

Richard Carlile, 1790–1843



*'I will not droop! but sweep away
The juggling fiends who tax and pray,
And though in jail with limbs confin'd,
I still am free in soul and mind!'* —Richard Carlile

RICHARD CARLILE WAS AN AGITATOR for the establishment of universal suffrage and freedom of the press in the United Kingdom. Born in Devon, his father was a shoemaker who died when Carlile was only four years old, leaving his mother struggling to support her three children on the income from running a small shop. At the age of six Richard went to the local Church of England school for a free education and then, at the age of twelve, left school for a seven-year apprenticeship to a tinsmith in the port city of Plymouth.

In the winter of 1816 Carlile had his hours working as a tinplater reduced; the hardship that this caused his family fuelled his growing sense of injustice and he began to attend political meetings where speakers would declaim the parliamentary system that only allowed three men in every hundred to vote. He decided to try and earn a living by selling pamphlets on the streets in London commenting that he often walked thirty miles for a profit of eighteen pence. He was soon imprisoned for four months without trial for reprinting parodies of church services originally published by satirist and bookseller William Hone. He later rented a shop in Fleet Street and became a publisher publishing such works as Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* by dividing them into sections and selling them as pamphlets. In 1819 he witnessed the Peterloo massacre where cavalry charged into a crowd of 60–80,000 who had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation. He published his denunciation in radical newspaper *The Republican* which he edited and was again imprisoned without trial. The same year he was imprisoned for publishing Paine's *The Age of Reason* (which advocated the rights of the people to overthrow their governments), sentenced to three years in Dorchester prison for blasphemy and seditious libel, and fined £1,500; the sentence being extended to six years because of his inability to pay. Ironically this was the period of Carlile's greatest fame; he continued to edit *The Republican* as well as many freethinking tracts by Shelley, Voltaire and others. His wife, Jane Carlile continued to publish *The Republican* once Carlile had been jailed and was in turn sentenced to two years' imprisonment for seditious libel. Mary Carlile, the sister of Richard Carlile, took over as publisher and within six months was imprisoned for the same offence. In the end eight of his shop workers, and over 150 men and women were sent to prison for selling *The Republican*. Carlile's writing desk from his time in Dorchester jail sits in the corner the Conway Hall Library to this day.

By 1821, Carlile had moved from deism to atheism and became the first person in Britain to deny, in print, the existence of God. In 1826 he published an essay *What is Love?* describing and defending contraceptive techniques.

He was freed from jail in 1825 and in 1829 opened the Rotunda on Blackfriars Road making it a centre of radical theological and political discussion. In 1831 he was in prison again for expressing sympathy for agricultural workers campaigning against wage cuts and advising the strikers to regard themselves as being at war with the government.

Released in 1833, Carlile left his wife and was joined by the freethinker Eliza Sharples who had already given birth to their first child, conceived while he was in prison. They had at least three further children. Having left prison deeply in debt, Carlile was no longer able to publish newspapers, but he was jailed once more for causing a public nuisance by refusing to pay church rates and displaying blasphemous effigies in his shop window.

Carlile died in extreme poverty back in Fleet Street in 1843 at the age of fifty-three, leaving his body to anatomical science. Nine years, seven months and one week of his life had been spent in prison. Following his death, his body was dissected and people, including members of his own family, purchased tickets to watch! *

OIL PORTRAIT OF THOMAS PAINE BY UNKNOWN ARTIST, COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

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HALL Humanist Library