

Henry Hetherington

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Henry Hetherington was born in 1792 in Compton Street, Soho. He was the son of a tailor. In 1805, he was apprenticed to Luke Hansard, the printer of the Journals of the House of Commons. When his apprenticeship ended, and work was hard to find, he went to Belgium for 3 years. On his return, he worked as a shopman for Richard Carlile.

During the 1820s he started his own printing and publishing business, and he also joined a number of radical organisations. In 1820, he attended a series of lectures on the co-operative ideas of Robert Owen, and became a founder member of the Co-operative and Economic Society

In 1822 he set up his own press in Kingsgate Street, Holborn, paying a rent of £55 a year for the house. Here he published the Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist.

He next joined the London Mechanics Institute in Chancery Lane, which had been founded in 1828 by George Birkbeck to provide adult education for working men. He joined the First London Co-Operative Trading Association, which was often asked for advice from other new co-operative societies. So Hetherington and others then founded the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge. He became the most accomplished BAPCK speaker, but a rift developed with Robert Owen, who thought politics were irrelevant to the growth of co-operation. During the 1830s, Hetherington's main focus was on universal suffrage, and the demand for a free press. He joined a number of short-lived radical associations, including the Radical Reform Association which had been founded by Henry 'Orator' Hunt to demand universal male suffrage.

Henry Hetherington was a leading light in the "War of the Unstamped". The Government attempted to shut down the Radical newspapers by imposing a Newspaper Stamp Tax and increasing the tax on paper. In the 1820s, all of the radical papers decided to pay the tax, which at 4d was a multiple of the cover price, so their circulation went down substantially. Readership was less affected, since people clubbed together to buy these papers and passed them round.

In 1830, the July Revolution in France boosted interest in electoral reform and created a larger market for radical newspapers. So, in 1831, Henry Hetherington began publishing the Poor Man's Guardian which was the best-known and most influential of all the many short-lived radical newspapers published at this time. For all his papers, he appointed an editor, so that he could concentrate on travelling, addressing public meetings, and expanding the distribution of his papers.



The great Reform Act of 1832 is known nowadays mainly for its name and for the abolition of the "rotten boroughs" which returned one or two Members of Parliament despite having only a small number of electors. At the time, it was widely regarded as a betrayal, since voters still had to own property, so the middle classes got the vote while the working classes were still excluded.

Although the Guardian's life of 4½ years was short, its campaign against the newspaper tax, which it described as "a tax on knowledge", was a notable success. It showed that there was a large demand for cheap newspapers, and that radical ideas for voting reform attracted widespread support among the working classes. Its circulation was higher than all but one of the broadsheet newspapers read by the upper and middle classes. The Guardian made money through its Victims Fund,

which gave money to a wide variety of working class causes, such as the fatherless Tolpuddle martyrs, and to parish martyrs whose property was confiscated when they would not pay their church tithes.

Henry Hetherington was imprisoned three times during the War of the Unstamped; 800 other people were imprisoned for distributing unstamped papers. In 1836, the Government reduced the stamp duty from 4d. to 1d. and greatly increased the penalties for non-compliance. Hetherington's unstamped papers were converted to pay the stamp; he explained that "personal courage was useless against the government's new powers".

His energetic activities had paved the way for Chartism, which soon divided into the "moral-force" and "physical-force" wings. The Chartist movement succeeded in its main aim of presenting a huge petition to the Houses of Parliament, but thereafter lost momentum.

Hetherington remained active in a variety of public causes, until he caught cholera in 1849. He refused medication in the belief that his lifelong teetotalism would protect him; he died in August.

