

The Chartist Rising, 1839

By R. W. POSTGATE

JOHN FROST was a draper of good standing in Newport, Monmouth. He had been active in the Reform movement of 1832, and had gained a reputation for humanity as well as ability. He had saved two noblemen, Somerset and Beaufort, from a probably well-deserved thrashing by the crowd at the Monmouth election of 1831. His capability and influence over the general people of the district was recognised some time after the victory of the Reform Bill by his election as Mayor of Newport and later nomination as a J.P. It would have been well for him if he had done as so many others did after the Reform Bill: take the honours given him and forget that "the people" had not been enfranchised, but only a section of the middle-class. He was too conscientious and methodical a man to do that. The same virtues of punctuality, order and method that made him so successful a retailer forbade him to accept this shoddy article for the real enfranchisement of the people that he desired. He had not, so far as we know, any further ambitions than that. "There was never," he said at his trial, "any talk of a distribution of property other than what exists." For him the Charter, of which he became an adherent, carried no more meaning than was written in its terms. Universal Male Suffrage, Annual Parliaments, Secret Ballot, Payment of Members—these he desired because he believed, with all the rest of England, that they would bring real freedom to the working masses of Great Britain.

His advocacy of these principles secured him great affection and trust in Monmouthshire. The barren hills and moors of the county had been only recently broken and tunnelled into by a new population who had been crowded into the region by the coal-owners. No unions, no modern appliances or Acts safeguarded lives or limited the hours of the colliers. Death and disease took an unchecked harvest of the men, women and children, who all alike had to work down in the mine depths. Great suffering, much degradation and discontent resulted among the 40,000 workers who inhabited a countryside where 50 years before there had been barely 40 shepherd's huts. "Ignorance," lamented the learned Attorney General, "prevails there to an extent very much to be deplored, and many of the people who live in this district are subject to be practised upon by designing men."

"Designing men" were not lacking. In the year 1839 the Chartist movement was growing in strength and not seriously disunited. A Convention of Chartist delegates met at the beginning of the year to direct a campaign to culminate, it was hoped, as the campaign of 1832 had done, in terrifying the authorities into passing a new Reform Bill. Discussion and dissension over methods was considerable, but it was agreed for the while to let the "moral force" Chartists, as they were called, try their methods out. A petition with a million and a quarter signatures—an unheard of number—was presented to the House of Commons. At the same time a programme for a month's general strike was adopted.

In July the petition was rejected. The Convention then fixed a date for the general strike, but realising that its power to carry it through was very doubtful, called it off again. The whole movement seemed to have ended in collapse.

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The matter was not allowed to stay there. The "moral force" men had led them to disaster: there were others, the "physical force" men who would take things over. Frost of Wales, Taylor of Birmingham, Bussey of Yorkshire, and some others, met after the Convention had risen and made arrangements for an armed rising. Sheffield, Birmingham, Cardiff and Newport, and the cotton districts of Lancashire, were held to be ready to rise. Bussey was in charge of Yorkshire and failed to do anything. Of the other districts we know little, except of Wales. The Crown alleged afterwards that the Monmouth men were to give the signal for a general rising by blowing up the Newport bridge over the Usk. This would prevent the mail leaving for Birmingham, and its non-arrival there within an hour and a half of the usual time would be the signal for a rising. "There was to be a general rising through Lancashire and throughout the Kingdom and Charter law universally established." That this was the exact plan seems doubtful: the Newport mail joined the Birmingham mails at Bristol, and whether or no the Newport mail was held up the mail coach would arrive in Birmingham at the usual time, carrying the Bristol letters. But it seems sure that there was some connection between Wales, Birmingham, and the North, and that the capture

of Newport was to be the sign for a general insurrection.

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Frost returned to Newport in the autumn. He had for assistance Zephaniah Williams, an inn-keeper, and William Jones, a watchmaker. Things were going wrong in the North, Bussey was letting them down, but the message to this effect, which was to have been sent through the great leader Feargus O'Connor, never arrived in Newport, and Frost proceeded with his preparations until the end of October. Then they fixed on the night of November 3rd as "the day." On that date they would enter Newport at two in the morning and seize the town before the garrison was capable of resistance. This would give the signal for the English revolt: for themselves they would proceed to Monmouth to free their beloved Chartist orator, Henry Vincent, lying there in prison.

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On the night of the third of November, the Chartist army was on the move. They were in three divisions, composed, of course, almost exclusively of miners. The first column, under John Frost, consisted of the Lodges of the extreme West of Monmouthshire. It was to assemble at a place called Blackwood, near the Rhymney, and cut across country to Abercarn and down to Risca, which is some four miles from Newport. Here it

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would meet the two other columns—Zephaniah Williams's, which was to come down country twenty miles at least, from Nantyglo in the north, and William Jones's, which had merely to come from Pontypool, a journey no farther than Frost himself had to make.

Frost, in the afternoon and evening of November 3rd, fixed his headquarters duly at Blackwood, in a public-house. The Chartists' arrangements, which are secret to this day, must have been fairly effective, for several thousands fell in. They were armed, for the most part, with home-made pikes and spears, but a fair number had guns and pistols, with ammunition, while others brought "an instrument called a mandril, which is made of iron and used for picking coals in the mines, resembling a pickaxe in shape, a very dangerous and deadly weapon if used as a weapon of offence." They had been drilled a little but not enough, for though they started off bravely enough in rank they had not gone far before the main body dissolved into a general mass walking along as easily and casually as any peaceful procession. More disorganisation was caused by their impressing all the miners who were unfortunate enough to live on the line of march. Their numbers were increased by this, but their morale was ruined by the presence of so many who were only anxious to run at the first opportunity.

When they got up on the hill-side on their way to Abercarn, they were met by the most terrific storm. The rain and wind that swept over the Welsh moors can be terrible enough under ordinary circumstances, but this was "the darkest and most tempestuous night known for many years." The night was pitch black, neither moon nor stars could be seen, and they had to guess their way over the rough roads. Up on the heights they were helplessly exposed to the wind which raged with appalling violence, howling like a living thing. The rain descended in sheets, soaking them through and through. Time and again they had to stop to clean and dry their muskets. They were more than a little cold, damp and discouraged when they descended into Risca to meet the other columns.

No one was there. They took shelter as best they could, in doorways or public-houses, and waited.

They must have waited nearly four hours, for day was breaking before they decided not to wait any more, but to go forward and capture Newport themselves. They formed some sort of order again and moved on down the road to Newport.

Only ten minutes later Zephaniah Williams's column entered the empty town of Risca. It followed Frost down to Newport—ten minutes behind all the way. Jones had only reached Malpas.

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Frost's men, after halting twice again to look to their muskets, approached the outskirts of Newport, passing by the length of Tredegar Park, and past Court-y-Bella. One of the songs they were singing has been preserved:

I have seen the poplars flourish fast
While the humble briars bound them,
I have seen them torn up by the blast
Of elements around them.
The lightning flashes through the sky,
The thunder loud roars after,
O scorch, burn the oppressors! Why?
Because they withhold the Charter.
Then rise, my boys, and fight the foe,
Your arms are truth and reason,
We'll let the Whigs and Tories know
That Union is not treason.
Ye lords, oppose us if you can,
Your own doom you seek after,
With or without you we will stand,
Until we gain the Charter.

* * *

Inside Newport the authorities had got wind of what was on. They had rounded up a number of Chartists and put them under guard in the Westgate Hotel. A number of special constables and a small detachment of soldiers were also put in to guard the Hotel, though it seems that Frost knew nothing of the presence of the soldiers. Anyway, when his irregular army, some four thousand strong, marched down Stow Hill and wheeled round to the front of the Westgate Hotel, they behaved as though they suspected nothing. The windows were shuttered and barred, and nothing was to be seen but a few special constables, who fled inside, after replying "No, never!" to a demand that they surrender the prisoners. The Chartists were firing aimlessly into the air, doing no injury if creating alarm. They attempted to follow up the special constables through the front door. Just as they were pressing through, the shutters of the windows on the ground floor were thrown open, exposing the soldiers who had been hidden up till then. The military instantly fired a volley into the mass of the crowd. They were in a commanding position: the Chartists were packed into an open square beneath them. Every shot told, there was no possibility of escape: the miners were caught like rats in a trap. The soldiers swore they only fired one volley (and the defence at the trial had good reason for not questioning that) but the ten dead and over 50 wounded prove this to be wrong.

As soon as they could, the outmanoeuvred miners scattered and broke, running down every turning. Those who were trying to storm the front door and had actually broken in to the passage, resisted and fought for some while longer. They attempted to rush the room in which the soldiers were several times, but always "faltered when they encountered their own dead." The firing, all told, lasted ten minutes, and by then the passage and street were clear of all but the dead and wounded. Among the dead was a boy of 18 who had sent this letter the night before:—

Dear Parents,

I hope this will find you well as I am myself at this present. I shall this night be engaged in a glorious struggle for freedom, and should it please God to spare my life I shall see you soon; but if not, grieve not for me. I shall have fallen in a noble cause. Farewell!

Yours truly,

GEORGE SHELL.

* * *

As the flying miners went back along the road they ran into Williams's column still leisurely advancing. Williams's men hesitated for a moment and then joined in the rout. Jones's column heard of the defeat by message and turned home.

The last seen of Frost that day was when he was walking with jerky steps among the mob past the walls of Tredegar Park, "holding his handkerchief to his face, as if he was weeping."

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