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Glasgow in the Year of Revolutions – A Commentary and Analysis of the Glasgow Riots of 1848

Euan Bell

In 1848, a series of revolutions and demonstrations occurred across Europe, though Britain was comparatively unaffected aside from generally peaceful Chartist agitation and a handful of small riots. One of these riots occurred in Glasgow between 6th-8th March, following increasing unrest surrounding the scale of poverty and unemployment, involving thousands of Glaswegians and inspiring further unrest in towns across Scotland.

Using a variety of sources, though principally local and national newspapers, this paper will assess the context preceding the riot, provide a microhistory of the riot itself, its consequences, and explore the significance of the riots within the history of Glasgow, and within the context of Scottish and British Radicalism. It will argue that the riots demonstrate both the scale and circumstances of poverty within Glasgow in the 1840s, and the social divisions existing within Glasgow's Chartist movement.

In 1848, Europe was beset by an avalanche of revolutions. In France, an attempt to crackdown on democratic reformers spiralled into a revolution which overthrew the King and established the Second French Republic.¹ The French Revolution gave inspiration to other radicals across Europe, sparking a Liberal Pan-Nationalist revolt in Germany, Liberal-Democratic revolutions in Italy and Denmark, Nationalist revolutions in Poland, Hungary, and Ireland, and many more small outbreaks and constitutional changes that redefined Europe.² “France resembled a fiery volcano in the moment of irruption [sic], of which the throes were watched by surrounding nations with trembling anxiety for their own existence” wrote Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in October 1848.³

Britain maintained a comparatively more liberal constitution and broader electorate than most of its European counterparts, minimising

1 Mike Rapport, *1848* (London: Abacus, 2008), 47-57.

2 Ibid., ix-xii.

3 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 64, Iss. 396 (Oct 1848), 475.

unrest to an extent, though poverty was still immense, and the overwhelming majority of the population remained ineligible to vote.⁴ “No wonder that the cries of Paris are finding an echo in the streets of London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Manchester; and that Great Britain should pant after the liberty of France” declared *The Northern Star*.⁵ Predominantly, British radicalism was represented by the Chartist movement, a broad cross-class, essentially reformist campaign focused on the implementation of ‘The People’s Charter’; six reforms including universal male suffrage, secret ballots, annual elections, and constituencies of equal size.⁶ Consequently, most histories of Britain in 1848 focus on Chartism, particularly the underwhelming conclusion of their Parliamentary petition in April, and the movement’s subsequent decline.⁷

However, a handful of small, spontaneous uprisings occurred in Britain that year, including one in Glasgow, where a public meeting agitating for poor relief spiralled into days of violence and unrest, as well as inspiring smaller-scale riots in Edinburgh, Kilmarnock, and Lanarkshire. This paper will attempt to detail the context leading to the Glasgow riots, provide a microhistory of the riots themselves, and assess their significance within the wider context of early Victorian Scottish radicalism, arguing that the Glasgow riots demonstrate the social tensions existing in early Victorian Glasgow, the class divisions within Chartism, and the role which public opinion and fear of revolution played in influencing political decision-making.

I - Context

Immediately following the riot, the North British Daily Mail claimed that the authorities “had plenty of warning from the proceeding of the last three or four days”, and the events leading to the riot do reveal

4 Henry Weisser, “Chartism in 1848: Reflections on a Non-Revolution,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 1981): 12-14.

5 “Parliamentary Review,” *The Northern Star*, March 11th, 1848, 12.

6 Irene Maver, *Glasgow* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 91.

7 John Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 120.

much about its nature.⁸

Glasgow in 1848 was deeply impoverished even by standards of the period: In 1848 Glasgow Parish Council estimated that within the City of Glasgow around 40% of the city's population was receiving or eligible for poor relief, compared with 7-8% in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Paisley.⁹ It was getting worse too - in 1845 there were 63,070 officially registered poor, in 1846 It had risen to 69,484, and in May 1847 sat at 146,370.¹⁰ This ever growing poverty put pressure not just on individuals but also the state – In 1836 £171,042 was spent on poor relief across Scotland, and by 1848 that had risen tremendously to £544,334, with £67,418 of that spent in Glasgow.¹¹ Poor Law authorities were also notoriously reluctant to give out payments, so these figures are likely below what should have been paid out.¹²

An 1839 report to Parliament read “I have seen human degradation in some of the worst places, both in England and abroad, but I did not believe until I had visited the wynds of Glasgow that so large an amount of filth, crime, misery, disease existed in one spot in any civilized country”.¹³ In 1841, life expectancy was just 37.40 for men and 39.94 for women.¹⁴ The 1840s also saw large-scale immigration from Irish refugees fleeing the famine, who would make up 20% of Glasgow's population by 1851,¹⁵ and who were overwhelmingly destitute, adding to the already overcrowded slums.¹⁶ Typically of the period, this poverty grew as wealth simultaneously increased – Just two days before the riots began one contemporary Scottish periodical

8 “Serious Riot in Glasgow.” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

9 William Logan, *The Moral Statistics of Glasgow*, Pamphlets, Scottish Temperance League, 1849, 24.

10 “City Parochial Board,” *Glasgow Courier*, March 4th 1848, 3.

11 Logan, *Moral Statistics*, 24.

12 “The Glasgow Riots...” *Express* (London), March 9th, 1848, 2.

13 Charles Oakley, *The Second City* (London & Glasgow: Blackie & Son Ltd., 1946), 68.

14 Hamish Fraser and Irene Maver “The Social Problems of the City,” *Glasgow*, Volume II: 1830-1912, ed. Fraser, Hamish, & Maver, Irene (Manchester University Press, 1996), 352.

15 David Cannadine, *Victorious Century* (Penguin, 2017), 252.

16 *Ibid*, 69-72.

described Glasgow as having “Vast fortunes and luxurious houses in one district, masses of poverty in another”.¹⁷

This immense human suffering arguably presented fertile ground for political radicalism, which was certainly not new to Glasgow – very recently many Glaswegians had been incredibly active in the successful campaign to repeal the protectionist Corn Laws, which galvanised those protestors to seek further reform.¹⁸ In 1838, Glasgow’s first Chartist group was founded,¹⁹ and in 1842 78,000 Glaswegians signed the second Chartist petition to Parliament.²⁰ The later 1840s marked a comparative decline for Chartism,²¹ but it remained active in Glasgow: on the 28th February the Glasgow Chartists held a general meeting in the Dyers Hall in an ambitious and optimistic mood, where they announced their plans to move to their weekly meetings to a larger venue at the newly-named “Democratic Hall” at Glasgow Cross, in “the most public part of the town”.²² The Northern Star claimed that “All departed in high hopes of the future”, reflecting on Feargus O’Connor’s recent election to parliament,²³ and their recent victory three weeks ago when the Glasgow journeymen coopers unanimously endorsed Chartism at a meeting in Nelson Street Chapel.²⁴

Nominally, Chartism was solely concerned with political reform, though its progressive anti-establishment nature naturally attracted many individuals equally concerned by social injustices.²⁵ However, Glasgow Chartism, at least officially, was ambivalent towards issues such as factory or housing reform, and in 1841 even formed a brief

17 *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal, Feb. 1832- Dec. 1853*, Iss. 218, (Mar 4, 1848), 147.

18 Fiona Montgomery, “Glasgow and the Movement for Corn Law Repeal,” *History* 64, no. 212 (1979): 370-376.

19 Maver, *Glasgow*, 91.

20 Cannadine, *Victorious Century*, 205.

21 F. Mather, 1980, *Chartism and Society*, 11-12.

22 “Correspondence: Glasgow,” *The Northern Star*, March 4th, 1848, 9 & “Commutations at Glasgow,” *The Northern Star*, March 11th, 1848, 25.

23 Ibid.

24 “National Association of United Trades,” *The Northern Star*, February 19th, 1848, 22.

25 Fraser, 203-207.

alliance with the Conservatives in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to disrupt the hegemony that Glasgow's Liberals had enjoyed since the 1830s.²⁶ Though Glaswegian Liberals were slightly more reformist than their party nationally, they were nevertheless thoroughly moderate, and often used anti-Catholic populism to maintain their ascendancy.²⁷

Nevertheless, the Liberals had a keen understanding of the unrest this scale of poverty could cause, and established a relief committee, comprised of all the city magistrates coordinating short-term relief for the unemployed.²⁸ They had attempted to create employment in the city through stone-breaking jobs, though workers were paid a paltry six pence per day, and the attempt to relieve trained loom weavers by providing them with material to weave was not quite as effective as hoped given most were lacking a loom.²⁹

On Friday 3rd March, around 3000 mainly unemployed people gathered in Glasgow Green, where they were addressed by Dr Peter Murray McDougall, a prominent Chartist from London, who delivered a "long Chartist harangue" as the *Glasgow Courier* described it, condemning the ineffectuality of the relief committee.³⁰ McDougall's presence is unsurprising, as Chartists often visited cities across the country, and Glasgow had hosted many during the campaign against the Corn Laws.³¹ Following McDougall's speech, 2000 people marched to the office of Glasgow City Treasurer to demand action on unemployment, and after the treasurer met with a small group of them and promised action, the crowd dispersed peacefully.³²

Shortly afterwards, the relief committee successfully appealed for a government grant of £2000, which was used to provide approximately

26 John McCaffrey. *Political Issues and Developments. Glasgow, Volume II: 1830-1912*, ed. Hamish Fraser & Irene Maver (Manchester University Press, 1996), 196-197.

27 Ibid.

28 "Serious Riot in Glasgow," *Glasgow Courier*, March 7th, 1848, 2.

29 "Meeting of Unemployed," *North British Daily Mail*, March 4th, 1848, 3.

30 "Serious Riot in Glasgow," *Glasgow Courier*, March 7th, 1848, 2.

31 Montgomery, *Glasgow and the Movement for Corn Law Repeal*, 369-372.

32 "Serious Riot in Glasgow," *Glasgow Courier*, March 7th, 1848, 2.

1000 bowls of soup on Sunday 5th March.³³ However, that day another crowd gathered on the Green, demanding further action still.³⁴ The authorities were conscious of growing discontent, and ensured that the gathering was left alone, hoping that tension would not escalate any further.³⁵ The authorities were also likely conscious of the size of these gatherings – the Glasgow Police Force had only 440 officers, tasked with policing a city of 300,000 and containing these gatherings that frequently numbered above 1000.³⁶

II - Riot

On Monday 6th, between 2000-5000 individuals³⁷ gathered in Glasgow Green, delivering speeches for economic justice and, in some cases, calling on the public to emulate the French Revolution of the previous month.³⁸ “To do a deed worthy of the name of France!”, as one speaker phrased it.³⁹ Despite one publication labelling them “Chartist Demagogues”,⁴⁰ Chartist leadership always avoided direct calls for revolution or comparisons with France, so these speakers are most likely either not affiliated with Chartism or represent a radical fringe, but certainly seemed to have lead the conversation of the crowd.⁴¹ The gathering was evidently diverse, with all accounts emphasising the number of women and children amongst it, and women accounted for just under half of those arrested in connection with the riots.⁴²

Around 2pm, the crowd left the Green and marched towards the police station, where they demanded food or employment, and remained

33 *The Examiner*, London, Issue 2093, March 11, 1848, 172.

34 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *Glasgow Courier*, March 7th, 1848, 2.

35 Ibid.

36 “The State of Glasgow,” *The Times*, March 13th, 1848, 6.

37 The Times (“Riots in Glasgow,” *The Times*, March 7th, 1848, 4.) claims merely 2000, The Glasgow Courier (“Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *Glasgow Courier*, March 7th, 1848, 2.) claims 3000-4000, The North British Daily Mail (“Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.) claims 4000-5000.

38 “Scotland,” *The Spectator*, 11th March 1848, 6.

39 *The Examiner*, London, Issue 2093, March 11, 1848, 172.

40 “Riot in Glasgow,” *Geelong Advertiser*, July 1st, 1848, 4.

41 Weisser, 22.

42 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

unsatisfied after the magistrates there replied that soup was currently being prepared for distribution.⁴³ Some were sceptical the soup was actually coming, and one witnesses later said in court that “he hoped they would not return to their starving wives and families [empty-handed] as they had done before”.⁴⁴ One man “asked what they were to do now? Were they to return home, or were they to have their rights? ‘Let us go,’ said he, ‘in a body to the town and have our rights’”.⁴⁵

The crowd moved along London Road and Trongate, looting several bakeries for food, and seizing a food cart in Buchanan Street.⁴⁶ In one shop, 130lb of cheese was stolen.⁴⁷ They also broke into an ironmongers, a toolmakers, and a gunsmith’s, equipping themselves with firearms and limited ammunition.⁴⁸ More shops were looted and windows were smashed, and as yet the police led by Chief Superintendent William Henry Pearce were totally inactive.⁴⁹ Despite this, the riot still did meet some resistance, such as from Mr. Russel, a printer who wrestled a loaded rifle from a rioter, or one Mr. Smith, who reportedly fought off rioters attacking his clothing store with a stick “with the greatest ease”.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the riot continued its march, chanting loudly “Bread or Revolution!”, “Vive la Republique”,⁵¹ and (disputedly) “Down with the Queen!”⁵² Around 4pm, virtually all shops that could, locked their doors as the crowd continued to the Gorbals, looting butter, cheese, and fish.⁵³

After hours of unrest, the Riot Act was read at 5pm in Royal Exchange

43 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

44 “Glasgow Judiciary Spring Circuit – The Late Riots,” *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, May 9th, 1848, 2.

45 Ibid.

46 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

47 “Glasgow Judiciary Spring Circuit – The Late Riots,” *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, May 9th, 1848, 2.

48 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

49 Ibid.

50 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

51 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

52 “Riots in Glasgow,” *The Times*, March 7th, 1848, 4. – This was disputed by the North British Daily Mail.

53 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

Square by Baillie Orr⁵⁴ in the absence of the Lord Provost Alexander Hastie, an MP who was in London at the time.⁵⁵ The Police finally responded, and 5000 volunteer Special Constables were enlisted from the public, meaning they possibly now outnumbered the rioters.⁵⁶ This tactic of recruiting “Specials” is remarkable in demonstrating the severity that the police felt, but was not uncommon for the period in times of crisis.⁵⁷ These specials were recruited from across society, with 2000 of them being workmen at factories throughout the city,⁵⁸ 150 were students and staff at the Glasgow Athenaeum,⁵⁹ and a large portion were retired soldiers or police.⁶⁰ Contemporary sources claim there was near-universal opposition to the riots, which should be viewed with immense scepticism, but there evidently was broad popular opposition to them.⁶¹ Additionally, military reinforcements were called in the form of 600 Infantrymen and 150 Dragoons from Edinburgh.⁶²

Across the city, placards were placed which declared “The Riot Act has been read. All well-disposed persons are implored to betake themselves to their homes”.⁶³ Within a few hours, the reinforcements arrived, and with the support the Specials, and the crowd was quickly dispersed.⁶⁴ By half-past midnight the police declared that “the town was as quiet as on any other night”.⁶⁵ Around 150 people were arrested in connection with the riots, and roughly 100 guns were confiscated by the police.⁶⁶

54 Ibid.

55 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

56 “Scotland,” *The Spectator*, 11th March 1848, 6.

57 R.E. Swift, “Policing Chartism, 1839-1848: The Role of the ‘Specials’ Reconsidered,” *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 122, No. 497 (Jun., 2007), 676-680.

58 “Riot in Glasgow,” *Geelong Advertiser*, July 1st, 1848, 4.

59 “Glasgow: Athenaeum Brigade,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 10th, 1848, 3.

60 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

61 “The Late Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Courier*, March 14th, 1848, 2.

62 “Riots in Glasgow,” *The Times*, March 7th, 1848, 4.

63 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *Morning Herald* (London) March 8th, 1848, 5.

However, the situation was far from over. The following day, “shops were all opened in the morning, as usual, and the belief seemed general that business would be allowed to go on undisturbed by any outbreak”, as the Daily Mail put it.⁶⁷ Despite this, the city was still intensely militarised, with the military guarding banks and the city chambers, and the special constables remaining on alert.⁶⁸ This caution proved prudent, as around 11am another crowd gathered again on Glasgow Green, and passed a resolution to dismantle the mills at Bridgeton and to cut off the city’s gas supply, for unclear reasons.⁶⁹ However, when they attempted to do so, the workers at the Bridgeton Mills fought them off from the walls, and the crowd returned to the Green.⁷⁰

The crowd was met by a small detachment of around 17 Special Constables, led by Police Assistant Superintendent James Smart, who were met “with hootings and showers of stones” from the crowd.⁷¹ Smart arrested a 20-year old man who had hit him with a stone, prompting the crowd to begin chanting “Rescue, Rescue, down with the b---- [sic], down!”, and “Murder the bloody b---- [sic], kill the fellows!”, as they threw more and more stones at the police.⁷² Smart reportedly gave the order to charge at the crowd, hoping to disperse it in the same manner as the previous night, but the specials either misunderstood or were overcome by panic and fired their rifles into the crowd.⁷³ Instantly, a bullet killed a Collier named David Carruth, fatally wounded a weaver named only as Campbell, and killed a provision dealer listed as Mr Alexander, who had actually enlisted as a special constable the previous night and who was in the process of offering to help the police just as he was shot.⁷⁴ Cries of “Blood for Blood” were briefly heard, and it seemed things might turn more violent.⁷⁵ However, at that critical moment cavalry reinforcements crossed the bridge, led by the Sheriff Archibald Alison, who after

67 “The Riots in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 8th, 1848, 3.

68 “Riot in Glasgow,” *Geelong Advertiser*, July 1st, 1848, 4.

69 “The Riots in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 8th, 1848, 3.

70 Ibid.

71 “Riot in Glasgow,” *Geelong Advertiser*, July 1st, 1848, 4.

72 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 “Riot in Glasgow,” *Geelong Advertiser*, July 1st, 1848, 4.

speaking to Smart promised the crowd that “if any party was to blame for what had occurred, they would be punished”, and implored them to return home.⁷⁶ He was reportedly cheered, and after tending to the dead and wounded the crowd quietly dispersed.⁷⁷

At 1pm on Wednesday, there was one more meeting on Glasgow Green, though it was much smaller than the previous two days.⁷⁸ This time however, the authorities took no chances and wasted no time, and as soon as the meeting had begun dragoons charged right into it, and the crowd was dispersed without much resistance.⁷⁹

The unrest in Glasgow sparked similar outbreaks across Scotland too – on Tuesday, a similar riot broke out in Edinburgh, though on a far smaller scale – it appears to have begun from a smaller group inspired by the events in Glasgow, smashing windows and as many as 1000 lamps.⁸⁰ However, it was quelled far quicker than Glasgow, although with similar usage of special constables and dragoon reinforcements.⁸¹ On Wednesday evening, a smaller riot was briefly active in Kilmarnock, with a crowd consisting largely of 14–16-year-olds smashing windows and lamps in the town centre.⁸² However, fearing a repeat of Glasgow’s trouble the magistrates had already enlisted special constables earlier in the day and were able to quickly suppress the riot without incident.⁸³

Ayr also experienced similar unrest that night, involving a crowd of young boys starting an oil fire in the town centre, before the cavalry quickly dispersed or arrested the participants.⁸⁴ While these cases do demonstrate the impact of Glasgow’s riots, they dissolved as quickly as they appeared, and do not appear to have been preceded or succeeded

76 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

77 Ibid.

78 “The Riots in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 9th, 1848, 3.

79 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

80 “Riot in Edinburgh,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 9th, 1848, 3.

81 Ibid.

82 “Attempted Riot in Kilmarnock,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 10th, 1848, 4.

83 Ibid.

84 “The Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

by significant political agitation.

III - Aftermath

Following the riots, public meetings were outlawed for several months, and the military remained in the city to suppress any attempts at resistance, though there was very little of it.⁸⁵ The Special Constables were not only maintained, but expanded to around 10,000 volunteers, and a new Volunteer Rifle Corps was formed comprised of 1500 men, which filled its ranks almost immediately.⁸⁶ There was some unrest – shortly after the riots, 15,000-20,000 Miners and Colliers in Glasgow, Airdrie, and Holytown went on strike, but the authorities were not particularly concerned that events would turn violent.⁸⁷ However, peaceful political agitation continued in defiance of the ban on meetings, with local clubs and workplaces petitioning for expansion of the franchise,⁸⁸ and in April as many as 100,000 gathered in Glasgow Green in support of Chartism, chanting “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”, and singing La Marseillaise.⁸⁹ While events remained peaceful, it evidently influenced the authorities to such an extent that in June Glasgow Town Council voting in favour of petitioning Parliament for a moderate expansion of the voting franchise.⁹⁰ While this remained far more conservative than Chartists wanted, and can critically be viewed as an attempt at appeasement rather than any real change of political opinion, it nonetheless demonstrates that the influence the reform campaign had in the city.

The Glasgow Police were intensely criticised for their handling of the riot from all sides, with the North British Daily Mail writing “The Riot could have been put down at once, had energetic measures been adopted at the commencement, or had the police done their duty.”, and for the deaths on 7th March.⁹¹ On 10th April, Pearce resigned as

85 “The State of Glasgow,” *The Times*, March 13th, 1848, 6.

86 “The Late Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Courier*, March 14th, 1848, 2.

87 “The State of Glasgow,” *The Times*, March 13th, 1848, 6.

88 “Glasgow,” *Glasgow Chronicle*, June 21st, 1848, 4.

89 Hamish Fraser, *Chartism in Scotland* (Merlin Press Ltd., 2010), 159.

90 *Ibid*, 167.

91 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

Chief Superintendent.⁹² After an eight-month interlude, Captain Smart would be appointed as Chief Superintendent, who would remain in post until his death in 1870.⁹³

With regards to the dead, 150 people attended Mr. Alexander's funeral on Saturday 11th, with most of the mourners also attending the burial of Campbell in the Calton Burial Grounds.⁹⁴ David Carruth was escorted to Sighthill Cemetery by two armed Cavalrymen, though his burial occurred without incident.⁹⁵ Mr. Alexander's family were compensated £150 by the city,⁹⁶ though the appeals of other participants' family such as David Carruth's widow had their requests rejected,⁹⁷ on grounds that "they ought not to have been on the spot at the time".⁹⁸

Lord Provost Alexander Hastie also faced immense criticism for his handling of the situation,⁹⁹ and when local elections were held on 7th November, Hastie came third in his own constituency.¹⁰⁰ The overall winner in his constituency was James Moir, a police commissioner and prominent Chartist delegate,¹⁰¹ whose victory reportedly gave "great satisfaction to the Chartists of Glasgow".¹⁰² Some sources including the North British Daily Mail claim that Hastie "took no personal interest in the election",¹⁰³ though the Northern Star claims that "every influence was used and money lavishly expended" in the campaign.¹⁰⁴

92 "Chief Superintendent William Henry Pearce," *The Glasgow Police Museum*, accessed 8th December 2023, <https://www.policemuseum.org.uk/personalities/chief-constables/chief-superintendent-william-henry-pearce/>

93 "Chief Constable James Smart," *The Glasgow Police Museum*, accessed 14th December 2023, <https://www.policemuseum.org.uk/personalities/chief-constables/chief-constable-james-smart/>

94 "The Late Glasgow Riots," *Glasgow Courier*, March 14th, 1848, 2.

95 Ibid.

96 "The Late Riots," *Glasgow Chronicle*, October 25th, 1848, 5.

97 "Glasgow Municipal Police Board," *North British Daily Mail*, April 4th, 1848, 3.

98 "The Late Riots," *Glasgow Chronicle*, October 25th, 1848, 5.

99 Maver, 76-78.

100 "Glasgow Municipal Elections," *Glasgow Herald*, November 10th, 1848, 2.

101 Maver, 77-78.

102 "Glasgow Municipal Elections," *Glasgow Herald*, November 10th, 1848, 2.

103 "Scotch Municipal Elections," *North British Daily Mail*, November 8th, 2.

104 "Glasgow Municipal Election," *The Northern Star*, November 11th, 1848,

Irrespective, the repudiation of the city's official representative and sitting MP by an outspoken Chartist is remarkable, particularly given the narrow propertied electorate. Moir would become a symbol of Glaswegian radicalism well into the 1870s, vehemently advocating for parliamentary reform, poor relief, and condemning "abuses existing in the management of our local and national affairs".¹⁰⁵ However, despite some major investments such as development of the city's water purification, Glasgow's civic agenda would remain fundamentally conservative for some time, and it would take until the 1880s for life expectancy to go above 40.¹⁰⁶

Over the courses of several months, nearly 100 individuals were tried on charges of "Mobbing and Rioting", as well as several charged with housebreaking, robbery, and assault.¹⁰⁷ The severity of punishment varied substantially – four individuals were tried on the 8th July, who pleaded guilty and were sentenced to sixty days of prison each, alongside one Elizabeth Kean who pleaded not guilty and was sentenced to a steeper four month imprisonment.¹⁰⁸ On May 6th, three of the rioters were found guilty and were sentenced to transportation for 7-10 years.¹⁰⁹ They were tried alongside 14-year-old Wells Miller

who was sentenced to only one year of prison.¹¹⁰ A very small handful of individuals, such as one John Ross, were brought to court in connection to the riots but were discharged shortly after.¹¹¹

IV - Interpretation

How should all this be interpreted? Should it be grouped with the riots over starvation and poverty that have been near historical constants,

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105 "Reform Banquet," *Glasgow Herald*, December 8th, 1848, 4.

106 Fraser & Maver, 352-364.

107 "Glasgow Judiciary Spring Circuit – The Late Riots," *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, May 9th, 1848, 2.

108 "The Glasgow Rioters," *The Northern Star*, July 15th, 1848, 4.

109 "Glasgow Judiciary Spring Circuit – The Late Riots," *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, May 9th, 1848, 2.

110 Ibid.

111 "The Glasgow Rioters," *The Northern Star*, July 15th, 1848, 4.

viewed within the context of a deeply impoverished city, or should it be conceptualised as more inherently political alongside the other attempts of revolution in 1848? In its first issue following the riots, the Glasgow Chronicle clearly stated its view:

*“...the riots had no connection either with the political feelings or with the social distresses of our population. Undoubtedly there are many belonging to our working classes who are at present sorely pinched by the privations they are undergoing; but no one who had an opportunity of seeing the rioters will be found to say that he believes they had any co-operation from the class in question. The disgraceful outrages committed yesterday and on Monday were the work of a comparatively small number of those degraded and brutal ruffians...”*¹¹²

An anonymous eyewitness interviewed by The Spectator agreed:

*“All this convinced me, [...] that the affair was neither more nor less than a most audacious robbery, committed by common thieves under the colour of a political row. Now and then a fellow would quietly drop his gun and sneak off, having got something valuable; and when they attacked a cart of meal, they merely tumbled the sacks into the street, and allowed the contents to be carried off by a crowd of ragged women and boys—common beggars. The moment the soldiers appeared the rascals ran like quicksilver.”*¹¹³

The eyewitness’s claim would be unsurprising if true – Gang violence and robbery were extremely prevalent in 1840s Glasgow,¹¹⁴ and all sources agree that rioting certainly occurred, with one jeweller claiming to have lost £2000 worth of goods (Approx. £160k today).¹¹⁵ On Friday 10th “a parcel of watches was found secreted in a dunghill”, and for several days following the riots there were rumours of gold watches being traded about town.¹¹⁶ It is however notable that the

112 “The Riots of Monday and Tuesday,” *Glasgow Chronicle*, March 8th, 1848, 4.

113 “Scotland,” *The Spectator*, 11th March 1848, 6.

114 Oakley, *The Second City*, 69.

115 “Riot in Glasgow,” *Geelong Advertiser*, July 1st, 1848, 4. Approximate Currency Conversion cf. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

116 “The Late Glasgow Riots,” *Glasgow Courier*, March 14th, 1848, 2.

majority of goods looted were food, and the attacks on the likes of jewellers only occurred slightly later in the riot, by some accounts by groups that had separated from the main crowd.¹¹⁷

The obvious counterargument is to look for a Chartist presence in the riots, which contemporaries certainly saw: in the midst of the riot, a telegram sent at 4pm by *The Times*' correspondent described the rioters as a "Chartist Mob".¹¹⁸ As already noted Chartists both natives and visitors to Glasgow had been extremely active in the days prior to the riots, so almost certainly played a role in at least maintaining tensions, if not exacerbating them. The *Glasgow Herald* suggested that:

*"The disturbance had its origin, no doubt to some extent, in the feelings of discontent which have been industriously excited amongst the unemployed by the Chartist orators who were lecturing them day by day for a week previous to the outbreak"*¹¹⁹

Although the *Herald* seems to deny the unemployed any agency of their own, it does seem accurate that even if the riot itself were not fundamentally Chartist, it was heavily influenced by their activities.¹²⁰ The Chartists themselves, however, repudiated this, saying at their National Convention that "Chartists had no connexion [sic] with them

[the Glasgow riots] whatever, except to oppose them."¹²¹ One Chartist group even suggested that the riots were intentionally prolonged by the authorities "for the purpose of furnishing a pretext for getting up a force to attack and abuse the Chartists."¹²² However, the Chartist Newspaper did add that the riots "attest the restless heaving of the elements under our own political and social system", while expressing no opinion on the morality of the riots.¹²³

117 "Serious Riot in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

118 "Riots in Glasgow," *The Times*, March 7th, 1848, 4.

119 "The Glasgow Riots," *Glasgow Herald*, March 10th, 1848, 2.

120 Ibid.

121 Fraser, 155.

122 Ibid.

123 "Parliamentary Review," *The Northern Star*, March 11th, 1848, 12.

As already noted, the riot was punctuated by various slogans, which while often very radical were notably not Chartist. In any other political movement, difference in communication of this nature might be insignificant, but Chartism was a movement with a distinct cultural identity, known for its distinctive slogans, poems, and chants, which are overwhelmingly absent here.¹²⁴ When those radical chants were heard, many contemporary publications explained them as rioters crying familiar slogans rather than actually understanding their meanings; a point often made quite patronisingly but which is very possible.¹²⁵ As noted earlier, the cries of “Down with the Queen!” were even disputed by the *North British Daily Mail*, who stalwartly proclaimed “The Queen, we believe, has neither more loyal nor more attached subjects in any city in all her dominions than in Glasgow”, though that repudiation should be approached with some scepticism.¹²⁶ The situation was extremely similar in Edinburgh, with identical occasional cries of “Vive la Republique”, but nothing more than Glasgow.¹²⁷ Therefore while there was undoubtedly a Chartist presence, their role is overshadowed by both more radical and more apolitical participants.

Another facet worth exploring is the popular opinion of the riots. In this, the role of Special Constables is significant – looking at the impoverishment in Glasgow it is perhaps natural to sympathise with the rioters, to some extent, but evidently their contemporaries did not – they were not suppressed by the full force of the state but in large part by their fellow Glaswegians. However, some scepticism is warranted, as various cases exist throughout the 1830s-40s of employers obligating their workers to enlist as Specials, which certainly may have occurred here, though very unlikely on a scale which would account for all volunteers – evidently the riot did inspire many Glaswegians in defence of the status-quo, or at least in defence of order.¹²⁸ Conversely, however, the grassroots campaign for suffrage

124 Gareth Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 95-97 doi:10.1017/CBO9780511622151

125 “Serious Riot in Glasgow,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 7th, 1848, 3.

126 “Telegraph dispatches...,” *North British Daily Mail*, March 9th, 1848, 3.

127 Ibid.

128 Swift, *Policing Chartism, 1839–84*, 684-685.

expansion and the subsequent election of Chartists including James Moir seems to indicate remarkable sympathy towards radical ideology. Evidently, there was a clear distinction between many of the generally middle-class democratically minded Glaswegians and impoverished rioters.

To argue against that the riots were totally apolitical is to ignore the increasing politicisation which preceded them, and that the gatherings which the riots stemmed from were imbued with political agendas and ideas. The Revolutionary and often French-inspired chants and songs of the riot makes clear that the participants were inspired by the French Revolution. Simultaneously, however, the rioters do appear disconnected from the broader Radical movement in Glasgow, which actively condemned them.

Following the French Revolution of 1848, the new republic was divided between revolutionaries primarily interested in political reform (who were often more middle-class) and the working-class revolutionaries seeking a so-called “République démocratique et sociale” which was just as focused on social reform.¹²⁹ Ultimately, this tension culminated in an outright uprising amongst the radicals, which was brutally crushed by the Republican government.¹³⁰ In Glasgow, a similar divide can be seen between the middle-class Chartists who

peacefully advocated reform and elected Chartist representatives, and the working-class participants in the riots whose attention was focused on social reform and short-term relief. Both groups contributed to the city’s unrest and deeply influenced each other, but in this instance cannot be conflated.

The Glasgow Riots of March 1848 clearly demonstrate two broader elements – firstly, the class conflicts which existed within the Scottish Chartist movement, which underscores the fundamental reformism of British radical campaigners. Secondly, as the London-based Express put it shortly after the riots, “This frequency [of riots], however, is

¹²⁹ Samuel Hayet, *Revolutionary Republicanism: Participation and Representation in 1848 France* (London: Routledge, 2023), 186-187.

¹³⁰ Rapport, 209-211.

rarely, if ever, observed where there is not some real grievance at the bottom.”¹³¹ Britain avoided revolution in 1848 as the burgeoning middle-class was far better represented and protected than in the rest of Europe, preventing the kind of broad cross-class revolutions as seen in France and Germany, but the Glasgow riots demonstrate the clear unrest many working-class individuals felt in Britain, and Glasgow represents a relatively unique example of that unrest manifesting into open violence.

131 “The Glasgow Riots...,” *Express (London)*, March 9th, 1848, 2.

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