enfranchisement of miners grew out of a relatively minor question, the attempt to participate in a local election. When the claimants met resistance from electoral officials, their demands broadened and eventually spread to a general appeal for further reform of Parliament. As the movement grew, it not only recalled echoes of Chartism, but also took on overtones of republicanism, and it began to attract national attention. Eventually, it played some role in the decision to equalize the borough and county franchise in 1884.

The movement sheds light not only on the process of franchise extension, but also on the renewed organizational strength of the coal miners and the continuing reformist commitment of late nineteenth-century English working men. The agitation was clearly an outgrowth

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of the recently revived miners' unions in Northumberland and Durham. Further, it marked a repoliticization of the miners after their concentration on industrial action since the Chartist period. After the Chartist failures of the 1840s, the miners had developed a "no politics" tradition in their union organizations and, except for lobbying for specific mining legislation, had avoided political involvement. That attitude now changed, and, in the words of one miners' leader in 1873, "They would utilize the power which belonged to their unions and would make them the instruments by which they would at last obtain the means of electing members of Parliament by whom they would be directly represented."¹ Organizationally, the effort rested upon the unions, although it was separate from them, and very early it set as its goal the winning of at least one, and possibly two, parliamentary seats for miners' leaders. Yet in carrying out the campaign, the miners maintained continual contact with sympathetic middle-class radicals of the district and re-established the long standing alignment of middle- and working-class reformers dedicated to the parliamentary system.

Although the miners' franchise agitation has been noted in a number of accounts,² the full dimensions of the movement have never been explored. The purpose of this paper is to make such a comprehensive examination.

The problems of the miners arose from the complicated differences in qualification for the franchise. A variety of local-government and parliamentary franchises operated after the Second Reform Act, but the essential requisite for admission to the franchise was occupation of property. The first step toward gaining the vote was to secure inclusion of the voter's name as an occupier in the Poor Law rate-books, which formed the base for the electoral rolls.

Miners found themselves in an anomalous and inequitable position with regard to the occupation requirement in two respects. The first affected miners living in the counties and the second concerned many of the miners living in boroughs. The factory workman occupying a household of any value in the borough could vote while his exact

¹ *Miners' Advocate*, June 21, 1873. The Northumberland organization grew out of Thomas Burt's foundation of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association in June 1864, while the Durham union grew out of a bitter strike in 1869. By the early 1870s, both unions had become well established and had achieved many gains for their members.

² For discussion of the miners' franchise movement see Richard Fynes, *The Miners of Northumberland and Durham* (Sunderland, 1923), pp. 269-77, and E. Welbourne, *The Miners' Unions of Northumberland and Durham* (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 197-98.

counterpart among the agricultural labourers, the rural foundrymen or the miners in the county could not, unless the property they occupied met the minimum county value qualification of the 1867 act. Obviously very few did. The miners felt their exclusion especially bitterly because they were workers in a large and vital industry. They were highly skilled and comparatively well paid among workmen, and for their own safety and welfare they had long sought protective legislation.

The extension of borough boundaries in 1867 had brought many colliery settlements within parliamentary borough limits and had opened the way for men living there to vote, provided they could become recognized as properly qualified occupiers of households. But the second grievance arose out of their difficulty in securing admission to the electoral rolls. Some were immediately listed as occupiers by the Poor Law officials and experienced no difficulty, but the men living in housing provided by their employers, as was the common custom in colliery settlements, encountered a further obstacle. The act did not enfranchise employees who occupied premises as a necessary condition of their employment, such as domestic servants. In the case of the miners, those living in colliery housing frequently were considered by the guardians to be in the position of servants, and therefore were denied the critical listing as occupiers. Such was the case with many miners living in the North-eastern coal field and the problem was most acute in the borough of Morpeth.

Morpeth was an ancient parliamentary borough, which returned two members until 1832 when it was reduced to one. During its early history the borough consisted of the pleasant county market town on the banks of the Wansbeck, and its society had a closeness which excluded anyone without ancestral ties to the town. The place had an agricultural character, and its life was geared to serving the farmers and wealthy county families of the surrounding area. For much of its parliamentary history its politics had been dominated by the lords of Morpeth manor, the earls of Carlisle, although the members of the several companies of freemen had struggled to assert themselves against the Howard (Carlisle) influence in the eighteenth century.¹

The redistribution accompanying the 1867 Reform Act changed this greatly. The boundaries of the parliamentary borough were extended to include not only Morpeth, but also the coal port of Blyth and the colliery villages of Choppington, Newsham, Bedlington,

¹ For a discussion of the pre-1832 politics of the borough and a revision of the Webbs' views on Morpeth, see J. M. Fewster, "The Webbs and the Borough of Morpeth", in: *English Historical Review*, LXXXI (1966), pp. 236-55.

Beaside, Barrington, Cowpen, Cambois, and others. The increase in the size of the parliamentary borough completely transformed its population characteristics, turning the market-town element into a small minority and embracing thousands of pit workers. Yet the participation of the miners in parliamentary politics was not immediate because most of them were not recognized as occupiers by the Poor Law Guardians and, therefore, were not included on the electoral rolls until they protested their exclusion.

The agitation to win the franchise for the Morpeth miners arose out of a relatively minor issue at the small Northumbrian village of Choppington Guide Post. The village, like many others in the area, was without adequate water supply and sanitation. In 1871 an Irish miner named Thomas Glassey started a movement in the village for sanitary reform, and in spite of local opposition he secured the election of a local pit doctor, James Trotter, to the board of health. During the campaign, however, he discovered that only the miners occupying rented houses had the vote, while those in colliery houses were not included on the register. This led him to take up the broader question of the enfranchisement of the miners, although he always retained his interest in public health.

Glassey had already had considerable experience in organization. Although he was born in Ireland in 1844 and began work in the linen mills, he went to Scotland at thirteen and entered the mines. There he became an ardent trade unionist and adopted radical political ideas. His views and efforts to encourage union organization among the miners cost him a series of jobs, and finally black-listing drove him south to the region of the Tyne in 1867. He continued his organizing work in the Bedlington district and developed a reputation as a fiery agitator, who sometimes alarmed his co-workers by his vehemence.¹

Three other men joined Glassey in the campaign to win the vote for the Morpeth miners. Two of them were radical doctors, reminiscent of the lower middle-class professional men who had so frequently

¹ S. S. Rayner, "Thomas Glassey - Queensland Labour Leader", in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland*, IV (1949), pp. 231-52. I am indebted to Professor Douglas Pike, Australian National University and editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* for calling this and other biographical information on Glassey to my attention. Glassey remained in the Morpeth-Bedlington district, acting part of the time as the local Liberal Party agent, until 1884, when he emigrated to Australia. There he quickly became involved in the politics of Queensland, and he regarded his election to the Queensland parliament in 1888 as the first choice of a Labour candidate in Australia. He was a founder of the Labour Party in Australia, but disagreement with the pro-Boer leadership of the party led to his resignation in 1900. He lived until September 28, 1936, dying in Brisbane.

turned up alongside workingmen in the Chartist agitation thirty years earlier. They were James and Robert Trotter. The former was a pit doctor noted for his compassion to the poor, and it was he whose election to the local health board Glassey had secured earlier. Bedlington subsequently erected a monument in his honor. He and his brother supplied much of the intellectual leadership of the effort.¹ The third was Robert Elliott, a miner and a dialect poet of considerable local reputation, who often livened up political meetings with recitations of his work.²

They began their activity with several public meetings in the area of Choppington and Bedlington, and on Whit Monday, 1872, they held a conference at Choppington of miners resident within the parliamentary borough of Morpeth. The meeting organized the Working Men's Franchise Association with Robert Elliott as president and James Trotter as secretary. There then followed a series of frustratingly inconclusive encounters, which betrayed as much ignorance as obstinacy on the part of local officials. A deputation of men from each colliery approached the assistant overseer of Bedlington parish to test their claim for admission to the list of occupiers. They were referred to the overseers of the poor, who confessed ignorance of the subject. Subsequently, they sought to determine the exact boundaries of the parliamentary borough, but were unable to get information from either the Bedlington magistrates or the mayor of Morpeth. Finally in exasperation they consulted legal advice in Newcastle, and were urged to press their claim with the overseers to be placed on the electoral register. Reports from Newsham colliery in Blyth parish and Houghton-le-Street in county Durham of miners being admitted in those places encouraged them to go on.³

Meanwhile the Franchise Association leaders began a campaign of public meeting and speaking throughout the district to arouse support for their effort. The two Trotters, Thomas Glassey and Robert Elliott toured the colliery villages of Morpeth and the surrounding area, lecturing on the importance of gaining the franchise for miners and urging them to submit registration claims while the period for claims was still open. Local committees to work with the central committee of the association were set up, and they expanded their appeal into

¹ For comment on the Trotters, see Thomas Burt, M.P., D.C.L., *Pitman and Privy Councillor: An Autobiography* (London, 1924), pp. 212.

² For his work, see Robert Elliott, *Poems and Recitations* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1877). A copy can be seen in the Local History Collection, Newcastle upon Tyne City Libraries.

³ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, June 4 and 5, 1872.

areas not within the parliamentary borough on the grounds that miners in the county district would benefit vicariously from the political voice of those living within Morpeth. On this ground they sought and got "moral and pecuniary support" from outside the borough.

The speakers offered a variety of reasons for the miners to become politically active. They complained of bad sanitary conditions and water supply, high food prices and poor housing. They expressed dissatisfaction with the Mines Regulation Act of 1872, and argued that it could have been improved had miners had their own voice in Parliament. They attacked Sir George Grey, the sitting Liberal member, for allegedly not representing miners' interests during consideration of the bill, but the attack brought a defense of Grey from Thomas Burt, secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association, and an apology from Robert Trotter.¹

Grey's effort notwithstanding, the leaders made it clear from the beginning that their most important objective was winning the Morpeth parliamentary seat for the miners and installing Thomas Burt as the representative of the borough. They boasted of 10,000 members in the union with £12,000 of capital behind them, which could be used to support Burt in parliament. In a manifesto of July they called for concerted action to win the next election in the borough:

"Such an event would mark an era in the history of this country, as we feel that many other boroughs would speedily follow our example, and in the course of a few more years, a new party composed of intelligent working men, would be formed in the House of Commons, who by the importance of the interests and immense number of working men they represented, would speedily become a power in the State and exercise a salutary influence on the conduct of public affairs."²

Trotter had contacted Burt on the possibility of his being a candidate, but Burt was unwilling to commit himself. While he was sympathetic with the franchise movement, he thought it advisable to secure the vote first and select a candidate later.³ But it suited Trotter's purpose to talk in terms of a specific and popular candidate, so he used Burt's name without hesitation, and throughout the period it was assumed that the nomination would be offered to Burt as soon as the miners were added to the register.

The effort to promote Burt's candidacy along with the franchise

¹ *Ibid.*, August 8 and 10, 1872.

² *Ibid.*, July 5, 1872.

³ Burt, *Autobiography*, p. 210.

agitation provoked strong opposition from supporters of Sir George Grey in the town of Morpeth. A meeting addressed by the Drs Trotter, Glassey and Elliott in early August broke up in disorder when several townspeople attacked the campaign to substitute Burt for the sitting member. The incident gave rise to a dialect poem entitled *The Morpeth Hubbabboo*, a humorous retelling of the event, which was frequently recited at later franchise meetings.¹ The poem had a more serious effect, however, in that it singled out specific Morpethians as being responsible for the uproar, and it resulted in a virtually complete boycott of certain shopkeepers and publicans by the mining population.² Although a number of townspeople later expressed sympathy with the miners, the strongest opposition to their enfranchisement and Burt's candidacy continued to come from the town.³

Internal opposition to the franchise movement came from one of the leaders of the Northumberland Miners' Association, Richard Fynes. Since the 1840s Fynes had been prominent in union and cooperative affairs in Northumberland, although he was no longer an active miner. In a letter to the editor of the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, he criticized the political approach of the franchise association, recommending a direct appeal to the colliery owners to report the miners resident in colliery housing to the Poor Law Guardians voluntarily.⁴ He also attacked the use of Burt's name as premature, and disagreed with the suggestion made by Glassey and others that union funds would be used in support of a designated candidate regardless of the individual views of members.

Fynes's letter brought quick response from the movement's leaders. They excused Glassey's pledge of union resources to support Burt's candidacy as "Irish exuberance", but they denied the rest of his case. Most damaging of all, they suggested the real reason for Fynes's opposition was that Burt, and not he, had been singled out as the future candidate of the miners. In compensation they offered him the consolation of support for South Northumberland or North Durham when the county franchise was made equal to the borough.⁵ This response threw Fynes on the defensive, and he denied coveting the candidacy for himself. His position was unconvincing to many miners, and he felt compelled to publish a pamphlet justifying his position

¹ Burt reported that authorship of the poem was generally attributed to James Trotter, but that Robert Elliott had told him that Robert Trotter had actually written it (Autobiography, p. 211).

² W. E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, reprint (New York, 1968), pp. 540-43.

³ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, October 1, 1872.

⁴ August 27, 1872.

⁵ *Ibid.*, August 29 and 30, September 3, 1872.

and his long service to the labor movement in the area.¹ His views had no serious effect on the agitation, however, and the following year when he published the history of the Northeastern miners, he related the struggle for the franchise, omitting any reference to his own position in the agitation.²

Although the Franchise Association used political methods to arouse and sustain interest among the miners in getting their names added to the electoral rolls, the achievement of the objective entailed a legalistic process. It required that miners appeal to the overseers of the poor to be included in the ratebook as proper occupiers, and therefore on the electoral list. If that failed, they then had to appeal to the revising barrister to insert their names when he reviewed the list later. The problems in this approach were that the guidelines for housing which was tied to employment were not clear, the records of the overseers of the poor were inefficiently kept, and the revising barristers were men with little knowledge and experience of election law.³

The movement of the summer was timed to coincide with the preparation of the next year's register and to make it possible for miners to submit claims to be considered by the revising barrister if they were not included on the register prepared by the overseers of the poor. In some cases, such as Blyth parish, a simple appeal to the overseers had been successful in gaining the inclusion of the names of miners occupying colliery housing. In Bedlington parish, however, where the overseers continued to refuse to list the miners, the claimants resorted to court action.

A number of claimants brought an action at petty sessions against the Bedlington overseers for wilfully omitting the names of certain miners from the occupiers' column of the ratebook. According to the registration act, the overseers were liable to £2 fine for each name so omitted. The justices ruled against the charge of wilful omission, but testimony divulged that the overseers had already included new claimants during the summer in the list of voters, and that they had been advised to include the miners as occupiers when the ratebook was reopened for new entries in October. The miners did not, therefore, succeed in penalizing the overseers, but they achieved the point in which they were interested – that their claims should be recognized on the ratebook.⁴

¹ Richard Fynes, *A Review of the Real and Sham Reformers Who Have Been Amongst the Miners for the Last Ten Years*, 2nd ed. (Blyth, 1872).

² Fynes, *The Miners of Northumberland and Durham*, pp. 269-77.

³ H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London, 1959), pp. 399-404.

⁴ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, September 7, 1872; *Morpeth Herald*, September 14, 1872.

Their next goal was to ensure their inclusion on the list of voters which would be reviewed by the local revising barrister in October. Their hopes were encouraged when the revising barrister at South Shields ruled in favor of Templeton miners residing within that borough. When testimony was presented that occupation of colliery houses was not required to perform colliery duties, that pitmen were compensated if they did not occupy colliery houses, and that they were not automatically required to leave the houses when employment terminated, he allowed all 240 claims.¹

The expectations of the claimants in the vicinity of Morpeth, however, were disappointed by the local revising barrister, Walter B. Trevelyan. He grouped the claims of the miners according to the collieries at which they worked, and disallowed almost all of them on one of two bases. In one case, including Newsham, Netherton and a few other collieries, the companies posted rules in their offices stating that occupation of a colliery house by a workman did not create a tenancy. Despite the fact there was no signed agreement between the workmen and their employers to this effect and that the notices had not been called to their attention, Trevelyan honored this notice as creating an agreement between the parties which invalidated the miners' claims. In the case of Choppington, Bebside, Bedlington and other collieries, the pitmen occupied their houses as tenants with no rule to the contrary, but since they had failed to apply for admission to the occupiers' column of the ratebook before it was last made up in the spring, he refused their claims on that ground.²

The disappointment of the Morpeth miners was great, particularly because of the inconsistency between the decisions there and in South Shields. Trevelyan did, however, seem prepared to accept as eligible voters persons whose names appeared in the occupiers' column of the ratebook, so the agents of the miners set about getting the workmen included in the following year. The overseers accepted the names in making up the new ratebook, and when the revising court met in September, 1873, Trevelyan accepted without hesitation the lists presented by the overseers, which included the occupiers of colliery houses. Thus at one stroke the registration of Morpeth increased from 2661 (1872) to 4916, and the increase was almost entirely composed of miners.³

In the meantime, however, the rebuff in the revision court of 1872 had infuriated the leaders of the franchise movement and caused

¹ Newcastle Daily Chronicle, October 1, 1872.

² Ibid., October 15, 16, 1872.

³ Ibid., September 29, 1873.

them to heighten their demands.¹ They turned from the strictly legalistic objective of admission of householders to the electoral rolls. Instead, in December 1872, they distributed a circular over the names of Elliott and James Trotter which set a new political target of universal manhood suffrage for both boroughs and counties:

“It has been found out that the so-called household suffrage in the boroughs is little better than a ‘mockery, a delusion and a snare’, and if they must agitate for the extension of the franchise, let them not seek after a brick and mortar one, but let them rather adopt the principle of ‘A man’s a man for a’ that’.”²

In order to dramatize the movement and arouse support throughout the kingdom, they called for a mass demonstration on the Newcastle Town Moor in the manner of the great demonstrations of the past.

Organization began at the end of December. The radical *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* heartily endorsed the movement.³ Indeed, throughout the franchise agitation the movement could count on the support of the *Chronicle’s* ex-Chartist editor, W. E. Adams, and its radical publisher, Joseph Cowen, Jr. A Northumberland delegate meeting at the end of December decided to extend an invitation to the miners of county Durham and members of all the trades of the district to join them in their agitation.

The Durham miners responded by forming the Durham County Franchise Association on January 11, but at first there was a divergence from Northumberland on whether to go for household suffrage or manhood suffrage. In Durham most of the mining population lived in the county area rather than within borough precincts, and they still had to achieve parity with the household suffrage of the boroughs. But a February meeting of the lodges of the Durham Miners’ Association opted overwhelmingly to join the Northumberland group for the whole program of manhood suffrage.⁴

Once this question was resolved, planning and preparation went ahead vigorously between the two counties. A committee composed of delegates from the district was set up and Joseph Cowen, Jr. was chosen as chairman. The date of April 12, the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter, was chosen for the demonstrations, a date which also coincided with the meeting of the Congress of Cooperative Societies of Great Britain in Newcastle. The committee quickly decided to

¹ Upon hearing the decision, Glassey stormed out of the court room and threatened, until quieted, to create a disturbance on the spot (Adams, pp. 539-40).

² *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, December 13, 1872.

³ January 4, 1873.

⁴ *Ibid.*, January 13, February 21, 1873.

extend participation beyond the miners to workers in any trade, and they urged that meetings be held in factories throughout the district to organize contingents for the procession.¹ Special trains were arranged to bring workers in from the outlying areas in both counties, a major change from the great Peterloo and Chartist demonstrations, when participants walked as much as fifteen miles each way to join the processions in Newcastle.

The committee followed a program of advance preparation for the meeting such as had become familiar in previous movements of agitation in the region. Preliminary meetings were held throughout the district and the original leaders, James and Robert Trotter, Glassey and Elliott, were joined by the early doubter, Fynes, in speaking to many of them. The most important of the advance meetings was held March 29 at Shadon's Hill, traditional meeting place of the miners of North Durham. Delegations numbering nearly 8000 attended to hear Joseph Cowen and others denounce the inequality of the franchise and argue that the working man's "moral sense" and "knowledge of human nature" more than compensated for any differences of education between themselves and those who now held the franchise.

This buildup climaxed with a great success for the actual demonstration. Fynes's report of 80,000 persons, like all Victorian crowd estimates, needs to be taken with caution, but the numbers must have been very large because the procession from the station began at one o'clock and was not completed until nearly four.² At the meeting ground the crowd divided into six groups at different platforms. The planning committee had decided that "the men who were seeking their political enfranchisement should plead their own cause",³ so all the speakers were local men. Each group adopted resolutions calling for manhood suffrage, redistribution and reapportionment in relation to population, petitions to parliament for enactment of these proposals and a pledge to continue the agitation. Following adoption of the resolutions, the crowd dispersed in remarkably good order and people hurried home on their special trains.

County Durham took up the pledge to continue organization and agitation with unusual vigor. Historically, the Durham miners had subdivided into three groupings oriented towards the three major rivers of the county and they repeated that pattern now. Miners living near the Tyne followed the leadership of Newcastle. Central Durham miners formed organizations along the Wear Valley, the main area of

¹ *Ibid.*, March 15, 1873.

² Fynes, *Miners' Unions*, p. 277.

³ *Miners' Advocate*, March 14, 1873.

strength of the Durham County Franchise Association, and looked to Durham City or Sunderland for leadership. In the South and West of the county miners built their associations in the communities along the Tees Valley, in this case centering on West Auckland.

The Durham County Franchise Association under the presidency of John Pritchard, a miner of Philadelphia, took the lead. In May he reported that in the four months since its formation, the association had held 28 demonstrations, delivered 110 speeches and distributed 3000 circulars, as well as bringing 20,000 Durham miners to the Newcastle Town Moor demonstration.¹ A circular in May made their strongest point:

“The importance of the present agitation for an extension of the franchise to manhood suffrage is intensified when we remember that the whole of this extra voting power will be placed in the hands of the working classes.”²

By September the association was able to hold an annual general meeting at Durham City, which was attended by 150 delegates representing 30,000 members.³

The South Durham miners moved spontaneously to join the movement. Leaders in the Auckland area called meetings at West Auckland and Bishop Auckland during the spring. About two thousand persons from the Auckland St Helen's area attended the first meeting in late April. While the Bishop Auckland demonstration was marred by bad weather, delegations from twenty-three collieries showed up, and they were able to hold a procession with the usual banners and bands. Representatives of the Durham County Franchise Association appeared at both meetings, and Joseph Cowen of Newcastle and John Kane of the Darlington ironworkers' union chaired platforms at Bishop Auckland.⁴

Without question the climax of the first phase of the franchise agitation in both counties came at the annual miners' galas in Durham and Northumberland. These great gatherings, which have continued down to the present with their nineteenth-century flavor largely undiminished, had grown up with the county union organizations.⁵

¹ *Ibid.*, May 3, 1873.

² *Ibid.*, May 10, 1873.

³ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, September 29, 1873.

⁴ *Ibid.*, April 28, May 19, 1873.

⁵ Northumberland held its first gala in 1865, shortly after the formation of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, and Durham held its first gala only in 1872, at a time when the union was just gaining recognition both from the employers and the National Miners' Association.

The galas brought groups of workers and their families from the associated lodges of the two county unions together in an atmosphere that combined the festivity of an outing with the earnestness of a political meeting. A labor journalist who accompanied a Durham colliery delegation in 1873 described his fellow marchers as “hundreds of men and women all dressed in a variety of holiday attire [who] seemed bent on proving their loyalty to the union.” He went on to muse: “As each army took their place in the ranks of labour, I could not help thinking that when labour takes its proper place in the world, Monarchy, Priestcraft, misery and slavery will wither and perish on their own dunghill.”¹

Politics followed the picnicking and exchanges of greetings among old friends. Batteries of speakers at both meetings addressed the crowds on subjects connected with the welfare of the unions, but the political and franchise questions stood prominent in their concern. An especial effort was made to break down the “no-politics” tradition that the miners adopted after Chartism. At Durham Joseph Cowen condemned the old rule of avoiding politics and urged them to use their voices and votes to correct the legal inequities directed at unions. Benjamin Pickard of West Yorkshire spoke directly to the question of the franchise, urging direct representation of labor in parliament. “The aristocracy had its representatives who secured the landed property; commercial men had their interests looked after; and why ought it not be so with the miners?”² The Newcastle gala drew not only local speakers, but also Alexander MacDonald of the National Miners’ Association and Charles Bradlaugh, whose republicanism had aroused national attention. Bradlaugh made the most telling point for the election of working men to parliament. “The reason they should have their men in Parliament was this – at that place their representatives could plead face to face with others. [...] Let the miners send representatives that they might listen and that they might answer.”³

Despite the success of these great demonstrations, there was little hope of bringing about a change in the law of the franchise without broader support than that of the Northeastern region. The leaders of the Durham County Franchise Association, most of whose members still were unenfranchised in the county districts, realized this most strongly and moved to extend their appeal to other districts. They especially tried to enlist the coal and ironstone miners of Yorkshire, but both responded slowly. In May John Pritchard began the campaign to arouse other areas when he called upon the “Yorkshire brethren”

¹ *Miners’ Advocate*, June 21, 1873.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1873.

of the Northumberland and Durham miners to take up the issue:

“Then let the contagion spread until it reaches every county, town and village in the United Kingdom and the country is made aware of the fact that British working men are determined to be hoodwinked and bamboozled no longer.”¹

Pritchard addressed his appeal in particular to Edward A. Rhymer, a politically active miner and republican of Barnsley, who had at one time been a miners' union organizer in Durham. His choice of Rhymer was unfortunate, for Rhymer had been an extremely contentious and ineffective man in South Durham, and apparently similar quarrels blocked his attempts to organize a Whit Monday demonstration in Yorkshire.²

It was not until July under less divisive leadership that the Cleveland ironstone miners were enlisted. Joseph Cowen chaired a meeting at Normanby, which was attended by an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 people. He shared the platform with Thomas Burt, William Crawford, Alexander McDonald and Lloyd Jones as well as others. The meeting passed a resolution favoring universal manhood suffrage, and projected plans for a mass meeting in conjunction with Northumberland and Durham in early September, to which Gladstone would be invited as chief speaker.³ The inter-county rally never took place, but by autumn Jones and others spread the appeal to several other locations in North Yorkshire and were attracting additional support for the union as well as the franchise.⁴

Throughout the development of the movement the miners were greatly aided by support from two sympathetic newspapers, the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* of Joseph Cowen and the *Miners' Advocate* of Middlesbrough. The *Chronicle* had stood behind the Morpeth miners from the beginning, giving full coverage to their organizational activities and lending encouragement in the leader columns. Joseph Cowen, Jr, the publisher, worked with the association, appearing at their public meetings, and one suspects lent advice from his experience in other agitations. The *Miners' Advocate*, which only began publication in January 1873, afforded the same support to the Durham miners' effort. From the beginning of the Durham County Franchise Association, the newspaper reported on meetings and plans for agitation. As the movement grew in strength, the *Advocate's* support grew also, and increasingly it recommended a social as well as a political policy

¹ *Ibid.*, May 3, 1873.

² *Ibid.*, May 10 and June 21, 1873.

³ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, July 21, 1873.

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 13, 1873.

for the agitation. In June it commented: "We are of the opinion that the possession of political power will enable them to emancipate themselves from the thralldom of capital", and in July it called for the election of several working men to the next parliament. "We want a labour party in the House of Commons, an 'Extreme Left', and if neither Conservatives nor Liberals will help us to our emancipation, we will reach it in spite of them."¹ Clearly the young paper sought through its support to the franchise movement to build its audience and was helpful in the publicity that it gave the agitation.

Through the press and the statements of leaders at public meetings the franchise movement also became linked with other issues and interests of the workers in the Northeastern region. Not only were meetings expressions of pride in the new strength of the unions, but they were also peppered with condemnations of the Master and Servants Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act for their inequities to workers. Franchise meetings were occasions to reaffirm the support to conciliation in industrial affairs that was then popular in the region, as when Alexander MacDonald called for the establishment of permanent boards of conciliation "to promote the industry, the happiness and the prosperity of our common country".² Producers' cooperation also became linked to the franchise question. An ill-starred Cooperative Mining Company had just been formed to take over and operate a colliery by miners. Many speakers on behalf of the franchise also echoed Thomas Burt's views when he said:

"The establishment of cooperative collieries would tend to the more equal distribution of the wealth of the nation, it would tend to the greater comfort and happiness of the people; and it would help them to develop and bring up a noble, high-minded, intelligent, moral and virtuous race of men and women."³

Political questions beyond industrial issues also became part of the agitation. From the outset the movement manifested elements of the Chartism, which once had been strong among the miners. Early in 1873 the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* claimed the remedy for the miners' grievances lay "in the universal manhood suffrage of the People's Charter".⁴ As the movement spread it brought veteran agitators out of retirement. In May John Pritchard reported: "Many old Chartists have come to the rescue, the embers of political life have been fanned into a flame, many young and middle aged men have imbibed the

¹ *Miners' Advocate*, June 7 and July 26, 1873.

² *Ibid.*, June 21, 1873.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ January 4, 1873.

same spirit."¹ Later in the summer John Pescod, a former Durham Chartist, took the chair at a large miners' demonstration at Crook, and described himself as "an old political soldier who had fought under the Chartist banner, and who had joined in every movement that had for its object the amelioration of the condition of the masses".² And indeed, Joseph Cowen of Newcastle on one occasion even reiterated the physical-force argument of the Chartists for reform.³

The presence of Bradlaugh, the atheist and republican, at the Northumberland Miners' gala injected a note of republicanism into the agitation, but this demand came even more strongly from the *Miners' Advocate*, and one of its frequent correspondents, Edward A. Rhymer. Both directly and indirectly they attacked the royal family and the aristocracy, and called for universal suffrage to enable the people to "uproot every system and destroy all that stands in the way of their emancipation".⁴ In the words of an *Advocate* leader, "We desire a Republic, we labour for a Republic, because we believe that is the only form of Government that will confer true happiness on the masses of mankind."⁵ There was no indication that republicanism attracted any significant support in the region, but these voices added to the stridency of the agitation.

During the summer of 1873 the franchise agitation received a boost from two sources that seemed to bring its objects closer to realization. The first was the injection of the suffrage question into active parliamentary politics. G. O. Trevelyan, member for the border burghs, introduced a county household-suffrage proposal in July. In raising the question, he was partly prompted by the agitation in the North-east:

"Take the case of the coal districts of Durham and Northumberland, and it is more important to take their case because among the miners in that part of the country there is arising a very genuine dissatisfaction at their exclusion from the franchise – a movement which has spontaneously grown from among themselves and is in no manner due to suggestion or provocation from without."⁶

Trevelyan's motion would have had only passing significance had it not been for the intervention of Gladstone himself. During the debate

¹ *Miners' Advocate*, May 3, 1873.

² *Ibid.*, July 5, 1873.

³ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, October 13, 1873.

⁴ *Miners' Advocate*, May 10, 1873.

⁵ *Ibid.*, July 12, 1873.

⁶ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, CCXVII (1873), c. 810.

on the second reading of the bill, William Forster reported that Gladstone had authorized him to announce that while the Government had no recommendation to make on the matter:

“he [the Prime Minister] retains the opinion that he has more than once indicated, and believes the extension of the household franchise to the counties to be one which is just and politic in itself and which cannot long be avoided.”¹

This statement convinced many that the government was on the threshold of adopting county household suffrage as a policy. A general election had seemed a possibility since the ministry had been weakened by the Irish University crisis of the spring. What it needed was a popular issue with which to go to the people. *The Times* interpreted the Gladstone message as an indication that the Liberals planned to make the county suffrage part of their cry in an early election.² The *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, always more sanguine, was convinced that household suffrage would be adopted the next session, and that “the step from Household to Manhood Suffrage will not, we apprehend, be difficult or slow of accomplishment”.³ From July on the Northeastern movement threw its support behind county household suffrage as a preliminary to manhood suffrage.

The prospect of progress on the county franchise led to the second new development, the reconstitution of the Northern Reform League on the basis of the Northumberland and Durham Miners’ associations. The League had been formed to agitate for universal manhood suffrage before 1867, but did not formally disband itself after the Second Reform Act. In September 1873, both the Northumberland Miners Mutual Confident Association and the Durham Miners’ Association decided to join the League, giving it an affiliation base of 50,000 men.⁴ Joseph Cowen became the chairman of the reconstituted League, which had grown out of the organizing committee for the Newcastle Town Moor demonstration of the preceding spring.⁵

The movement’s abandonment of the goal of manhood suffrage for the more limited objective of household suffrage may seem abrupt and surprising. It becomes less so when viewed against the background of the region. First, the middle-class leadership which proposed the shift of emphasis had unusually high credibility among workers.

¹ *Ibid.*, cc. 841-42.

² July 28, 1873.

³ July 24, 1873.

⁴ *The Times* (London), September 25, 1873.

⁵ G. D. H. Cole and A. W. Filson, *British Working Class Movements: Select Documents, 1789-1875* (New York, 1965), pp. 589-90.

This was especially true of Joseph Cowen, as his election to parliament with worker support in 1874 was soon to attest. His workman's speech and dress, his espousal of their causes and his long standing work for radical political reform won him their endorsement and respect. Further, Cowen's relationship with working men illustrated in a highly personal way the readiness of middle- and working-class radicals to work together in the Northeast that had been true since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Except for the most excitable period of Chartist agitation in 1839, this partnership had endured through reform movements from Peterloo to the Second Reform Act, and it operated again in 1873-74.

Second, by the summer of 1873, a large measure of the original objective of the movement had been achieved. The Morpeth miners had been added to the occupier column of the ratebooks in spring 1873, and unlike autumn 1872, there was every expectation that they would be included on the electoral roll. The probable consequence of this was that miners' votes would determine the outcome of the next parliamentary election in Morpeth. The equalization of the county franchise with that of the boroughs promised to bring a similar power to the miners of county Durham. Earlier, the Durham miners had considered limiting their agitation to that objective. While manhood suffrage was the ideological goal of the miners, the early concession of household suffrage would in practice give them most of what they wanted. Finally, the men in the franchise movement genuinely regarded support of household suffrage as a tactical, rather than a strategic, move. They were convinced that universal suffrage would be an early consequence of a parliament chosen by the laborers in both town and country. They never gave up the goal of manhood suffrage, and throughout regarded household suffrage as a step toward it.

The League moved into leadership quickly and sought to attract middle-class elements to support suffrage reform. An October meeting in South Shields set the tone. It was endorsed by a large number of middle-class reform figures from North and South Shields and was chaired by J. C. Stephenson, MP for South Shields. Stephenson sought to bridge the distance between reformers by endorsing eventual enactment of the League's program, while he acknowledged the differences between supporters of household suffrage, like himself, and those who wanted manhood suffrage. The resolutions which followed were stated in ambiguous terms, which could accommodate supporters of either manhood or household suffrage. The first, for example, called for legislation "to complete the political emancipation of the masses of our working population".¹

¹ Newcastle Daily Chronicle, October 13, 1873.

At the same time the League continued its activity among the mining population during the autumn, and its leaders frequently appeared at union or franchise meetings in the district to support reform. Through its more cosmopolitan contacts, it was able to establish relations with other groups interested in suffrage reform, such as Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union, and it was able to call upon speaking talent from outside the district. Lloyd Jones, the cooperative leader and supporter of Arch's union, had appeared at South Shields, and in November he was engaged by the League to speak in the district.¹

The organization conceived the major problem to be persuading the government that a genuine swell of support for reform existed in the country. To this end they planned a deputation to call upon the Prime Minister before the opening of the new session in January. After some delay due to an illness of Gladstone, a deputation consisting of miners from Scotland, Durham, Northumberland, Yorkshire and Derbyshire, as well as representatives of the National Reform League, the National Agricultural Labourers' Union and other societies, waited upon the Prime Minister on January 21. They claimed to speak for half a million men.

Gladstone gave them very little more than he had at the end of the preceding summer's session, and he had already privately decided that alteration of the county franchise was unfeasible at that time.² He did express his personal sympathy with the extension of the franchise, and more explicitly than before encouraged them to demonstrate a broad base of public support for reform in order to enable the government to proceed with it. Far from being disappointed with this response, the members of the delegation took it as an exhortation. Cowen's paper stated after:

"No question remains as to the duty of Radicals on this matter. Their duty is to prepare the country for this new measure of Reform. [...] It is the duty of Radicals to show the Government that extension is expedient."³

Before they could proceed with this work, however, events overtook them. The Cabinet was deadlocked over its program for the coming

¹ Joseph Cowen Collection, Newcastle upon Tyne Central Library, B 156 and B 157. I am indebted to Professor John Osborn, Central State University, Edmond, Oklahoma, for information concerning Jones's work with the movement in autumn, 1873.

² John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (London, 1903-04), II, p. 481.

³ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, January 24, 1874.

session at the time the deputation interviewed Gladstone. On January 24, the Prime Minister resolved the impasse by dissolving Parliament and calling for new elections on the issue of the *impôt* tax. Suffrage reform was not an issue adopted in the Government's election manifesto.¹

The election both reflected the achievement of the franchise movement and marked the beginning of its decline. The Northeastern elections were fought intensively, and, contrary to much of the rest of the country, with many successes for Liberals. Nowhere was this more dramatic than in Morpeth, where Thomas Burt carried the constituency overwhelmingly as a working men's candidate running under the Liberal banner. Sir George Grey had retired as a candidate after the miners were admitted to the electoral rolls and the Conservatives brought forward an outsider, Captain Francis Duncan. He and Burt fought a gentlemanly campaign to what was a foregone conclusion. Elsewhere, William Crawford of the Durham miners temporarily considered standing for North Durham, but since miners were still without the vote in the county, he was persuaded to withdraw in favor of Isaac Lowthian Bell and Charles Mark Palmer, two Tyneside industrialists.

Despite the genuine triumph in Burt's election at Morpeth, which was entirely the result of the franchise effort, the movement made no further gains immediately. The combination of an administration unfriendly to county reform, and the erosion of the economic strength of the miners' unions faced them with insurmountable barriers. Gladstone's defeat in 1874 eliminated any possibility of turning his personal conviction on the suffrage into government policy. Even more damaging to the movement was the collapse of the coal trade for the balance of the 1870s. In the succeeding five years the miners of both counties lost the wage gains that had been won in recent years by their renewed union organization. The time was not auspicious for political demands, and the suffrage movement withered.

But it did not die completely. In Durham the county franchise association was replaced in 1875 by the Miners' Political Reform Association with John Wilson as secretary. It continued to press for reform and supported the efforts of G. O. Trevelyan to bring a county household-suffrage bill before Parliament. When Gladstone returned to office in 1880, the miners appealed to him to take up the franchise question at an early date, and they claimed influence over Gladstone's eventual decision to move on the county suffrage. Following the reform of 1884-85, John Wilson was returned for the Houghton-le-Spring

¹ W. H. Maehl, "Gladstone, the Liberals and the Election of 1874", in: *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, XXXVI (1963), pp. 53-69.

division of Durham, and remained as its member until 1894.¹ Northumberland also played an important role in the renewed franchise agitation. Newcastle held a suffrage meeting attended by 50,000 persons in autumn 1883, and Thomas Burt reported to the House of Commons that in one week of April, 1884, fifty franchise meetings were held in Northumberland.²

The miners' franchise movement is a curious episode in the evolution of parliamentary democracy in nineteenth-century Britain. In politics, the denial of gratification often only heightens the appetite. And at the same time, the frustration frequently results in the displacement of desire from one object to another. As each demand confronts a new obstacle, it is superseded by an increased demand, which in turn evokes a new and more formidable difficulty. This escalation continues until a willing concession is made, or else the demand is so effectively blocked that it is diverted into other channels entirely. The struggle of the coal miners of Northumberland and Durham closely parallels this simple analogy.

Their movement began with a demand for the local-government franchise in a limited district of the region. But when they encountered resistance, they raised their claim to the household franchise in boroughs for miners where they had been omitted from electoral rolls. Their claims ceased in boroughs where miners were admitted to the rolls, but in Morpeth, where they were not immediately added, the miners established an agitational movement. As it met opposition, the movement spread out of Northumberland to include Durham and parts of Yorkshire. It broadened its goal from household suffrage in certain boroughs to universal manhood suffrage nationwide. It subsided when it encountered the economic distress of the late 1870s, but retained enough vitality to revive in the more promising conditions of Gladstone's second government.

Its greatest success lay not in changing policy, but in fulfilling it. It managed to secure application of the provisions of the 1867 Act to its followers, but it failed to broaden the franchise beyond the Act. The agitation began to excite national attention, but then was overtaken by more commanding political events and economic reversal. It may have exerted some influence on the renewal of the reform issue prior to 1884, and it generated some public opinion pressure at the

¹ For an account of the Miners' Political Reform Association, see *Memories of a Labour Leader: The Autobiography of John Wilson, J.P., M.P.* (London, 1910), pp. 238-57.

² Charles Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales* (New Haven, 1915), p. 460.

time of the Third Reform Act, but, amidst the many claimants then, it is doubtful whether its effect was decisive.

Yet the story is not negligible. The Morpeth miners' initial difficulty in getting on the electoral rolls illustrates the persistence of traditional practices by an established bureaucracy in the face of policy change. The agitation demonstrated the efficacy of public demonstration in modifying such practices. And successes such as this, along with the election of one of their own to parliament, mitigated the disappointment of the Northeastern miners in not achieving the broader franchise reform. Rather than becoming alienated by their failures, the gain they made sustained the workmen in their distinctively English faith that their ends could be served through the parliamentary system.