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A City of Light — Socialism, Chartism and Co-operation — Nottingham 1844. By Christopher Richardson.

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A City of Light — Socialism, Chartism and Co-operation — Nottingham 1844

By Christopher Richardson

Second edition, Loaf on a Stick Press. 2015. ISBN: 9780956913982.

Price £8 (p&p to Journal of Co-operative Studies readers, for details, see www.acityoflight.wordpress.com)

I have visited Nottingham several times en route to destinations, including the Co-operative College when it was at Loughborough. Reading Christopher Richardson's well-produced 257-page paperback I should have spent more time absorbing the city's past and present.

As the title suggests the book focuses on socialism, chartism, and co-operation. Richardson sees 1844 as a year of change and transformation for Nottingham. He tells of a brave Emma Martin of the Rational Society who addressed 5,000 people on socialism and capital punishment only a week after the public hanging of a man who slit the throats of his wife and three children and many onlookers among the dispersing crowds got trampled to death or injured in the ensuing panic; and of the authorities that banned a chartist speaker from the Market Place so he held his meeting on open space on what was once part of Sherwood Forest. The chapter, *For Freedom of Expression*, tells of another bold woman and "infidel", Susannah Wright, imprisoned in 1822 for 18 months in London's Newgate jail for blasphemy after printing tracts by Richard Carlile, himself in jail for publishing Thomas Paine. She returned to Nottingham in 1826 to open the freethought Goosegate Bookshop that was besieged for four weeks by religious critics.

As Richardson makes clear, chartism, the strong working class force between 1836 and 1848, was no single-issue movement. The *People's Charter* demanded universal male suffrage, secret ballot, abolition of property qualifications for MPs, payment of MPs, equal sized Constituencies and annual elections to Parliament: and all but the last was achieved. The campaign for women's suffrage came later, and more than doubled the electorate when realised in the twentieth century.

1844 saw the first Operatives' Library opening for manual workers unhappy with the Mechanics Institute annual subscriptions and reading hours. Economic downturn hit framework knitting and lacework, which employed a quarter of the city's workforce. Elections for the Poor Law Guardians were held. The harsh new Poor Law of 1834 had denied payments to unemployed men outside the workhouses and they were mostly filled to capacity or not fit for purpose. The demeaning living conditions and Whig attitudes make Chapter 11 depressing reading.

Political and religious extremes if laterally opposite often converge in circularity. There was intemperance over temperance. Christian and secular advocates opposed to drinking were at loggerheads. George Jacob Holyoake had no time for temperance hotels and the quality of drinking water made temperance risky! The Church Rate was another divisive issue with Unitarians, Quakers, Methodists, Catholics and others who maintained their own churches objecting to paying for Church of England buildings. The Compulsory Church Rates Abolition Act 1868 made payment voluntary.

The focus on the Chartist Co-operative Land Society should interest co-operative historians. Rules were drawn up for smallholdings to support families in times of falling wages. Many subscribers were attracted though not all chartists shared the enthusiasm of Feargus O'Connor, Nottingham's Chartist MP. The then Registrar of Friendly Societies rejected the scheme and subsequent failings contributed to its demise.

Richardson also details the development of co-operative trading societies over the years. This includes Carrington established in 1840, which did not have open membership, and dividends were paid on shares not purchases; Nottingham Society founded 1847; and Lenton Industrial & Provident Society in 1863 based on the Rochdale model.

Christopher Richardson's painstaking study with Foreword by Stephen Yeo, interesting illustrations and excellent index derives its title from a 1944 CWS *Men of Rochdale* film and the words of William Cooper:

We socialists wanted a city of light on a hill for all to see, free from poverty, crime and meanness.

Travelling by time machine from mid nineteenth century Nottingham to present day we may see wider if not dissimilar anxieties all around us.

This second edition includes additional material on Henry Layland Knight, the Owenite Social Missionary who led a party of men, women and children to Illinois to set up a co-operative community in 1842, and his controversial later life in California.

The Reviewer

Jim Craigen worked in the co-operative and trade union movements and is a former Labour & Co-operative MP