



Rob Breton, *The Penny Politics of Victorian Popular Fiction*.

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Woven intermittently between informative details of Chartist politics and its infiltration into the popular ‘cheap’ texts of the 1830s and 1840s, Rob Breton’s *The Penny Politics of Victorian Popular Fiction* expertly navigates through publications that targeted the working-class of the early-Victorian period. Investigating such texts as the Newgate calendar, sensational crime narratives, penny bloods, and popular journals, this monograph offers a much needed and unique approach to the ephemeral literature of the time. Within these pages, Breton identifies how a network of periodicals capitalised on the revolutionary beliefs of the Chartist reformation. Utilised as a method for monetary sales and perpetuation of radical beliefs, the working-class periodicals of the time incorporated antagonistic discourses that created tension and social divisions in Victorian society. Divided into five chapters, exclusive of the Introduction, *Penny Politics* offers its readers a unique approach to the ‘cheap’ fiction and the radical reformation of the nineteenth century. Arguing how this literature was an authentic effort for ideological struggle as well as a source of commercial marketing and viability, Breton reinforces the impact that Chartism and politics had on popular culture and their resulting method of social control.

Creating a framework that merges the analysis of politics, working-class British literature, and their relationship to the radical papers, Chapter 1, aptly titled “The old, new, borrowed, and blue Newgate calendar” introduces the Newgate calendar as a pivotal factor of social influence. Setting up the essential foundation for the remainder of this monograph, Breton highlights the

criminal element of the Newgate calendars to emphasise how these texts necessitate a reassessment as popular sources of Chartist radicalism. Used as a method for communication and support, the Newgate narratives of the 1830s and 1840s, then, are argued as voices of change “by the Chartist defendants, if not for Chartism itself” (15). Specifically targeting characters as tricksters and thieves, this chapter argues that such criminals were often described as quintessentially offensive yet euphemised in their behaviours. This characterisation, while applied to earlier calendars, was later exploited in the calendars’ exposition of the Chartist trials exhibiting a transition of perspectives in popular literature.

Building on the analysis of the political exploits and their exposure in the penny publications, Chapter 2, “*Jack Sheppard*, the Newgate Novel,” further explores the representation of the Newgate school as the ideal literary form of communication about social instabilities. In this chapter, Breton investigates what he refers to as the true four Newgate novels: Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Eugene Arams* (1832), and William Harrison Ainsworth’s *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839–40), and identifies how this latter publication is the pivotal Newgate novel, as it speaks directly to, and about, the political upheaval of the period. While this chapter provides an analysis of the necessary historical rise and decline of the Newgates, it aligns much of its focus on Ainsworth’s novel and how, as a significant part of a political movement, it “mocks and defies” the ongoing unrest about social freedoms (15). While Breton identifies the political ambivalence created by the text, he theorises that this indecisiveness is the key, and potentially seditious method that provokes dichotomous emotions of intrigue and fear in readers.

Transitioning from the political exploitations of the Newgate novels, Chapter 3 (“Penny radicalism? *Sweeney Todd* and the bloods”) and the penultimate Chapter 4 (“Mysteries and ambiguities: G.W.M Reynolds and *The Mysteries of London*”), shift attention to evaluate the texts known as penny bloods of the 1840s. In the first of these two chapters, Breton specifically acknowledges the difference between the Gothic-style bloods of the early-Victorian period from the juvenile-targeted dreadfuls of the later years, and then catapults his readers into the depths of *Sweeney Todd*’s cellar. Although this particular penny blood has been analysed by scholars as a celebration of industrialisation and capitalism, Breton offers a new approach that suggests the emergence of Chartist radicalism is founded on its antagonism, thus resulting in *Sweeney Todd*’s popularity amongst the working class. Declaring the radicalism of the penny bloods as crucial sources of political propaganda, Breton segues into the chapter dedicated to the foremost Chartist voice of the Victorian period: George W.M. Reynolds. As a significant advocate for this tumultuous movement in the later years, Reynolds predates his prominent visibility as a reformist by integrating his beliefs into his literature. Solely examining *The Mysteries of London*, this chapter argues how Reynolds utilised the same radicalistic methods as the Newgate calendars and prior ‘bloods’ to capture the intrigue of the working-class readers. However, unlike its predecessors, *The Mysteries of London*, as Breton argues, resists ambiguity and offers a more deliberate politicisation of the fiction.

The final chapter in Breton’s monograph, “Distant friends of the people: *Howitt’s Journal* and *Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine*,” transitions to focus explicitly on popular reformist periodicals. Similar to the penny publications and Newgate material, these papers also borrowed information from canonical sources to implement radical ideals able to influence working-class citizens. Arguing that such reformation journals could not “simply reject or ignore Chartism,”

this chapter highlights how these journals were used by middle-class society as an “antidote” to reject the penny publications’ segregation of culture and politics (178). Concluding with an interrogation of society’s attempted resolution of the Chartist narrative and beliefs, Breton re-identifies the conflict brought forth by earlier indecisiveness and subsequent tensions.

Wrapping up, what I consider a concise, intricate, and evaluative examination of the penny periodicals as a vehicle for politics, concerns, and Chartist perspectives, this monograph concludes in an appropriate manner: with the revisitation of the middle-class’s attempt at social control through literary means. Expertly creating an intertextual and socio-political analysis of Victorian society’s use of discourse control, Breton’s unique perspective that identifies democratic, radical, and Chartist infiltration of penny periodicals sheds a new, and necessary, light on these narratives. The diversification of texts utilised in this monograph strengthens Breton’s theory and highlights how rhetoric control and social perspectives were informed by both subtle and forthright literary language. Therefore, I would highly recommend Breton’s monograph to academics, scholars, or hobbyists interested in nineteenth-century British studies, political scientists, or anyone interested in penny periodicals.



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