

DORMAN, Henry (1803-?)

NOTTINGHAM CHARTIST, FRAMEWORK KNITTER, PREACHER, TEETOTALER

Henry Dorman was born in Ansley, Leicestershire. Of his origins and early life very little is known. His wife, Mary, was also born around the same time and hailed from Fleckney, also in Leicestershire. They were Primitive Methodists. At some stage Henry and Mary moved to Nottingham where they both gained employment in the textile trade, Henry as a framework knitter (in the drawers branch of the trade) and Mary as a seamstress. I have not been able to locate him on the 1841 Census, but he and his family appear on the 1851 and 1861 censuses. During this period Henry Dorman lived with his wife and children in Shakespear [sic.] Yard in the Parish of St. Mary – an overwhelmingly working-class district. We know that the Dormans were in Nottingham by the early 1840s as Henry begins to appear in reports of Chartist activities in the local and Chartist press. He first came to prominence in December 1839 as chairman of a group of unemployed framework knitters who met in the Rancliffe Tavern. Although the poverty and wretchedness of the framework knitters was nothing new by this stage, the state of the trade was particularly 'deplorable' in the winter of 1839. Conditions were so bad that the Nottingham Board of Guardians resolved to find outdoor work for those who were unemployed and had two or more children (*NS*, 14 December 1839).

Dorman used his position as a lay preacher to establish his Chartist credentials, first coming to prominence as a lecturer in the Chartist Chapel. By the mid-1840s he had established himself as an influential local Chartist leader. He was a popular speaker with the Chartist rank and file, drawing, no doubt, on skills that he had acquired as a Methodist lay preacher and as a Teetotaler lecturer. Henry combined his religious and political views by lecturing regularly in Nottingham Market Place and in the Democratic Chapel, the purpose of which were to show, in the words of one report in the *Northern Star* [*NS*], that 'Chartism is in accordance with Christianity' (6 March 1841). Dorman continued to preach until 1843, whereupon he took the decision to leave the connection, a severance caused by his political principles. Though Dorman left of his own accord it was noted that 'he had caused great trouble to the members and leaders by taking an active part with the Chartists'. Dorman continued to lecture but as a Chartist not as a preacher, and not just in Nottingham. In 1844 he was appointed by the National Charter Association [*NCA*] as lecturer for the South Staffordshire District. He also lectured on a number of occasions at meetings in London. A report in the *NS* of one such meeting furnishes a tantalisingly brief glimpse into Dorman's skills as a public speaker. The report noted how Dorman's voice was 'perhaps the most extraordinary vocal instrument in existence, it gave great life to the proceedings. Mr Dorman's voice is a deep clear bass, with great compass' (27 April 1844).

Further evidence of the esteem in which Dorman was held by his Chartist peers was his nomination as Nottingham's representative to numerous Chartist conferences: the Manchester conference of the *NCA* in 1844; his election to the executive committee of the *NCA* in 1845; and to the conference on land in 1845. Through his inspiring oratory and his organisational capacity Dorman played a leading role in keeping the Chartist embers burning in Nottingham during the doldrums years of the mid-1840s. In August 1843, possibly just after he had left the connection, Dorman opened a Temperance Hotel in Clare Street, which, in addition to numerous public houses in and around Nottingham, acted as a venue for Chartist meetings. Dorman like virtually all Nottingham Chartists was a champion of Feargus O'Connor, though he was not a slavish devotee. When Dorman first learnt of the

details of the Land Plan he strongly objected to the proposal that those who wished to subscribe had to pay either three-pence or six-pence per week to the Land Fund. 'How', Dorman inquired incredulously, 'would they be able to pay such a sum?' Dorman wished to remind the organisers of the Land Plan that they were legislating for the working classes. In Dorman's view it was only fair that a poor man who subscribed a penny a week should stand the same chance of winning a piece of land as a man who subscribed a shilling a week. Dorman was also concerned that the pursuit of the Charter would be subordinated to the Land Plan. When Dorman was subsequently satisfied on these points he rallied around the Land Plan (*NS*, 23 September 1843, 14 October 1843, 27 April 1844). Dorman came to see in the Land Plan the means to provide the Chartist rank and file with something 'tangible'. A similar desire to achieve practical results also lay behind Dorman's support in 1845 for establishing an organisation to promote Chartist candidatures at elections.

Dorman, like the majority of Chartists in Nottingham and elsewhere, believed that constitutional means should be used to gain constitutional ends. As he told one group of Chartists: he 'could not agree with violence' (*NS*, 14 October 1843). This constitutionalism, however, should not disguise the passion and the overwhelming feelings of suffering and degradation that Dorman and his fellow framework knitters brought to Chartism. Dorman and others like him combined their political radicalism with leadership of the knitters trades association. Dorman and several other Nottingham Chartists gave evidence to the Royal Commission on the condition of framework knitters which reported in 1845.

What is remarkable about the evidence given by Dorman and those like him to the Royal Commission was the sophisticated understanding of the capitalisation of the trade and the causes of the stockingers' proletarianisation. Little had changed for the East Midlands stockingers since the days of Luddism, except that there were now fewer framework knitters and those that remained were even more desperate. But whereas the fundamental problems identified by the Luddite stockingers had been the proliferation of 'cut-ups', the employment of 'colts' and frame rents and other overheads, the framework knitters who appeared before the Royal Commission in the mid-1840s directed most of their ire not at rapacious hosier-capitalists per se but the unscrupulous and exploitative 'middle-men' or 'second-hand master' (the nomenclature used by the knitters themselves) whom they employed to farm out the work to the framework knitters. As Dorman told the commissioners: 'the principal sources of poverty of the people [is] the enormous profits taken by the middle-men from the man who works the machine'. The middle-man, Dorman explained, engaged in a whole range of dishonourable practices to the detriment of the stockinger: contracting work from the hosier as cheaply as possible and offering the knitters much less favourable terms allowing them to pocket the difference as profit; demanding that the knitters pay the same rate for contracting 'stint' (less than full-time work) as they would for full-time work; refusing to pay children for the work they performed; paying in 'truck' which furnished the middlemen with a 'double profit'; discriminating against married men in favour of young single men from whom, if employed as indoor-journeymen in a single lodging house-workshop rather than as 'out-door' men who worked in their own homes, a greater profit could be derived on account of lower overheads. Dorman, however, was far from being naive when it came to the hosiers who, as he explained, were to large extent in league with the middle-men. He understood that the middle-man in order to secure a contract from the hosier had to come in cheap. To do this the middle-man had to promise the hosier higher-grade knitting at lower prices. The few honest middle-men that existed were then forced by the hosiers to contract work at the

lower price. Dorman's solution to these problems were in essence the same as demanded by the Luddites: an agreed price list between hosiers, middle-men and knitters; the abolition of frame-rents and truck; and the branding of 'spurious' articles as inferior. The hostility of Dorman and the East Midlands framework knitters towards idle exploitative middle-man serves as a reminder that it was not just radical artisans in urban centres of workshop who located the source of working-class exploitation in capitalist modes of exchange rather than production per se. Dorman was certainly alive to the similarities of the framework knitters' conditions with that of other trades and his representation of the Nottingham framework knitters at national trades conferences suggests that he viewed the struggles of the knitters as part of a wider working-class movement. Dorman represented Nottingham at the conference that led to the formation of the National Association of United Trades (*NS*, 22 March 1845).

We may surmise that Dorman saw in Chartism the means to reinstate the moral economy of the pre-industrial age by regulating capitalism and protecting workers. Like countless other casualties of industrialisation Dorman railed against the degradation and immiseration of unrestrained capitalism. As he gloomily informed the commissioners, the average wage of the stockinger had plummeted to about seven shillings a week (certainly not the worst of textile workers – a cotton factory worker earned as little as five shillings a week, but hardly an adequate income). Dorman himself appears to have experienced several periods of under- or perhaps unemployment. This may have been a factor in his decision to open a Temperance Hotel, but this venture did not last long. By the time of the 1851 Census he is still listed as a framework knitter, though perhaps with some added financial security by this stage as his wife Mary was listed as a seamer, his eldest son William as a baker and his younger son George as a winder (it may well be the case that Mary and George worked for Henry). The family had also taken in a lodger, Charles Woodward, who was also a framework knitter, and may have been the son of George Woodward, a fellow framework knitter and Chartist.

Although Dorman was still involved with the Chartist movement when it began to revive in 1847, the main impetus in Nottingham coming from O'Connor's election as one of the borough's two MPs in the general election of that year, like other knitters (Benjamin Humphries, John Buckland, George Woodward, Thomas Emmerson, George Kendall and Thomas Kerry) who had been prominent earlier in the 1840s he quickly receded into the background for reasons that remain unclear. It was the widespread support of the knitters that had made Nottingham Chartism a mass movement in the late 1830s and early 1840s, and in their falling away (due, in large measure, to the contraction of the trade) is to be found one of the main reasons why the Chartist revival of 1847-48 was a limited affair. I have only found one occasion in 1848 when Dorman appeared on the Chartist platform and that was in mid-January at a meeting to raise subscriptions to meet the expenses of defending O'Connor's seat which was being challenged. Dorman would play no part in the brief local recrudescence of Nottingham Chartism in the spring and summer of 1848. We know that he was still living in Nottingham as he appears in the 1851 Census and he is still listed as a framework knitter. Dorman reappeared occasionally on radical platforms and at Chartist conferences in the early 1850s. His last major public appearance seems to have been at the 1852 general election when he announced his support for Charles Sturgeon who contested Nottingham as a Chartist candidate in a vain effort to don the mantle of O'Connor's successor. Like many Chartists, Dorman was and remained vehemently anti-Whig. Dorman implored the electors to return Sturgeon who would be the 'death-knell of

Whiggery in Nottingham'. His anti-Whiggery may explain why Dorman, like several former prominent Nottingham Chartists, did not make the transition into Gladstonian Liberalism. After 1852 Dorman disappears from the historical record, save for one final entry in the 1861 Census. Perhaps tellingly, though, he is no longer listed as a framework knitter but as a traveller. By the time of the 1871 Census Henry Dorman no longer appears and his eldest son is listed as the head of the Dorman household. I have been unable to ascertain when (or where) Henry Dorman died. He was survived by his wife Mary who died in 1883.