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"And these sufferers are our brethren": The Lancashire Cotton Famine and the English Moral Community

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# “And these sufferers are our brethren”: The Lancashire Cotton Famine and the English Moral Community

Abstract: The Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861-65 needs to be situated within its contemporary moral climate to yield a better understanding of the crisis. In seeking to uncover historical verities, scholars focusing on the Cotton Famine have rejected the idea of the quiescent and uncomplaining Lancashire operative, and have further challenged the supposed class harmony which existed. Yet, in doing this, they have passed over the more consequential point. The represented image of the Lancashire operative was shaped by and for a contemporary political culture, the foundations of which were increasingly explained in terms of a shared basis of morality. This essay situates the Lancashire Cotton Famine within the English moral community of the 1860s, and examines how the identity of the Lancashire operatives became so prominent in the political imagining of the nation. In a political context which sought to distinguish between the respectable and the unscrupulous classes of society, the charitable efforts of the famine years had political significance. The image of a deserving, industrious recipient of relief was put forward to the charitable sympathies of the nation, and it was this identity which persisted in the Reform debates to follow as the operatives’ respectability was lucidly demarcated. It was the English moral community which manufactured an image of the deserving recipient, just as it framed the boundaries of political respectability. Likewise, as entry into the political nation increasingly rested on behavioural qualifications, the operatives conducted themselves in a manner which lay congruent with their reputations in this moral community, as its benefits to both charity and politics were realised. Politicians looking to further the reform cause early recognised that the Cotton Famine was an example in the making of working-class political fitness, manufacturing its legacy into the perfect product for the political imagination of England.

On the 19th June 1865, Mr H.B Farnall was recalled by the Poor Law Board, as his work as Special Commissioner in the Cotton Districts was no longer required. The next day, *The Times* reported how Farnall's withdrawal 'marked the formal close of a great and memorable passage in the history, not only of this country, but even of the world'; they hailed the moment as 'the end of the great Cotton Famine'[1]. Farnall had been sent to Lancashire in May 1862 by the President of the Poor Law Board, Charles Pelham Villiers, to inquire into the state of the factory operatives, 'who, from a great diminution in the demand for labour in the cotton districts', had 'suddenly and unavoidably fallen into temporary distress'[2]. The deprivation occurring there was consequent upon the American Civil War, as a Union blockade of Confederate ports prevented raw cotton coming over the Atlantic to the docks of Liverpool, and thus starved Lancashire of its industrial sustenance. The calamitous effects this would have on the regional economy were soon realised, and as cotton mills began to close Lancashire's factory operatives were left idle and unemployed, reduced from their previous state of relative prosperity to one of dependence upon the handouts of the Poor Law and national charity. As *The Times* remembered in its obituary of the famine, by December 1862, the number of persons in receipt of relief from the Guardians and the Local Relief Committees fell little short of 500,000, yet this intense phase of distress was 'borne by the nation without any exhausting effort'[3]. National self-congratulation was the most pronounced tone of the commentators looking back at the period of distress, and *The Times* was by no means unique in its presentation.

Before the symbolic closure of the Cotton Famine marked by Farnall's withdrawal, contemporary historians, quick with their pens, had been considering how to package the years of distress for posterity. Each tried to extract the moral from the story, and expose the lessons learned during the period of sustained deprivation. In 1865, Arthur Arnold, a resident government inspector of public works, framed the peaceful outcome of the Cotton Famine as 'the happy result of progress, of liberal legislation, of widely diffused education, and of a consequent unity among all classes'[4]. For Dr John Watts, who had served as a principal member of the General Committee of the Fund for the Relief of the Distress, the thought of writing a history was not originally appealing, yet after attempts to persuade his colleagues

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[1] *The Times,* 20th, June 1865.
[2] Charles Pelham Villiers to H.B Farnall, 12th May 1862. Farnall Archives MSS 17772/62. National Archives, Kew.
[3] *The Times,* 20th June 1865.
[4] Arthur Arnold, *The History of the Cotton Famine from the Fall of the Sumter to the Passing of the Public Works Act, Second Edition,* (London: 1865), p.350.

into undertaking the endeavour proved futile, he reluctantly conceded. A history needed to be written of this unique chapter in the nation's history, and he expressed that 'the bearing of the people under their unexampled trials', along with the 'immense flow of benevolence to their aid' and the 'manifold organisations which were improvised', all seemed to 'demand registration for future reference'[5]. The story of the famine, as had been unfolding from 1861, was one of noble suffering, national munificence, and class conciliation, as rich and poor were joined by the bonds of sympathy. Whereas twenty years previously, hunger and poverty would have resulted in riot and rebellion, the operatives had instead displayed their moral brilliance, cultivated by the increased access to education and the penny press. However, and perhaps to the disappointment of Arnold and Watts, it is the task of historians to challenge what is unquestionably received, and histories of the famine have since disproved the idea of class harmony and noble quiescence, their tone lacking the characteristic celebration.

Historians focusing on the Lancashire Cotton Famine have examined its role in heightening class tensions, as indigence led to reliance on Relief Committees and the Poor Law Guardians. Michael Rose has shown how, contrary to the widely-espoused trust in the operatives' behaviour during the famine, relief methods were tailored to discipline and control the unemployed factory hands. Central to the thinking of the Poor Law Boards and, indeed, the Relief Committees, were methods of distribution which sought to suppress potential disorder; these included compulsory attendance at schools set up by Relief Committees, as well as the ticketed form of relief to control spending on alcohol. The perceived punitive behaviour of those distributing relief was the cause of class antagonism during the years of dearth, as the operatives increasingly saw the Guardians and members of the Relief Committees as despotic tyrants.[6]Ultimate, a riot at Stalybridge in March 1863 marked the culmination of these tensions, as operatives protested the reduced levels of relief, and the distribution of tickets, rather than money. Similarly, Neville Kirk has stressed that the supposed equipoise and social harmony apparent during the Cotton Famine was undermined by the continuance of class conflict and critiques of mechanised factory production. Months before the American Civil War had its economic impact on the region, overproduction in the boom years of 1858 to 1861 had left a glutted market, and resulted in factories cutting wages or putting their operatives on short-time. Strikes and turn-outs thus occurred in 1861, with

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[5] John Watts, *The Facts of the Cotton Famine,* (London, 1866), Preface.
[6] Michael E Rose, "Rochdale Man and the Stalybridge Riot. The Relief and Control of the Unemployed During the Lancashire Cotton Famine", in A.P Donaigrodzki (ed.), *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain,* (London, 1977).

open air meetings of between 5,000 to 12,000 operatives condemning capitalist oppression, and for Kirk, this is demonstrative of a persisting class-consciousness which ran through the years of famine. [7] More recently, Rosalind Hall has concentrated on the weaving town of Clitheroe, studying the diaries of John O'Neil, an operative, and James Garnett, the manufacturer for whom O'Neil worked. From these diaries, and from local newspaper reports, Hall suggests that there existed during the Cotton Famine in Clitheroe a general sense of apathy amongst the wealthier classes towards relief of distress. Far from the outpourings of emotional munificence as was reported in contemporary accounts, Hall concludes that the famine was in no way a period of harmonious class relations, and agrees with Rose in suggesting that the operatives had a strong distrust of the Guardians and Relief Committees.[8]For all these studies, then, class remains the inescapable determinant in Cotton Famine history, and Rose, Kirk and Hall use the fictional construct of harmonious social relations as their starting point, to expose a more fraught historical reality.

The empirical rigour runs central to the other studies of the Cotton Famine which focus on its more famous legacy. Running concurrently with the Civil War in America, the poverty of the Lancashire operatives was romantically sewn together with the emancipation of slaves in the Confederacy, and the working-men of Lancashire were framed as noble sufferers for the cause of freedom, resolute in their support for the Union. In the 1960s, however, Royden Harrison, presented a much more complex picture of Lancashire's sympathies during the Civil War, arguing that partisanship with the sides in America was a 'veil' for social and political antagonism.[9] Class, of course, remained central in Harrison's account, as he analysed the split between old Chartists and new labour leaders, arguing that the Southern sympathisers amongst Lancashire operatives were far more developed in their class consciousness, demonstrated in their rejection of John Bright's emancipation and reform rhetoric. Indeed, he suggested some of the older labour leaders saw no great moral principal at stake in the slavery question, as its abolition would only mean the continuance of wage-slavery domestically. Although this idea of conflict between old and new labour leaders has since been disputed, mainly by Biagini,[10] Harrison deconstructed the homogenous picture of Union sympathy amongst the Lancashire working-classes, and offered a more complicated

[7] Neville Kirk, *The Growth of Working-Class Reformism,* (London, 1985).
[8] Rosalind Hall, "A Poor Cotton Weyver: Poverty and the Cotton Famine in Clitheroe", *Social History,* Vol.28, No.2 (May 2003), pp.227-250.
[9] Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics, 1861 to 1881,* (London, 1965), p.60.
[10]Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform, Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880,* (Cambridge,1992).

narrative. In keeping with Harrison's class analysis, Janet Toole has argued how the Civil War in Lancashire provided an output to channel both anti-slavery and anti-capitalist sentiment amongst the factory operatives. In rejecting Joyce's call to move beyond class,[11]Toole suggests how social tension, deriving from economic exploitation, remained a pertinent feature of the famine years, asserting that 'class was not subsumed beneath an inclusive humanitarian outlook shared by operative and master.'[12]Thus, the historiography which has formed around Lancashire's sympathies during the Civil War has taken a balanced view, acknowledging the existence of Confederate support, class tension, and, indeed, a large degree of Union sympathy.[13]Clearly, for the historians of the famine, the laudatory accounts of contemporaries prove themselves embellished, and largely falsified. The 'class unity' which Arnold discussed in his *History of the Cotton Famine* has been replaced with social tension in the dominant narratives, and the 'immense flow of benevolence' which Watts recorded has been largely subsumed by histories of despotism amongst its distributors.

In seeking to uncover historical verities, then, scholars focusing on the Cotton Famine have rejected the idea of the quiescent and uncomplaining Lancashire operative, and have further challenged the supposed class harmony which existed. Yet, in doing this, they have passed over the more consequential point. The represented image of the Lancashire operative was shaped by and for a contemporary political culture, the foundations of which were increasingly explained in terms of a shared basis of morality. As Hawkins has shown, in the early 1860s the idea of the political nation was recast from a community of responsible property owners, to a community of moral respectability,[14]and the representation of the Cotton Famine must be situated in this context. The constructed identity of the Lancashire operative which was put forth in contemporary accounts, journalistic or otherwise, was shaped by, and for, this political moral community. The male factory operative, during the famine years, became emblematic of the celebrated virtues of self-help, self-denial, industriousness and a respect for order, and their legacy persisted as a moral exemplar during the Reform debates of the 1860s. Thus, the famine helped consolidate a national idea of political respectability, which ultimately rested on a shared appreciation of set moral virtues,

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[11] Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class,* (Cambridge, 1991), Introduction.
[12] Janet Toole, "Workers and Slaves: Class Relations in South Lancashire in the Time of the Cotton Famine", *Labour History,* Vol. 63, Issue 2, (1998), p.174.
[13] Mary Ellison, *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War,* (Chicago, 1972), Philip S Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War,* (New York, 1981), and R.J.M Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War,* (Louisiana, 2001).
[14] Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: Habits of Heart and Mind,* (Oxford, 2015), p.247.

wholly embodied in the operative classes of the cotton districts. Indeed, as historians of the famine have hitherto moved beyond representation in attempts to uncover a 'real', they have overlooked the power such representation had in shaping contemporary notions of social and political identity. Using the myopic lens of class reductionism to look for the realities of economic and social experience, historians have failed to see the ascribed role of the Lancashire working-classes in a larger public discourse, central to the contemporary political culture. Whilst the work of these historians has offered invaluable knowledge on the Cotton Famine, they have started with the represented image of class harmony and the Lancashire operative in order to prove its falsity, rather than questioning why it was represented as such in the first place. In looking at the Cotton Famine, we should look to the role of class in the moral and political sense, rather than as a strict economic determinant, wholly defined by relations to capital and production, as Toole sees it. As Saunders states: 'the second reform period coincided with a drastic rethinking of working-class character',[15]and the period of distress in Lancashire was formative to the moral imagining of the working-classes which took place. It is in this moral, political context, then, that the Cotton Famine should be viewed.

Here, we may borrow from Collini's thinking on character, and Joyce's work on narrative to understand the importance representation had in the formation of social identities. For Collini, the prominent role played by character discourse in Victorian politics rested on the understanding that an individual was already a private 'moral agent whose mastering of his circumstances is indirectly a contribution to the vitality and prosperity of his society.'[16]It was this understanding which, Collini suggests, meant the language of character 'allowed a vicarious form of self-assertion, a public affirmation of one's own worth'[17], as the moral preservation of an individual provided the necessary foundation for a prosperous society. Each member of a society had their individual moral duty to perform, and thus each had a role in the national moral community which, in the 1860s, was increasingly tied with the political community. Yet, the perceived role one played relied on narrative and representation to frame one's actions as part of a wider public duty, and the moral community was

[15] Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act,* (Farnham, 2011), p.6.
[16] Stefan Collini, "The Idea of 'Character' in Victorian Political Thought", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 5th Series, 35, (1985), p.43.
[17] Collini, "The Idea of 'Character'", p.45.

understood insofar as it was imagined.[18]As Joyce has suggested, narrative is important to answer the question of how people become shaped into acting subjects, and how they understand themselves and their roles in particular ways.[19]In *Democratic Subjects,* Joyce quotes Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson to validate the power of narrative in shaping social and political identities:

> 'The people construct identities…by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives…and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiple but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives'[20]

During the Cotton Famine, a sense of involvement in an English moral community was narratively constructed as each were prescribed a set role and public duty: the suffering operatives were to remain stoical and grateful, whilst the rest of the country were to sacrifice and donate. Sermons, first-hand accounts, newspaper reports, poetry and politicians' speeches were central in aiding the imagined understanding of the political and moral community of the Lancashire operatives, and in constructing a narrative of inclusion and progress. Indeed, whilst running the risk of stating the obvious, the character of the Lancashire working-man in Victorian England was known to those who were alien to the county inasmuch as it was represented to them, be it through a newspaper column or in the pews of a Parish church. Thus, whilst historians have moved past the represented image of the Lancashire operative, it was this fashioned identity which played a central part in galvanising charitable sympathy for the virtuous unemployed during the Cotton Famine. And, it was this fashioned identity which packed a rhetorical punch in the Reform debates to follow.

This essay examines the prescribed identity of the Lancashire operatives within the moral political culture, and explores the representative narratives which emphasised public duty for both the operatives and the rest of the country. Starting with the narratives which attempted to rouse charitable sympathy and instil a sense of duty, the essay will move beyond

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[18] For this see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition* (London, 2016).
[19] Patrick Joyce, 'The Constitution and the Narrative Structure of Victorian Politics', in James Vernon, *Re-Reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century,* (Cambridge, 1996), p.180.
[20] Margaret R Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, in Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth Century England,* (Cambridge, 1993), p153.

the intensely local focus of previous histories, and show how the Cotton Famine was interpreted elsewhere in England. The essay will then explore how the operatives configured their own role and duty during the Cotton Famine, in responding to their identity as discussed by politicians, newspapers, and other forms of literature. Finally, the essay will show how the identity of the operative classes during the Cotton Famine was shaped by, and for, a political context of Reform. It will further be argued that the legacy of the operatives suffering nobly for the Union was a tale shaped by these Reform debates, which romantically conflated the years of poverty with struggle for liberty, and provided an intense example of moral steadfastness amongst the operative classes. Thus, rather than moving beyond the represented image to uncover how things actually were, this essay will focus on things as they were told to be in a wider discourse.

**"Con yon help us a bit?"**

Charity and public sympathy are the often assumed aspects of the histories of the Cotton Famine which look instead to expose the despotic manner in which relief was administered. The Stalybridge riots of March 1863 provide the most studied example of conflict between the suffering operatives and the Relief Committees, as the inhabitants of the town turned out to protest the reduction in the amount of relief and the change in its form, from money to tickets.[21]The emphasis placed upon Stalybridge by historians, though, does not do justice to the contemporary silencing of the outbreak, as whilst it was closely followed in newspapers, its history was soon rewritten, and it became a forgotten aspect of the famine legacy. Of the twenty-nine arrested and sent to trial after the rioting at Stalybridge, twenty-eight sent before the magistrate were Irish, and Arnold's history told how 'the Irish boys of Stalybridge damaged the houses of the members of the relief committee', being cheered on 'by their 'colleens'.[22]Similarly, Watts showed the respect for order amongst the native population, as the chairman of the operative deputation, which met with Mayor Hopwood of Stalybridge following the riots, followed the example of 'th' houses o'parliament' in letting the 'majority rule', and ordered all to return to the schools in which they received relief the next day.[23]Even in rioting, the respectable working-man was located. Thus, whilst conflict existed during the years of unemployment, the focus on it has myopically constrained the studies of

[21] See Rose, "Rochdale Man and Stalybridge Riot", and Toole "Workers and Slaves".
[22] Arnold, *History of the Cotton Famine,* p.258.
[23] Watts, *Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.272.

the famine, as local tensions have been the exclusive focus, whilst national sympathy has gone unquestioned.

The Cotton Famine had generated 'the largest charitable subscription ever known'[24] at its close, and the eruption of national sympathy needs to be explained in relation to a contemporary moral climate, within which the charity elicited was wholly embedded. In his recent study of consumerism and liberal politics in Victorian Britain, Peter Gurney explores the Cotton Famine in length to show how material goods played a central role in articulating the emotional response of the nation.[25]During the famine year of 1847 in Ireland, only £200,000 was charitably contributed, in contrast to the near £2,000,000 donated during the Cotton Famine, and Gurney exposes this disparity to question the roots of national sympathy. In asking why the public were so sympathetic, then, Gurney is asking the right questions about the famine, though he provides only a tenuous answer: 'It was a shared hunger for and love of things that increasingly knit classes together', and this, he claims, was 'manifested through the humanitarian relief operation.'[26]Whilst an appreciation of material goods did feature during the famine, it took only a secondary role in generating an emotional and sympathetic response from the wider public beyond Lancashire. The material artefacts discussed in the accounts of distress mostly served to signify the moral and respectable character of the operative to whom they belonged, as the Lancashire man came to typify the achievements of a self-improvement culture. As Ellen Barlee observed in her report of the distress in 1862, the moral injury caused by poverty was seen in the absence of 'pianos, pictures, books, and other incentives to mental cultivation', in the cottages of the working classes.[27] Likewise, *The Times* correspondent, S.G.O – Lord Sydney Godolphin Osborne -, wrote of the pain the operatives felt in pawning 'the books, the musical instruments' and 'every stick of that small store of luxuries hard industry and self-denial had won', all to maintain their independence.[28] Thus, the objects emphasised in the accounts of distress represented the endeavours of self-improvement and learning, in reading or music, and served as a status symbol to show the moral respectability of the owners. Whilst narrative attempts to rouse sympathy did seek to locate a bond of shared understanding and interest between the operative and the wider public, Gurney overstates the importance of material

[24] *The Times,* 5th December 1865.
[25] Peter Gurney, *Wanting and Having: Popular Politics and Liberal Consumerism in England, 1830-70,* (Manchester, 2015), p.289.
[26] Gurney, *Wanting and Having,* p.289.
[27] Barlee, *A Visit To Lancashire,* p.6.
[28] *The Times,* 15th May 1862.

things in his explanation of this mutuality. Instead, it was a shared understanding of moral character and public duty which galvanised the charitable efforts during the Cotton Famine, and these were articulated in the writing on the Lancashire distress.

On April 14th 1862, *The Times* featured the first in a series of letters from a "Lancashire Lad", who was writing from Wigan in an urgent appeal to the sympathetic purses of the nation, as his home county was feeling the effects of the cotton shortage. The "Lancashire Lad", or John Whittaker as he was otherwise known, painted a bleak image of the Lancashire men, as he told his readers:

> 'We have the same fathers who, before these hard time came, were proud men, who would have thought "beggar" the most opprobrious epithet you could hit them with, but who now are made humble by the sight of wife and children almost starving.'[29]

Only out of paternal duty would the proud fathers concede to ask for relief, yet doing such presented a heavy blow to their cherished independence. Their industriousness and pride were the elevated virtues emphasised by Whittaker, as he sought to rouse the sympathy of his readers. However, the most evocative plea came in the simple dialect of the factory girls he saw wandering idly, asking the 'beggar like' question, "Con yo help us a bit?"[30]It was not starvation, but poverty's immoral temptations which the letter highlighted, as the young factory girls pictured were desperate, and prostitution was a real moral threat. These girls, Whittaker stressed, were 'all daughters of Eve no matter what their outer condition and dress', and 'temptations innumerable stand everywhere about them'. Surely, he asked the editor, the letter would 'prompt some of your readers whose hearts are made of more yielding stuff than steel' to help how they can, and prevent poverty and hunger from entering the poor man's home. More importantly, though, it was a Christian duty to preserve the industrious pride of the Lancashire man, and the morality of the factory girl. Five days later, the same newspaper columns included a journalistic response to Whittaker, repeating the question of the factory girls in translated English, of course: "Cannot you do something to help us?". *The Times* replied forthrightly, asking its readers, "cannot we do something to help them?", those who were simply 'a group of girls wanting nothing but a day's work'.[31] Edwin Waugh, the Lancashire dialect writer and journalist, observed that John Whittaker was 'one of the first writers whose appeals through the press drew serious attention to the great distress in

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[29] *The Times,* 14th April 1862.
[30] *The Times,* 14th April 1862.
[31] *The Times* 19th April 1862.

Lancashire,'[32] and thus, from its outset in the "Lancashire Lad's" descriptions, the famine, in the public consciousness, had the potential to be a crisis of demoralisation as much as genuine starvation. Indeed, Whittaker, in closing the letter, reminded the reading public of a time when the distress of the operatives would have 'changed them from men into unreasoning brutes', but now they had taken a moral and intellectual step forward with the nation: 'We can read', the "Lancashire Lad" asserted, 'and we can think'. It was a masculinised image of the respectable operative which was put forward, as it was the men who operated within the public sphere and had developed as respectable characters.

Whittaker's appeals for the assistance of private charity were considered premature by some, as it was presumed that Lancashire could deal with the crisis independently, with the adequate mechanisms of the Poor Law rates. Indeed, in writing to instruct Farnall in his role as Special Commissioner to the Cotton Districts, Charles Pelham Villiers expressed that the Poor Laws were 'fully adequate to meet all probable emergencies'.[33]However, the ignominy of appearing before the Guardians remained a chief deterrent in claiming official assistance in the early stages of distress in Lancashire.[34]The suffering operatives derided the status of pauperism, and sought to distance themselves from the chronically indigent class whose status was coterminous with immorality and improvidence. To be collectivised amongst the paupers, it was recognised, would have eroding effects on the respectability of the cotton workers, and this concern with demoralisation provided the impetus for charitable interference. The 14th Earl of Derby, at a meeting to set up a fund for the distressed operatives in May 1862, expressed that the purpose of charity should 'enable such persons to maintain their position, and to keep themselves off the pauper lists.'[35] Likewise, the importance of private charitable assistance was put forward in a letter to *The Times* on June 5th, as its author, signed 'W', asserted that it was of the 'utmost consequence' to maintain the 'workman's self-respect and cherished independence'. This, they saw, as hard to accomplish 'if the rates are solely depended on'.[36]Thus, in May 1862 the Lord Mayor of London, William Cubbit, formed the 'Lancashire and Cheshire Operatives Relief Fund' at Mansion

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[32] Edwin Waugh, *Home-Life of the Lancashire Factory Folk During the Cotton Famine,* (Manchester and London, 1867), p.209.
[33] Charles Pelham Villiers to H.B Farnall, 12th May 1862. Farnall Archives MSS 17772/62. National Archives, Kew.
[34] See Lynne Kiesling, 'Collective Action and Assisting the Poor: The Political Economy of Income Assistance During the Lancashire Cotton Famine', *The Journal of Economic History,* Vol. 55, No.2, (June 1995), pp.380-383.
[35] Watts, *The Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.87.
[36] *The Times,* 5th June 1862.

House, in direct response to the solicitations of John Whittaker. The Manchester Central Relief Committee was formed in the same month, and this later merged with 'The Cotton Districts Relief Fund' of Bridgewater House, to form the Central Executive Committee. Under the Earl of Derby's chairmanship, (having succeeded the role upon the death of Lord Ellesmere), and with Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth as Vice-Chair, and John Maclure as secretary, the Central Executive Committee collected and distributed funds to Local Relief Committees in the districts across Lancashire, and, largely through the work of Kay-Shuttleworth, offered guidance on how to administer relief. The efforts of private charity were thus gargantuan in the years of famine, and the funds were almost equal to the Poor Law in being the principal form of relief. Mr Farnall's report for 27th December 1862 showed that 260,506 people were dependent upon parochial relief, whilst the number maintained by the Relief Committees was 236,310,[37] and, by the 30th June 1863, donations to relief funds had totalled £1,974,203.[38] It was thus the figure of the morally respectable operative which was, and continued to be, the imagined recipient of relief in the wider public consciousness, as charity sought to preserve the prescribed character of the Lancashire working-man. The form of relief, too, was active in the promotion of morality, as schools were set up across Lancashire for the unemployed operatives to consolidate their literacy skills, whilst sewing-classes were offered to female cotton-hands to improve their sense of domestic duty and care.

The moral dimensions of the Cotton Famine were persistently put forward by authors and speakers who sought to feed the sympathetic imaginations of those foreign to Lancashire. As Arnold suggested in his history, through the accounts emerging from the distress, 'the mind of London pictured to itself scenes of misery thought of by the ordinary passenger through a Lancastrian town'[39]. Ellen Barlee, having visited the cotton districts during the height of the distress in December 1862, framed the Cotton Famine as a crisis of character, more than anything: 'The diminished self-respect and mental anxiety', she stated, was 'evidently the heaviest part of the trial the sufferers are called upon to bear.'[40]Whilst hunger certainly played a role in the rhetoric of sympathy, it was the test to independence and respectability which proved more evocative, as Barlee's account reads like a horror story of Victorian self-help. However, it was widely lauded in the accounts how the moral trial of the

[37] Arnold, *The History of the Cotton Famine,* p.191.
[38] Arnold, *The History of the Cotton Famine,* p.321.
[39] Arnold, *The History of the Cotton Famine,* p.174.
[40] Ellen Barlee, *A Visit to Lancashire in December 1862,* (London, 1863), p.8.

Cotton Famine was borne nobly, and from it emerged the image of the stoical operative, whose quiescent fortitude served as a public affirmation of working-class progress and respectability. As one anonymous author put it, everywhere in Lancashire was 'found the greatest hardships borne with the most noble fortitude'.[41] Thomas Guthrie, moderator of the Free Church of Scotland, claimed in a sermon delivered at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall that the conduct of the working-men 'through this tremendous ordeal' was 'the noblest thing' he had ever witnessed.[42]Indeed, the fortitude with which the Lancashire men suffered, it was thought, was the evident result of liberal progress, and one owing to the efforts of moral and mental cultivation of the working-classes. As Edwin Waugh suggested in his account of the operatives' behaviour in the *Manchester Examiner and Times*: 'Their demeanour during the present trying circumstances lies in their increasing intelligence', owing largely to the 'great growth of free discussion through the cheap press'.[43] For Lord Brougham, speaking at the annual meeting of the Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1863, the Lancashire working-men offered a 'convincing proof' of 'the blessed effects that have flowed from their progress in education'[44]. Whereas charity had sought to preserve the morality of the suffering cotton hands, their behaviour during the intense phase of poverty became the new focus of celebration, and their morality had indeed been ripened during the time of distress. The narratives of the Cotton Famine thus configured an image of the Lancashire working man as typifying the celebrated culture of self-improvement, and the character of the operatives was articulated in relation to a national moral community.

In her writing on the literary imagining of Victorian sympathy, Audrey Jaffe argues that 'the figures Victorian society defined as objects of sympathy were, of course, its outcasts', by this meaning those 'situated outside respectable identity'.[45]This assertion, perhaps, holds truth in the represented image of the London poor, who, as one observer commented in 1861, had a life 'steeped in ignorance, dirt, and crime',[46] and were consequently the objects of moral reforming programmes.[47] However, during the famine,

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[41] Anon., *The Distress in Lancashire,* p.53.
[42] Thomas Guthrie, D.D, *Practical Sympathy and Prompt Beneficence: An Address Delivered in the Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool, December 17th, 1862,* (London, 1862), p.21
[43] Waugh, *Home-Life of the Lancashire Factory Folk,* p.125.
[44] George W Hastings, *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, Edinburgh Meeting, 1863* (London: Longman Green, 1864), p.24.
[45] Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction,* (Cornell, 2000), p.9.
[46] John Hollingshead, *Ragged London In 1861,* (London, 1861), p.8.
[47] See M.J.D Roberts, Margot Finn, and Keith Wrightson, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787-1886,* (Cambridge, 2001), Chapter 5.

narratives worked to construct a distinct moral constituency in which both the operatives and the wider public were a part. Far from being framed as outcasts, the Lancashire men were a central pillar of this articulated English moral community, and it was their belonging which rendered them deserving of sympathy. The moral qualities on display during the famine were described, not just in relation to the Lancashire men, but in terms of shared English virtues. As Edwin Waugh observed:

> One thing I noticed amongst these men, - with very rare exceptions, their apparel, however poor, evinced that wholesome *English* love of order and cleanliness which generally indicates something of self-respect in the weaver – especially among poor folk.[48]

In appeals for charity, the author here locates the conduct of the working-men within a nationally defined moral constituency, as their actions represent English virtues, shared by Lancashire men and readers alike. It was this sense of inclusion within a moral community that authors and speakers upon the famine sought to construct in their narratives. In one sermon preached in October 1862, the Cotton Famine was posited as a 'national distress' which demanded 'national relief', and the operatives, the speaker expressed, were the 'silent martyrs to the sense of English independence.'[49]What was a local crisis in effect was transplanted onto a national scale, as the operatives exhibited 'the spirit of England's unyielding perseverance and determined courage', and this meant that 'all England should feel as a nation bound to relieve' them. The narratives thus helped readers and listeners to imagine a more coherent notion of shared national virtues, and this national inclusiveness served to emphasise the moral duty of fellow countrymen to relieve the sufferers. The operatives belonged, as much as they did, to the national moral community and offered an example of its virtues in action. Indeed, as the Reverend L.F Page suggested in a sermon published for the relief fund, 'England may well be proud of having such workmen', and he put it that they were 'all members of one community', which was 'bound together by innumerable ties and a thousand sympathies.'[50]

The articulation of a national moral character conferred a public duty upon all Englishmen to provide for the operatives in their time of distress. England was presented as

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[48] Waugh, *Home-Life of the Lancashire Factory Folk,* p.118.
[49] Anon., *Distress in Lancashire: A Sermon, Preached on October 12, 1862,* (London, 1862), p.11.
[50]Rev. L. F. Page, MA, *The Cotton Famine, a National Calamity; or Privations Nobly Borne should be Nobly Relieved, Two Sermons Preached at Woolpit, September 21st 1862., Published for the Relief Fund,* (London; Bury St Edmunds; Preston; Ipswich, 1862), p.12.

unique in its internal bonds of sympathy which held together the social frame, as the anonymous author of *The Distress in Lancashire* espoused, 'there are some countries, where, while one district is starving, another neat at hand may, in total unconcern, be rejoicing in their abundance', yet 'this is not the case in England'. Rather, he asserted, 'we be brethren', and there 'is not a true Englishman who can hear of the sufferings of his fellow countrymen without feeling sympathy for them.'[51]The national moral community was portrayed in intimate terms, as each felt deeply for their countrymen who they had never met. 'Never before', suggested the John Baillee of Caius College, 'was the heart of England so stirred to its depths as at this unexampled crisis.'[52]This sense of English moral connection was underpinned by ideas Christian brotherhood, which, as both Boyd Hilton and Jonathan Parry have shown, rose to prominence in the mid-Victorian years, as a religious emphasis upon incarnationalism succeeded the concept of atonement in importance. From the 1850s, Parry writes, 'the basis of an effective national life was the spread of inclusive Christian, as of constitutional, ideals', and there took hold the optimistic incarnational emphasis on the divine spark in all members of the nation, as there became a focus upon the 'Christian Unity of Mankind.'[53]Thus, a shared sense of nationality and Christian brotherhood acted as a solvent upon class and regional stratification, and helped to narratively construct a sense of inclusion in a moral community. Each belonged to England and to Christ, and one anonymous author expressed simply how 'these sufferers are our *brethren,* bound closely to us by every tie of fellowship.'[54]It was a sense of inclusion within this imagined community which assigned a moral duty to all, as the bond to the Lancashire operatives came in their status as countrymen and brothers. As Thomas Guthrie solicited at the end of his sermon on the distress: '*They* have done their duty; do you *yours*!...It was theirs to suffer, it is ours to give.'[55]

During the Cotton Famine, newspaper reports, sermons and accounts of distress all spoke to the performativity of a publicly prescribed moral identity, as each had their duty to outwardly fulfil: the operatives were widely lauded for their fortitude, whilst the wider public were called upon to sacrifice and donate. Collini recognises the performative nature of character discourse, as it relied on a public affirmation of an individual's moral identity, and

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[51] Anon., *The Distress in Lancashire,* p.85.
[52] Rev. John Baillee, *What I Saw in Lancashire, A Plea for the Distressed Operatives to Which is Added a Letter Published in The Times, Nov 27th,* (London, 1863), p.12.
[53] Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830-1886,* (Cambridge, 2006), p.98. See also Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865,* (Oxford, 1988), Introduction.
[54] Anon., *No Time To Be Lost: Few Facts From the Cotton Districts,* (London, 1862), p.13.
[55] Guthrie, *Practical Sympathy,* p.53.

thus necessitated the performance of a character role within the public sphere. During the years of Lancashire distress, the newspaper press was the central platform upon which moral character was validated, and it provided the vital organ in the imagining of individual roles within a moral community. Gladstone's repeal of the paper duties in 1861 had widened the accessibility of newspapers, and, in so doing, had increased the scope of the public sphere. As he acknowledged in an address to the printers and compositors of Newton in 1865, the penny press had the power to make a reader 'feel that he has become in a new sense a citizen of his country' as 'his country owns in a new manner his title to a share in public affairs.'[56]As Benedict Anderson has emphatically shown, the newspaper press conferred a sense of belonging to a wider, imagined community in the nation, as it allowed for a knowledge of spontaneous existence with strangers, bound together in the same national narrative. This imagined community was appealed to in the letters of John Whittaker, and others, who used the platform of the public press to generate sympathy, and assign moral duties. Indeed, Ellen Barlee contemporaneously noted how the suffering in the cotton districts was rapidly worsening 'before the public press had called the aid of England to Lancashire.'[57]In Manchester Mr. W. Birch, a young clerk, started a sewing school for unemployed factory girls with only £5 for the purpose, yet, by the second week, after appealing successfully for help through the columns of *The Times* he had collected £104. In the winter of 1862 some three thousand factory women attended Birch's sewing schools, the cost being £16,000.[58]

The press was undoubtedly the most powerful platform to generate sympathy and galvanise charity during the Cotton Famine, and it allowed for a public assertion of moral character through the subscription lists printed in the columns of national and local newspapers. Readers of *The British Workman* subscribed £3,564, and the subscriptions were accompanied with identifying labels, which, Watts suggested, showed that 'knowledge of the suffering had become general, and that sympathy was not confined to any class.'[59]The subscription list included a donation of 'A Few Working Men, Shrewsbury' who gave two shillings, 'A Friend to the Distressed' who offered six pence, 'A Family Dinner Weekly, per Fast and Give' gave six shillings, and 'A Poor Person' donated six pence. Similarly, the "Lancashire Lad", John Whittaker, sent subscription lists to *The Times* to prompt the continued performance of public moral duty, as 'Lord Belmore, Colonel Gold Weston' had

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[56] *Speeches and Addresses Delivered at the Election of 1865, by the Right Hon. W.E Gladstone M.P,* (London: John Murray, 1865), p.37.
[57] Barlee, *A Visit to Lancashire,* p.108.
[58] William Otto Henderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Famine, 1861-65,* (Manchester, 1934), p.72.
[59] Watts, *Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.249.

contributed funds, alongside 'A Hampshire Man', 'A London Lad', and 'A Scotch Mother'. Sympathy and morality were thus democratised as the nation expressed its common feeling for the Lancashire operatives, and the columns of newspapers were filled with readily available examples of self-sacrifice and munificence. Subscription lists provided a platform of expression for the Christian conscience of the nation, and they worked to establish an imagined moral community in which all, rich and poor, played their part. As *The Times* correspondent reflected in November 1862: 'In a long experience, I never saw a cause which was so thoroughly seized upon the Christian feeling of the entire nation.'[60]

The scale of charitable effort is the most telling evidence of a national sympathy felt towards the operatives during the Cotton Famine, and demonstrative of a sense of shared moral duty. Watts, in his history of the crisis, includes the balance-sheet of the Central Executive Committee up to the 31st December 1864, which shows the receipt of twenty-five thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine separate individual donations, along with collections at three thousand and ninety-three churches and chapels, and collections from five thousand four hundred and three parishes. Further, there were collections amongst the work people of one thousand four hundred and eighty-four firms, and collecting committees were organised in one thousand two hundred and forty-one places in connection with the Central Executive Committee at Manchester.[61] Sympathy emerged for the projected figure of the morally respectable Lancashire workman, who was threatened by demoralisation and indigence, and it became the moral duty of the public beyond Lancashire to donate what they could to preserve the character of the operatives. 'Thus appealed to', William Torrens reflected in 1864, 'the nation nobly did its duty, and the Cotton hands of Lancashire were saved.'[62]Similarly, Thomas Cave put forward in the Reform debates of 1864 that 'instead of the hard strata of unsympathizing castes' during the Cotton Famine, the nation 'high and low, north and south, east and west' came together as 'members of one family, with a common object and common interests', to 'tide the factory operatives' through the years of crisis.[63]

The idea of a national moral community was evidently romanticised by contemporaries, but it was the narratives of the Cotton Famine, and the organ of the public press, which worked to construct a more coherent sense of shared morality within England, as it was imaginatively understood. The outpouring of national benevolence, then, must be

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[60] *The Times,* 26th November 1862.
[61] Watts, *Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.234.
[62] W.T.M Torrens, *Lancashire's Lesson or, The Need for a Settled Policy in Times of Exceptional Distress, A Letter Addressed to the Right Hon. Charles Pelham Villiers,* (London: 1864), p.49
[63] Thomas Cave, 11th May 1864 *Hansard 3rd Series,* vol.175, cc.304.

explained in relation to the narratives which conferred a sense of purpose and duty, as these help the historian understand the contemporary moral climate of the early 1860s, in which the Lancashire cotton operative came to emblematise the celebrated virtues of England. As Keith McClelland has suggested in his conclusion on his study of working-class character in the politics of reform, a fuller account is needed which examines 'the impulses from civil society that differentiated the sober, respectable and desirable male figure', and 'situated him as a suitable object for social inclusion and even celebration.'[64]For this explanation of moral culture, the Cotton Famine and the national preoccupation with identifying the respectable working-man offers a useful starting point, as it firmly included the Lancashire operative in the political moral community.

**'Sich folk as us'**

So far, we have explored the way in which narratives constructed a sense of moral community during the years of the Cotton Famine, and projected a distinct character of the operatives to the wider public beyond Lancashire. The Cotton Famine years solidified a moral identity of the Lancashire workmen in the public imagination, as accounts of their fortitude and character became almost platitudinous. The operatives were ubiquitously praised for manner in which they bore their suffering, and for the respect they had - with very limited exception - for order. We have also seen how roles were set within this moral community, as narratives, in the form of sermons, reports or newspaper accounts, conferred a sense of duty in the public sphere. Moral character was inherently performative throughout the Cotton Famine, as it required outward fulfilment of an expected mode of behaviour, and this performativity of a given moral character shaped the conduct of the operatives throughout the period of distress. The Lancashire workmen were conscious of how they were perceived in the public sphere, and they actively subscribed to their moral reputation, projecting it outwardly in a public discourse of gratitude through dialect poetry, or letters to national newspapers. Likewise, this moral reputation was, in the early stages of famine, brandished publicly as an example of working-class respectability by politicians, and was used as evidence of their fitness for the elective franchise. The Lancashire men were,

[64] Keith McClelland, 'England's greatness, the working man', in Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867,* (Cambridge, 2000), p.116.

therefore, incentivised to act in accordance with their reputation, and, indeed, assist in the manufacturing of their moral identity, for the purposes of both charity and politics. The conduct of the operatives during the famine was thus shaped by and for a national moral community, membership of which became increasingly politicised.

Abject poverty notwithstanding, the unemployed of Lancashire maintained their efforts to stay informed on the news of the day, with newsrooms being set up for the operatives in some mills to occupy their idle time.[65]The entries in John O'Neil's diary, a cotton weaver of Clitheroe, record the eager anticipation for mail from America, as their privation was so closely intermingled with the Civil War. Still, on the 17th April 1864, no sign of improvement had come for O'Neil, and at home the news told of little 'but squabbling in Parliament about things that is of no use.'[66]O'Neil's astuteness is exhibited in the diary he kept intermittently during the years of famine, and it offers a striking example of how well informed the operatives were in current affairs, and, especially, in the news on raw cotton supply. Of course, the praise of the Lancashire character in the columns of newspapers and the speeches of public figures would not have gone unnoticed. The proactive correspondent on the Lancashire distress, S.G.O, observed how the enthusiastic efforts of national charity:

> …paid the highest possible tribute to the character of the suffering operative; he heard of it, read of it, was justly proud of it, and in return endured ruin with a calm patience above all praise.[67]

The popular perception of the Lancashire working man's moral character, it is here suggested, shaped their behaviour during the famine, as they sought to conform to an expected role ascribed to them. Yet, the moral identity of the operatives was not exclusively shaped by charity in public discourse, as their respectable conduct was politically packaged. As early as May 1862, John Bright, ever the opportunist, asked the Commons whether the 'men who could bear so much suffering with so much fortitude were not to be trusted with the elective franchise', especially, he noted, as members of the House paid so many 'abundant compliments' to them.[68]Similarly, William Gladstone, speaking in Newcastle in October 1862, paid tribute to the respectable behaviour of the suffering operatives, and promised his audience that 'when Parliament again considered the franchise the conduct of

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[65]See, *Reports of the Inspectors of Factories to Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, for the half year ending 31st October 1862.*
[66]John O'Neil, J & Mary Brigg, *The journals of a Lancashire Weaver: 1856-60, 1860-64, 1872-75* (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (Series) 1982).
[67] *The Times,* 26th March 1863.
[68] John Bright 9th May 1862, *Hansard,* Vol.166, cc.1514.

the men of Lancashire would be taken into account.'[69]The politicisation of the operatives' moral identity offered a further incentive, alongside charitable sympathy, to outwardly behave in a respectable manner. Indeed, in addressing the working-men of Stalybridge following the outbreak of rioting, James Kay-Shuttleworth reminded them that 'one of the most powerful practical arguments for the extension of the electoral franchise had been the temperate, wise, manly, patient, and intelligent conduct of the Lancashire workpeople.'[70]The transgression on show during the riots would only counter the argument of political respectability, he told them, as he tried to use the franchise question as a constraining measure upon their behaviour. The moral identity and respectable character of the Lancashire workmen was, therefore, manufactured in charitable and political discourse, not organically discovered, as their reputation preceded them and set the standard of expected behaviour.

Character discourse in Victorian political culture was comprised of a language of ascription, in that character was something to be given, attaching a moral label to a group which was worn in a political sphere. The language of character in *The Working-Man* weekly newspaper in the year before Reform demonstrates how the role of working-class respectability was assigned, as the columns discussed 'the character which the working class *received*'[71] in Parliament, and report that the statements in the House of Commons conferred 'the highest general character *upon* the people'.[72]Roles were cast in the political sphere with the expectation that they would be performed by those to whom they were given. A letter from six Lancashire men to *The Times* in 1865, written on behalf of the '"cotton operatives" of Manchester and its surrounding districts', looked to express a 'heartfelt thanks for the manly and open course of action' being called to their aid during the famine now dissipating. Four days earlier, the Earl of Derby had praised the behaviour of the operatives throughout the crisis and celebrated their maintained independence and observance of order. To this, the authors of the letter expressed: 'we are proud of the character *given* us by the noble earl', yet they also performed this character role in the letter:

> let us hope that we have become not only better as peaceful and loyal subjects respecting the laws which govern us, but more humanized in discovering that our wealthier neighbours consider us part of one great family bound together by ties of the strongest affection, sympathy, and love of fatherland.[73]

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[69] *The Times,* 8th October 1862.
[70] Watts, *Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.279.
[71] *The Working Man: A Weekly Record of Social and Industrial Progress,* 24th March 1866.
[72] *The Working Man,* 23rd April 1866.
[73] *The Times,* 9th December 1865.

The working-men who signed the letter wholly subscribed to a political moral community in outwardly conforming to their own role as loyal subjects of a respectable character. In writing to a nationally read newspaper to express gratitude, the 'cotton operatives' also sought to demonstrate their widely-reputed respect for order and hierarchy, and confirm their moral status on a public platform. Of course, Collini identifies that character in Victorian politics was discussed in the 'evaluative' sense, which focused on the 'moral qualities strongly developed or strikingly displayed' by a group or individual, and the idea of display was central to the culture of respectability.[74] The respectable character of the working-classes, despite its emphasis on private individual self-help, was as much about public performance as fireside reading and personal frugality. As Malcolm Chase has recently shown, workers partaking in reform movements in the provinces during the 1860s harnessed a 'rich material and performative culture' to outwardly display their occupational skill. [75] Symbols of their labour would be brandished upon banners in reform marches, to mark their respectability in occupation and legitimise their claim to the franchise through their economic and social standing. Similarly, as Biagini discusses, ex-drill sergeants were employed at reform demonstrations to ensure workers were properly ordered when taking part in public demonstrations, and it was imperative that respectable clothing was worn.[76]The working men in the 1860s who sought reform were thus conscious of how they were perceived, and took effort in their self-presentation, and it is within this culture of moral display that the behaviour of the operatives should be viewed during the Cotton Famine.

The performativity of respectable character is most pertinent in the dialect poetry produced during the years of distress, which, as Brian Hollingworth observes, provided a surprisingly fertile ground for poetical composition in its 'written form'.[77]During the Cotton Famine, the dialect verse of the two most prominent poets, Joseph Ramsbottom and Samuel Laycock, worked to fashion a respectable identity of the Lancashire operatives, whilst also attempting to inculcate the virtues it celebrated. Laycock himself had been made unemployed by the cotton dearth during the American Civil War, and Ramsbottom was not an 'outsider' to the working men of Lancashire. Indeed, the dialect poetry, in its content and language, is

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[74] Collini, 'The Idea of Character', p.33.
[75] Malcolm Chase, 'The Popular Movement for Parliamentary Reform in Provincial Britain during the 1860s', in Robert Saunders (ed.), *'Shooting Niagara – and After?': The Second Reform Act and its World,* (*Parliamentary History*, 2017), p.14
[76] Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform,* p.262.
[77] Brian, Hollingworth, "From Voice to Print: Lancashire Dialect Verse, 1800-70", in *Philological Quarterly,* Issue 92, Volume 2 (2013), p.303.

inherently inward looking as it speaks to a distinct cultural constituency, one demarcated by a familiarity with the native dialect and a proximity to the experience of poverty during the famine. Yet, it was this local class exclusivity which validated the dialect poetry as a powerful platform for the performance of a respectable identity, as it offered an authentic voice of expression for the Lancashire operatives. The method of publication of both Joseph Ramsbottom's *Phases of Distress* (1864), and Samuel Laycock's *Lancashire Rhymes* (1864) demonstrates their intended appeal beyond the unemployed cotton hands. Ramsbottom's *Phases of Distress* was published in both Manchester and London in book form, which alone suggests the appeal to a wider, wealthier audience. More significantly, the collection is edited by John Whittaker, the "Lancashire Lad" above mentioned, who was one of the first to provide a direct voice from the suffering districts to the wider public, thus framing the collection in outward address. In his preface, Whittaker writes that 'in the following poems the Author has given expression to the thoughts and feelings of the Operatives of Lancashire, during the most terrible crisis through which they have ever passed'[78] and he posits the role of Ramsbottom as providing an authentic voice of experience. In a similar manner, the preface to Laycock's, *Lancashire Rhymes* (1864) which featured the twelve *Lyrics of the Cotton Famine*, declares that the poems, now being collected and compiled in book form, 'may be acceptable to a large circle of readers, amongst whom the sheets have never been circulated,'[79] and this collection, too, was published in both Manchester and London. Additionally, *Lancashire Rhymes* is accompanied with glossarial notes which offer comprehensive assistance to a reader not familiar with the Lancashire dialect, and this demonstrates a concerted effort to make the poetry more widely accessible.

The means of publication in collected book form suggests that Laycock and Ramsbottom saw a wider role for their poetry during the famine in providing an expressive voice for the operatives in the verse of their native dialect. The idea of the authentic representation of experience through dialect is evidenced by Arthur Arnold, who included a poem by Ramsbottom in his widely-read history on the period. The poem, 'The Operatives Lament', which does not feature in *Phases of Distress,* was published in a local newspaper, and in quoting the poem in full, Arnold qualifies its purpose in expressing 'the feeling of the

[78] Joseph Ramsbottom, *Phases of Distress: Lancashire Rhymes,* (Manchester; London, 1864), 'Preface'.
[79] Samuel Laycock, *Lancashire Rhymes or Homely Pictures of the People,* (Manchester; London, 1864), 'Preface'.

operatives in their own lyrics'.[80]The dialect verse circulating during the Cotton Famine, then, offered a sense of proximity to the suffering of the operatives, and Hollingworth notes how 'there quickly emerged a sympathetic middle-class reading audience for verse about desperate conditions.'[81]Thus, the dialect verse offered a means to perform the moral character of the Lancashire operatives in a public discourse, in that it professed to express the thoughts and feelings of the suffering operatives, and presented an image of industry, temperance, frugality, respect for order, and gratitude. Of course, dialect poetry had further performative dimensions in that it was sung aloud and recited by the operatives during the famine to busk for money and alms. As George Milner, the editor of Laycock's work observed, out of the 40,000 copies sold of poems from Laycock's *Lancashire Rhymes* in single sheets, many of these 'were learnt by heart and sung by lads and lasses in the streets of the town' during the years of distress.[82] Therefore, as Larry McCauley rightly observes, when surveying dialect literature generally, 'we should attend less to the failure of these verses to project a working-class identity we presuppose and more the possible identity they attempt to construct.'[83] Whilst historians explore the famine from the perspective of class conflict, they overlook the way in which the operatives sought to present themselves to a wider public, and how they self-fashioned a respectable identity for the purposes of charity and politics.

In 'Philip Clough's Tale', Rambsottom presents an image of the respectable working-man who is desperately grasping onto his former life of independence and self-maintenance. The speaker, Philip Clough, records the fall into poverty and tells of the moral injury caused by the famine, and, in so doing, speaks to the stereotype widely propagated in public discourse of the industrious worker now idle through no fault of his own:

> Aw hate this pooin oakum wark,
> An 'breakin' stones to get relief;
> To be a pauper – pity's mark
> Ull break an honest heart wi grief.
> We're mixt wi th' stondin paupers, too,
> Ut winno wortch' when wark's t' be had;
> Con this be reet for them to do,
> To tak no thowt o' good or bad?[84]

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[80] Arthur Arnold, *The History of the Cotton Famine,* p.101.
[81] Hollingworth, "From Voice to Print", p.303.
[82] George, Milner, *The Collected Works of Samuel Laycock,* (Manchester; London: 1908), 'Preface', and Laycock, *Lancashire Rhymes,* 'Preface'.
[83] Larry McCauley, ""Eawr Folk": Language, Class and English Identity in Victorian Dialect Poetry", in *Victorian Poetry,* Vol.39, No.2 (West Virginia: West Virginia University Press, 2001), p.298.
[84] Ramsbottom, *Phases of Distress,* p.24.

Here, the demoralisation consequent upon the status of pauperism is expressed by the speaker, and the image reaffirms the widely-espoused concern of distinction between the respectable workers and the chronically indigent. Philip Clough asserts the need to separate the operatives from the paupers, and identifies his own respectability in criticising those who 'winno wortch' when wark's t' be had'. The poem clearly situates itself in the public conversation on charity, as the image put forward of the Lancashire workingman wholly conforms to his reputation as a deserving recipient of relief, whose respectability must be preserved. The following poem in *Phases of Distress,* 'Good News', continues the concern with distinction, as it reports the efforts of charity from 'Lunnon', acknowledging:

> They dunno want sich folk as us,
> To places loike a bastile goo[85]

The efforts to protect the morality of the operatives are here recognised, as charity sought to keep the honest and industrious working men from the workhouse, or the 'bastile' as it was known. The speaker locates these efforts as part of a wider concern within a national moral community in which working-class respectability was cherished, and it was the duty of all to assist:

> They're comin to eawr help, thea sees
> So weel they know heaw t'do their part,
> They never fail I' toimes like these[86]

The recognisable discussion of demoralisation and duty demonstrates Ramsbottom's attempts to write to the sympathies of a wider audience, as the working-class voices in the dialect verse form a respectable identity of the operatives, recognisable to anyone who had engaged with the charitable discourse during the Cotton Famine. The expected role of the recipient of relief was thus performed in the poetry written by Ramsbottom, as his verse concretised the received image of the Lancashire operative.

The verse of Laycock draws out a collective voice of the cotton workers, as it looked to inculcate virtues through suffering in the Lancashire men and women, whilst also directly speaking to a wider sympathetic audience. In 'Cheer Up a Bit Lunger', he espouses patient stoicism through highlighting the temporary nature of the suffering, and the poem offers a sentiment of hope amidst distress, with the speaker soliciting:

> Cheer up a bit lunger, mi brothers I' want,

[85] Ramsbottom, *Phases of Distress,* p.29
[86] Ramsbottom, *Phases of Distress,* p.30.

> Ther's breeter days for us I' store;
> Ther'll be plenty o' "tommy" an' wark for us o,
> When this dark-lookin' cleawd's blown o'er.[87]

The speaker, in addressing his fellow suffering operatives, expresses the simple wish to return to normal times of industry during which independent prosperity was to be found, and he stresses the exceptionalism of their current situation, as it was, he hoped, soon to pass. Laycock's dialect verse thus spoke to, and on behalf of, the operative classes, as it celebrated the virtues of manly suffering which it looked to inculcate, and constructed a shared identity in suffering, whilst also addressing a wider public audience.

In 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song', originally set to the Irish jig 'Rory O'Moore', Laycock's speaker outlets their frustration onto the ersatz cotton, Surat, which came from India as a substitute for the American 'middling cotton'. Its lower-grade standard caused for difficulty in weaving, and, in the system of piece-rate wage labour, this meant a reduction in the income of the operative.[88]Surat provides a symbol of hard times in the poem, as it presents a physical disruption to the normal flow of manufacture, and the speaker outwardly laments his distress:

> If one turns eawt to steal, folk'll co' me a thief,
> An' aw conno' put th' cheek on to ax for relief;
> As aw said I' ewar heawse t' other neet to mi woife,
> Aw never did nowt o' this sort in my life.[89]

Amidst such privation the operative identifies his respectable status, as, of course, stealing does not present an option, nor does asking for relief from the Board of Guardians, as they are both injurious to his pride and respectability as it was perceived. As he has outlined his independent character, the speaker turns from soliloquy to appeal, adopting a collective voice:

> Iv there isn't some help for us factory folk soon,
> Aw'm sure we shall o be knocked reet eawt o'tune
>
> Come give us a life, yo' 'at ha nowt go give,
> An' help yo're poor brothers an' sisters to live;
> Be kind, an' be tender to th' needy an' poor,

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[87] Laycock, *Lancashire Rhymes,* p.14.
[88] Surat was the subject of other dialect poems during the famine, the most famous being William Billigton's, 'Th' Surat Weyver's Song', which Axon claims sold over 14,000 copies.
[89] Laycock, *Lancashire Rhymes,* p.47.

> An' we'll promise when th' toimes mend we'll ax yo'
> no moor..[90]

The solicitations of charity locate the role of the dialect song in public discourse, as, like Ramsbottom, Laycock puts forward an image of the Lancashire operative which was congenial to the sympathies of the nation. As well as providing an expressive outlet for the Lancashire unemployed, then, the dialect verse, through its speakers and those who sung it, performed the expected role of the operative in a wider discourse, as it engaged beyond a localised class constituency. Laycock and Ramsbottom, through their use of a local demonic language, offered an assumed proximity to the suffering districts, and the identity they constructed of the working men and women was thus seen as authentic. As such, the operative identity in the dialect verse fulfilled the ascribed role of the Lancashire men in a wider public discourse, as they were the deserving recipients of charity, evidenced by their industry and independence.

By the end of the distress in the cotton districts, the moral identity of the Lancashire operatives had firmly fixed itself in popular political imagination, as it was manufactured throughout the famine in a bilateral discourse between the operatives and a sympathetic society. Indeed, in 1866, *The Working Man* weekly newspaper featured a series of articles by another "Lancashire Lad", who, writing from Manchester, hoped to explain the character of the operative population, 'of which so much has been said and written during the past four years'[91]. 'Their conduct', he wrote, 'appeared almost a miracle to those who had not watched the progress made by them during the previous twenty years', and their respectable character had achieved such prominence that it needed its own history; Co-operatives, Friendly Societies, self-schooling, industry, and temperance were the history's pertinent features in the articles to follow. Thus, the represented image of the Lancashire operatives during the famine must not be overlooked as a contemporary idealistic imagining of their moral identity. Whilst the identity was evidently polished in a public discourse, the represented image of the Lancashire unemployed conferred significant historical agency, in that it cast a role to be outwardly performed by the operatives for charity and political power. As the articles of the "Lancashire Lad" show, it was a respectable character identity to which he wholly subscribed and put forward in the year before the Second Reform Act. The conduct of the operatives was thus shaped by, and for, the political moral community: it was shaped *by* it in that the moral conventions of society identified the respectable virtues to be

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[90] Laycock, *Lancashire Rhymes,* p.49.
[91] *The Working Man,* 27th January 1866.

conformed to and demarcated the idea of good character; and it was shaped *for* it in that their conduct was an example in the making of working class political fitness, to be packaged and utilised in debates on the franchise. Readers of Edwin Waugh's 1862 articles in *The Manchester Examiner and Times,* which were collated in book form in 1867, would have realised the political consequences of the operatives' behaviour:

> If the working men of Lancashire continue to struggle through the present trying to pass off their lives with the brave patience which they have shown hitherto, they will have done more to defeat the arguments of those who hold them to be unfit for political power than the finest eloquence of their best friends could have done in the same time.[92]

Whilst class tensions may have existed at points during the famine as previous histories have worked hard to show, the working men's performance of their moral identity in the public sphere must be realised, as they were inescapably conscious of their own presentation. The sense of genuine gratitude, actual quiescence and stoicism, became the pertinent and exalted features of the Lancashire character as it was represented to the rest of the country.

**'A magnificent moral spectacle'**

In 1866, Robert Lowe questioned the moral fitness of the working-classes and challenged their suitability for the elective franchise, in an affront on the virtues of England's people. His words, spoken in the Reform debates in Parliament, galvanised response, and meetings were held across the country fuelled by an impassioned anger against Lowe and the Liberal Addullamites. The workers, Biagini writes, 'wanted vindication of their moral character against the charges of chronic drunkenness and depravity.'[93] It was the demarcation of respectability and morality which determined who was to be allowed the vote in the debates on reform during the 1860s, as Lord Palmertson had told his secretary in May 1864, 'a vote is not a right but a trust.'[94]As such, it was the display of good character and suitable manly

[92] Waugh, *Home-Life,* p.125.
[93] Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform,* p.262.
[94] Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation,* (Cambridge, 2000), p.1.

virtues which helped locate this trust in the people, as they showed they could orderly perform the public duty of electing a candidate fit to serve the nation. The debates on what constituted a character worthy of the franchise had been ongoing before the Cotton Famine had its devastating impact on Lancashire's economy, as John Stuart Mill had argued in 1861, the qualities needed in citizens individually to maintain good conduct and order were 'industry, integrity, justice, and prudence.'[95]It is perhaps of little surprise, then, that from the outbreak of the manufacturing distress, the conduct of the operatives was discussed in terms of the moral virtues required for political inclusion, as their patience, industry, independence, respect for order, and performance of duty were the exalted aspects of their behaviour. The Cotton Famine was an example in the making of the political respectability of the working-classes, and by the time Robert Lowe had come to level the charges of immorality and imprudence on the people, he was met with scornful rebukes. At this point in the debates on the franchise, the Lancashire operatives served almost as a byword for the political respectability of the working men of England, as one glass blower, Joseph Leicester, contested the accusations: 'When people were described as unfit for the franchise the word "Lancashire" should be whispered.'[96]Clearly, the people of Lancashire were also offended by the charges of immorality, as 15,000 demonstrators turned out at Blackburn, and around 4,000 appeared in Rochdale in the January of 1867 at meetings organised by the Reform Union, spurred by the defence of character against Lowe's slander. Discussions of character in politics were, of course, abstract if they did not have the worldly examples to evidence the moral virtues discussed, and the Cotton Famine worked as a crux of articulation in discourses upon the political fitness of the working people. The conduct of the operatives became a cornerstone piece, along with the Co-Operative movement and the Volunteer movement, in a tripartite package of working-class suitability for the franchise.

The fact that social progress and equipoise exposed the necessity for constitutional amendment from the late 1850s is accepted in the historiography upon the Second Reform Act of 1867. Writing in the year before its centenary, Smith introduced his book on the Act with a chapter on the Labour Aristocracy, to contextualise the politics in changes of working-class character. In this, he recognised that the publicity given to the behaviour of the Lancashire mechanics during the Cotton Famine helped to 'crown the image of the

[95] John Stuart Mill, *On liberty, utilitarianism, and other essays* (New ed., Oxford world's classics (Oxford, 2015), p.193.
[96] *Reynold's Newspaper,* 9th December 1866.

respectable, altruistic working man.'[97]More recently, Keith McClelland has been a proponent of the Collini emphasis upon character, in his study of the 'respectable working man' as the axial figure in reform debates. McClelland focuses on the reform pressures from the people in 1866 and 1867, to suggest that the central agent of the popular politics in these years was a man who 'represented himself in terms of his work, his independence and his respectability.'[98]It is thus undisputed that the moral character of the working-classes had a sway in the reform pressure of these years, however Saunders's warns against assuming a definite causality between constructed social identities and legislative change. In his criticism of McLelland, Hall and Rendall, Saunders writes that, 'having established a climate of opinion, little attempt is made to connect it with the legislative process', and asserts that debates about 'fitness' and 'character' only formed one part of Reform discussions.[99]Indeed, the Bill was less about popular pressure and more the legislative outcome of a complex and arduous political slog, which took place in the House of Commons. Yet, in this process, the Lancashire man continually featured as an apodictic example of moral virtue, and the operatives' identity was continually abstracted and manufactured in political rhetoric, coming to embody the celebrated qualities of character in the moral political community. It was this interpretive gloss attributed to the years of distress in Reform debates which informed the legacy of noble suffering and respect for order during the Cotton Famine.

It was Gladstone, more than anyone, who popularised the conduct of the Lancashire workmen in the political imaginary of the nation, as the famine proved formative to his thinking on working-class moral identity. Gladstone's biographer, H.C.G Matthew, argues that it was in his 1862 tours of Lancashire and Tyneside that he became a national political figure, and, as already discussed, it was in Newcastle that he publicly fused the operatives' actions with potential political reward.[100]Gladstone had a personal interest in the wellbeing of the working population during the phase of cotton scarcity in Lancashire, as he had made efforts to employ the idle factory-hands at his home in Hawarden, commissioning a renovation of his garden paths for them to complete.[101]Thus, it was a subject upon which he felt a personal proximity, and one which helped him define the qualities of political respectability. In his famous speech on reform on the 11th May 1864, he put forward qualifying characteristics for the privilege of the vote as being 'self-command, self-control,

[97] F.B Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Act,* (Cambridge, 1966), p.13.
[98] McClelland, *Defining the Victorian Nation,* p.116.
[99] Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote*, p.20.
[100] H.C.G Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809-1874,* (Oxford, 1986), p.130.
[101] John Morley, *The Life of Gladstone,* (London, 1903), p.77.

respect for order, patience under suffering, confidence in the law, [and] regard for superiors', and all such merits were exhibited by the 'general body of the operatives of Lancashire' during the famine.[102]Of course, 'patience under suffering' was a merit largely unique to the distress, and the use of this is demonstrative of the influence the moral conduct of the operatives had on Gladstone's articulation on the franchise question. Again, in the October of 1864, he spoke at an opening of Farnworth Park in Blackburn, where he publicly observed the 'moral transformation' which had passed over the district in the years of the famine. The manner in which the suffering had been met, he declared, was 'that surest of what constitutes a *true man*', and it had concretised the standing of the factory population in in public perception.[103]The moral identity of the Lancashire man thus assumed a fixity in Gladstone's rhetoric as it served as the foremost example of political fitness, and, despite the emphasis historians have placed upon conflict in the years of privation, Stalybridge and scorn for relief administration were soon forgotten aspects in the political legacy of the famine.

As the cotton crisis had passed, it increasingly became the product of political imagination and rhetoric, with less concern for detail and more attention paid to its romantic potential in a democratic narrative. Speaking in the Reform debates of 1866, Gladstone now adopted the tale that the suffering of the Lancashire operatives had been tied with a 'war for justice, and for freedom,' framing it as a 'magnificent moral spectacle.'[104]The idea of the unemployed operatives suffering nobly for the abolition of slavery was soon realised as a politically indispensable example for those trying to further reform pressure. When the vote was considered a trust and a public duty, there was no better evidence to counter the argument that enfranchising a wider constituency would flood the Commons with class interest: here had been a group who had recognised the source of their distress, yet had undergone a period of intense self-sacrifice in the inviolable support for a great moral cause. For Peter D'a Jones, writing in the epilogue to Mary Ellison's book, the idea of widespread and undisputed support for abolitionism during the years of crisis had been a myth created by English Radical-Liberals who needed it to fight the battle for parliamentary reform.[105] Despite this accusation, there was generally a sense of Union recognition in Lancashire, yet only after Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation had gained a firm foothold in defining what the war was actually about. As Watts wrote in his history, it was widely held during the

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[102] Gladstone 11th May 1864, *Hansard* 3rd Ser., Vol.175. cc.325.
[103] *The Times,* 13th October 1864.
[104] Gladstone 27 April 1866, *Hansard* 3rd Ser., Vol. 183, cc.115.
[105] Peter D'a Jones, 'The History of a Myth: British Workers and the American Civil War', in Ellison, *Support for Secession,* p.200.

first two years of the war that if the South had chosen to go back to the Union, the North would have received them with open arms, slavery included.[106]Whilst historiography has been conflicted over Lancashire's Civil War sympathies, it is now taken that support for both sides did feature at points during the Cotton Famine, and there was not homogenous unison in the fight against slavery from the war's inception.[107]

It took time to establish that the dispute was one against the institution of slavery, and even when Lincoln had tried to frame it as such, he was met with accusations of using the freedom of four million slaves for politically expedient purposes. Indeed, slavery seldom featured in the contemporary accounts of distress during its most severe pressures in 1862, and in the poetry of Ramsbottom and Laycock, as well as in the diary of John O'Neil, it is not mentioned once; there is only frustration over the conflict's impacts rather than an expressed advocacy of the Union. The operatives had, in March of 1863, forthrightly rejected the ceremonial narrativisation of their Civil War sympathies, when supplies from the Union affiliated *George Griswold* ship had landed in Manchester, to be donated after a grandiose display of gratitude in a march to Kersal Moor. There, the operatives were to receive loaves after an effigy of the *Alabama* ship was burned, which had been built for the Confederates in Birkenhead in 1862. However, the pomp was not responded to in a cordial manner, as the bread which was to be given out was seized, stamped upon and thrown around by those present, with the plan for the ship burning not going ahead.[108]If they felt their suffering was fused with the Union cause, it was in no way expressed here. Thus, moral purpose was projected onto the years of famine in retrospect, partly to deflect from the futility of the crisis, being consequent upon the economic failing of single-reliance on one source of cotton. As D'a Jones has suggested, the legacy of suffering for slavery was repackaged for political purposes, and morally glossed for arguments on reform. Whilst support for the Union did feature, it was by no means the pertinent and defining aspect of the Cotton Famine as it was later told to be, as there was instead an expressed helplessness over the extraneous cause of the suffering.

It was John Bright who worked relentlessly to partner the cotton crisis with a greater moral purpose. As early as 1861 he had tried to frame the Civil War as a dispute of liberty in

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[106] Watts, *Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.106.
[107] For the conflicting historiography see Ellison, *Support for Secession*, Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War*, Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War,* Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, Kirk, *Working-Class Reformism,* Harrison, *Before the Socialists,* and Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism,* (London, 2015).
[108] Arnold, *History of the Cotton Famine,* pp.254-6, Watts, *Facts of the Cotton Famine,* p.236, and Henderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Famine,* p.111.

a speech at Rochdale, as the object of the South, he declared, was to 'escape from the majority who wish to limit the area of slavery.'[109]Increasingly, Bright attempted to delineate the links between England's working-classes and the American slaves, as in Rochdale two years later he quoted the *Richmond Examiner,* being the principal newspaper of the Southern Confederacy, in saying that 'free society in the long run is impracticable.'[110]For him, what was at stake in this war was not just the abolition of slavery, but the very existence of freedom for both labourers and slaves alike, who were considered property in the eyes of leading Confederate statesmen. In an attempt to persuade his audience, he included an affront on the character of the workpeople he was addressing, as Mr Mann of the State of Georgia had presumed their own economic self-interest would prevail, believing that when cotton stopped 'the Chartists would be in all her streets and fields, revolution would be rampant throughout the island, and nothing that is would exist'[111]; 'King Cotton' diplomacy rested on the notion of working-class agitation for their economic sustenance, and overlooked their predilection for liberty. The very fact he was trying to rouse the sympathies of his audience suggests that support was not quite settled by 1863.

Bright had originally been met with some reluctance from the radical *Reynold's Weekly Newspaper,* as it criticised him of 'being false to the true principle of democracy' in that 'a people have a right to govern themselves.'[112]Only as slavery prevailed over self-determination as the principle factor at stake during the Civil War, largely through Bright's own efforts of public speaking, did Union sympathy supplant itself more firmly amongst the operatives. By the time reform was again proposed in Parliament in 1864, Edward Baines, the Liberal M.P for Leeds, observed the operatives' 'strong attachment to the cause of the Northern States and a strong detestation of slavery'. Despite the evident economic self-interest in supporting the Confederacy, he suggested, the stance of Lancashire offered 'one of the most striking proofs' he had known 'of the deep attachment of the working classes of this country to right, to justice, and to liberty.'[113]Politicians and political writers adopted an approach of moral reductionism, overlooking the complex reality of affiliations to put forward a romantic tale of a struggle for liberty. Richard Hutton, in defining 'the political character of the working class' in 1867*,* argued that they held an innate sense of right and

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[109] James E. Thorold Rogers (ed.), *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by John Bright M.P,* Vol. 1 (London, 1868), p.176.
[110] Thorold Rogers, *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy,* p.234.
[111] Thorold Rogers, *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy,* p.236.
[112] *Reynold's Weekly Newspaper,* (p156) Saunders.
[113] Baines, 11th May 1864. *Hansard* 3rd Series, vol. 175, cc.289.

wrong, and concerned themselves only with great moral principles, rather than arduous political subtleties. He presented the cotton operatives' support for the Union as a monolith, unwavering from the start of the crisis:

> they were ruled by an idea – a great idea – a most disinterested idea, for it induced them to make immense sacrifices, and to acquiesce in want as the price of a triumph for that idea.[114]

The identity of the Lancashire operatives was thus configured in an idealised political imagination to evidence the moral maturity of the working classes. Retrospect afforded the opportunity to add an interpretive gloss to the sufferings, and this shaped the moral legacy of the Cotton Famine in the national perception. Indeed, there still stands a statue of Abraham Lincoln in Manchester, erected in 1919 in Lincoln Square, which serves to mark the 'Lancashire friendship to the cause for which he lived and died'.

Whilst Saunders warns against placing too much emphasis upon the role of character in legislative change, the moral identity manufactured during, and after, the Cotton Famine did have an impact upon Reform debates, even if it was only rhetorical. Through the propagation in the speeches of Gladstone and Bright, along with the histories of Watts and Arnold, the conduct of the Lancashire operatives had assumed a discursive fixity in the debates of 1866. Sir George Grey asserted in Parliament in the April of that year that 'everyone knows what their behaviour was in Lancashire during the severe trial'[115], and William Gregory, a week later, acknowledged that the Cotton Famine provided 'the best argument that could possibly be employed' for enfranchisement.[116] The years of distress had become the perfect product of the English moral community, as the operatives were emblematic of the nationally celebrated virtues which qualified the working-classes for the franchise, and they provided a valuable political currency in advocating reform. The Lancashire operative was thus a central figure in the political imagination of England during the 1860s, and it was their conduct which, the Earl of Derby professed, had convinced him of their fitness for the vote. Speaking at a banquet held in Manchester in the October of 1867, after the Conservative party had passed the Second Reform Act under his leadership, Derby defended the decision to introduce household suffrage to the nation:

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[114] R.H Hutton, 'The Political Character of the Working Class', in *Essays On Reform,* (London, 1867), p.34.
[115] Sir George Grey, 13th April 1866, *Hansard* 3rd series*,* vol. 182, cc.1300.
[116] Mr William Gregory, 20th April 1866, *Hansard* 3rd series*,* vol. 182, cc.1780.

> The experience that I had in the period of the cotton distress… of the many and excellent qualities of the working classes, more especially in this district, led me to form such an opinion of their intelligence, their reasonableness, their sound sense, and their absence from personal and social prejudice, to believe that they could, without danger, be intrusted with that share in the representation of the country which the recent Act has largely intrusted to their hands.[117]

The abstracted moral identity of the Lancashire operative was formative in the imagining of who was to be granted the privilege of the franchise.

**Conclusion**

The Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861-65 needs to be situated within its contemporary moral climate to yield a better understanding of the crisis. The years of distress in Lancashire have offered a multivalent example for historians looking to examine class conflict, Poor Law derision and Civil War sympathies, and they have all used the idealised myth of the famine as their starting point, without questioning its origin. Of course, there is a degree of Victorian self-congratulation in the histories and speeches upon the crisis in the 1860s, yet this does not adequately explain how the Lancashire operative came to be a central figure in the political imaginations of England. From its outset, the Cotton Famine was a product of an English moral community, as contemporaries made sense of the crisis through its exhibition of celebrated moral virtues. In a political context which sought to distinguish between the respectable and the unscrupulous classes of society, the charitable efforts of the famine years offer a starting point for a wider cultural history of these efforts. The image of a deserving, industrious recipient of relief was put forward to the charitable sympathies of the nation, and it was this identity which persisted in the Reform debates to follow as the operatives' respectability was lucidly demarcated. It was the English moral community which manufactured an image of the deserving recipient, just as it framed the boundaries of political respectability. Likewise, as entry into the political nation increasingly rested on behavioural qualifications, the operatives conducted themselves in a manner which lay congruent with their reputations in this moral community, as its benefits to both charity and politics were realised. And, politicians looking to further the reform cause early recognised that the Cotton Famine was an example in the making of working-class political fitness, manufacturing its legacy into the perfect product for the political imagination of England. In strictly focusing on the Lancashire locality and the years of 1861-65, then, Rosalind Hall, Janet Toole and

[117] *The Times,* 18th October 1867.

Peter Rose have delimited their own conceptual parameters, and have failed to recognise the formative importance of the Cotton Famine in the political culture of the 1860s.[118]Nor have political historians of the period paid sufficient attention to the Cotton Famine, as they have overlooked its central importance to the idea of an English moral community, upon which politics was built in the reform years. The crisis thus deserves a more considered and substantiated role in the cultural histories of Victorian politics of the 1860s, and this essay has looked to provide that.

No history is complete, however, as the Cotton Famine still has its unstudied aspects which require attention to more fully understand its role in the moral political culture of the 1860s. The ongoing work of Simon Rennie at the University of Exeter to collate the dialect poetry written and published during the famine in local newspapers will prove invaluable to our understanding of the operatives' moral identity, as we have seen with the verse of Laycock and Ramsbottom. Likewise, more focus is needed on how the Cotton Famine helped to articulate reform pressures from within Lancashire, as the working men who had undergone the phase of intense privation turned their efforts to the franchise. A further exploration of local Lancashire elections of 1865 and 1868 would offer a useful insight into the famine's local political legacy, especially in perpetuating a politics of deference, by those politicians who had been so active in relief efforts during the years of distress. The Cotton Famine still has more to offer for historians, and this essay has looked to secure its role in historical considerations of Victorian political culture.

[118] Toole, 'Workers and Slaves', Hall, 'Poor Cotton Weyver', Rose, 'Rochdale Man'.

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