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Chapter 11

The 'She-Champion of Impiety': A Case Study of Female Radicalism

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I look upon her as by far the most interesting woman in the country, and one who has done more public good than any other one.

Richard Carlile in *Republican*, 24 September 1825

During August 1826, letters to the London radical journal the *Republican* reported that the town of Nottingham was 'in an uproar' with the launch of a radical bookshop trading in politically extreme and heretical publications. Large crowds of 'Christians' assembled in protest each night outside the shop; some prayed and others spat insults against the store's owner: radical, freethinker and former state prisoner, Susannah Wright. Wright found herself in the 'midst of a Christian storm' when angry crowds, affronted by the caricatures of God and the King adorning the front window, made repeated attempts to break into the bookshop and to drag her out into the street. Witnesses reported that she was subjected to 'profane curses' and 'horrid imprecations', and Wright herself wrote of receiving several death threats. While evening produced the largest wrathful gatherings, her radical friends were able to rally around the shop in support. During the day, however, she was forced to take all means to defend herself. Faced with two youths who used the 'most dreadful language' against her, she reached for the pistol which she kept under the front counter, and advised that she would most certainly fire it if they did not leave. They hurriedly 'scampered off'. The trouble came to a head by the end of the month when furious crowds attempted to break into the shop five or six times in one evening and by nine o'clock her friends sent for the police. The irony must have struck many. Initially an inadequate force was sent and reinforcements were needed to quell the riot outside the shop. After several arrests the police succeeded in clearing the streets by eleven o'clock.¹

The riot outside the Nottingham bookshop was preceded by five years of public malediction against Susannah Wright – most of which took place in London. Wright entered the political fray during tumultuous times when radicals of all stripes sought to reform the old order based on Church and King. Between 1819 and 1821 the government witnessed overt public discontent on an unprecedented scale and the glint of the guillotine resurfaced in the collective memory of Britain's ruling elite. The government responded with a raft of repressive legislation which

criminalised all forms of heterodox political and religious expression. Prosecutions for sedition, treason and blasphemy soared and the country's gaols swelled with political prisoners. During that time, Wright's work in the London bookshop of imprisoned radicals Jane and Richard Carlile resulted in several court appearances and almost two years as a state prisoner in both Newgate gaol and Cold Bath Fields prison. While she gained celebrity as a popular radical heroine, her profile also came with much public deprecation as the 'She-Champion of Impiety'.²

Almost every student of radicalism since E.P. Thompson has noted the imprisonment of Susannah Wright as part of the spate of radical prosecutions in the early 1820s.³ Yet previous scholars have invariably done so with scant detail – depicting her as an accessory of, and incidental to, the story of prominent radical Richard Carlile – that she has become little more than a footnote in radical history. An example is the treatment of Wright's story in Edward Royle's document collection *Radical Politics 1790–1900*. Royle includes an article written by B.B. Jones from the *Reasoner* of 1859 which contained some of the most detailed accounts of Wright's experience in the radical movement. Regardless of the fact that Jones wrote the article the 'because no one has given any account' of the individuals who 'assisted Mr Carlile in his arduous task against despotism',⁴ Royle reproduced it over a century later as a record of Richard Carlile's experience; Wright's name was included but the remainder of the detail of her experience was edited out.⁵

An exception to this pattern was a paper published by Iain McCalman almost 25 years ago. McCalman argued that the women in Carlile's circle had been either neglected or misunderstood by historians, even those who were beginning to uncover the women 'hidden from history'. Opposed to the 'supplementary' role ascribed to radical women, he pointed to a radical movement 'in which women played a genuinely critical part' and where the movement enjoyed the exceptional dedication of women such as Susannah Wright.⁶

This essay aims to give full justice to the story of Susannah Wright, not only to extricate her from Richard Carlile's shadow but also to restore her to her rightful place in the historical record. The woman brandishing a pistol in her own bookshop was a viable political actor in her own right. As a case study, her story is a document of independent agency; an experience that cannot simply be read as a subsidiary to that of the radical male narrative. Through her eyes we can see how a woman negotiated various spaces of political activity and forged a radical identity, and how her involvement provided a platform for other women to express their radicalism. Moreover, it places radical women in the evolving scholarship of the alternative or radical public sphere: Wright's experience broadens our understanding of how courts and prisons were active sites of radical political activity.⁷ Finally, Susannah Wright's story highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of contemporary attitudes to gender. As a freethinker and a woman, how did her experience fit with newly emerging notions of femininity which were often imbued with deeply religious undertones?

Susannah Wright was not new to the radical scene when she was first arrested for blasphemy in 1821; her public debut was preceded by an active participation in the less visible world of the radical family. A native of Nottingham, she attributed

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the formation of her principles to the 'distinguished spirit' of local reformers.⁸ In the years before her arrest, she, and her husband William Wright, published many heretical and politically stinging caricatures (in his name) and sold them through their radical bookshop in Fleet Street. The Wrights also participated in the regular Sunday gatherings of radicals at the home of B.B Jones and his wife, where to amuse themselves for the evening the 'Atheistical friends' would 'read and discuss' the latest in radical and heterodox literature⁹ – an intellectual and physical challenge to Christianity on its most sacred of days, the Sabbath. Wright also frequented the radical bookshop of Jane and Richard Carlile – a notorious outlet of radical texts and the site where many radicals courted prosecution, including Jane and Richard themselves.

Susannah Wright was one of the earliest of a string of volunteers who responded to Richard Carlile's appeal for help to keep the shop open following his arrest and imprisonment, and that of his wife Jane and sister Mary-Ann Carlile. Vowing to 'attend to the business at all risk', Susannah was assured of the backing of the Joneses and other 'atheistical friends'.¹⁰ Like the Carliles before her, and the string of volunteers who followed, Susannah was soon charged with blasphemy and, in December 1821, faced court for the first of three appearances for the sale of a tract penned by Richard Carlile from his prison cell. Released on bail after her first hearing, her trial was delayed until July 1822 by which time she had given birth to another child. She put these months to good use: as Carlile noted in the *Republican*, 'she is determined to defend herself, and read her own defence, and will not allow [Judge] Best to silence her'.¹¹

On 8 July, Susannah and her children, B.B Jones and his wife, and a tight-knit band of unnamed female radical supporters left the Jones' home in Surrey to attend the trial. Jones recalled that Wright defended herself against the charge of bringing the 'Christian religion into disbelief and contempt among the people' with 'an ease peculiar to herself'. He assisted her in the dock, keeping her place in her notes when she was frequently interrupted by the Judge disapproving of her line of defence or during the commotion in the public galleries caused by heckling from several youths. Jones recollected that the plan from the outset was to get as much of the defence read as possible, which included reading the offending tracts so as to 'prove' their innocence.¹² This was a pattern by now familiar at political trials, where the accused radicals used the courtroom to convey their message to a wider public audience.¹³

So engrossed was Susannah in the trial proceedings that Jones had to remind her to request a break to attend to her baby. She emerged from the court to the cheers of a large crowd who had gathered outside, and a group of about twenty close supporters retired for refreshments to nearby Castle Coffee House. Returning to the Court, Wright brought almost four hours of defence to a close by advising the Jury to 'be firm and do your duty' and by insisting that she scorned 'mercy and demand[ed] justice'.¹⁴ Wright's defence had invoked the language of historic rights, but without any overt appeal to the constitution. Rather, her appeal to the freedom of expression and opinion rang with overtones of the rights of the free-born English.¹⁵ Despite such bravado, her supporters were determined to avoid her

being taken into custody pending sentencing and ushered her swiftly out of the court before the guilty verdict was announced minutes later.

It was not until four months later that Wright again returned to Court for sentencing. This time, her notoriety attracted more of the public gaze both in crowd numbers and press interest. Under the pretext of addressing the Court in 'plea of mitigation of punishment' Wright instead challenged the validity of her guilty verdict, arguing that Christianity had no place in the law. Clearly agitated by the content of her statement the Chief Justice issued repeated warnings that he would not suffer such profanity against the law or the church in his court. This only spurred Susannah to greater defiance, telling the judge, 'You, Sir, are paid to hear me'.¹⁶ She continued to ignore his interruptions to the amusement of the crowded courtroom. Exasperated by her recalcitrance, the Judge sentenced Wright to be confined for ten weeks in the loathed Newgate prison to deliberate on her plea.

Early nineteenth century courtrooms were undoubtedly gendered spaces; only the public galleries were open to women and the business of the court was performed and controlled by men.¹⁷ It was no accident that Jones assisted Wright with her notes rather than one of her numerous female attendants. In relation to the courtrooms of the 1790s, James Epstein has argued that 'all those who spoke were men'.¹⁸ Susannah Wright's experience suggests that by the early 1820s this was no longer the case. Wright's trial reveals ways that women could circumvent and contest the unequal power relations implicit in the early nineteenth century legal process.¹⁹ Women were absent as officers of the courts, but they were not absent from the courtroom. By all accounts, Wright was surrounded by women in her trials, from her close circle of female friends to the unknown supporters in the public galleries, some of who travelled long distances to attend the trial. Nor was this support unique to Wright's trial: she herself reported attending Jane Carlile's trial every day for a week to 'watch the conduct of her inhumane Judges'.²⁰ Most importantly, she was not silent; neither did she allow herself to be silenced. Her defence in the July trial lasted almost four hours and in her November trial she countered the Judges interruptions by claiming that 'nothing but absolute force shall prevent me reading'.²¹

Historians of the radical movement have often downplayed the role of the Carlile's imprisoned associates with the suggestion that Richard was responsible for writing their defences. Carlile did mention working on Susannah's defence in private correspondence with another imprisoned shopman, yet as McCalman notes, much of it accords with the style and language of her other correspondence to the *Republican*.²² Regardless, it is perhaps better to think of radical defences at this time as a collective effort; learning from and building on each subsequent iteration; honing ways to circumvent the legal arguments against them and to utilise this arena to publicise the radical agenda.

The question of authorship is further redundant when Wright's performance of the defence is taken into account. One woman who travelled from Manchester for the trial recorded her awe at Wright's skill in negotiating the courtroom: 'never will the impression be effaced from my memory; the firmness she evinced and her resolution not to be silenced'.²³ This was not the case of an uneducated or docile woman regurgitating the words of an astute leader: she performed her defence in

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an exemplary manner – unsettling the prosecution with her legal tactics and understanding, challenging the jury on their own understanding of the Christian faith, and frustrating the judges with the force and persistence of her defence. Surprisingly, not even the most conservative of newspapers took the opportunity to question the right or the propriety of a woman to conduct her own defence. Given her notoriety, the absence of any criticism suggests that it is time to look more closely at the British courtroom not only as platform for political radicalism but also as a contested site of power and gender relations.

Susannah's performance at the trial, and the harshness of her treatment, made her into a popular radical heroine. Newspapers around the country printed the trial transcripts or reproduced those reported by *The Times*. Veteran ultra-radical and poet Allen Davenport was clearly enamoured with her efforts in the poem he dedicated to her, 'The Captive':

Ah! Great was my surprise rely on't,
When I beheld thy slender form;
'Is this,' me thought, "the mighty giant,
That battl'd in the *legal* storm!

"And was it she that brav'd the fury,
Of the ruthless bench and bar,
And scorn'd the verdict of a jury,
Empanell'd for religious war!"²⁵

Despite Wright's popular radical appeal, the nature of her crime and its moral implications polarised press opinion in the metropolis. The *Morning Chronicle* and *The Times* remarked that she and her attendants were 'very respectably dressed'.²⁵ In the courtroom, Wright described herself as a respectable woman in the 'genteel' occupation of laceworker; a stinging taunt to the aristocracy who were mocked by radicals as the 'useless' classes. Describing a working woman charged with blasphemy as 'respectable' infuriated the conservative *New Times*, which countered with a savage invective against Susannah Wright, aligning her with the most maligned and liminal of the female population – the prostitute.²⁶ Wright, the columnist sneered, was a 'wretched and shameless woman', an 'abandoned creature' who had 'shunned all the distinctive shame and fear and decency of her sex'.²⁷ John Stoddart's *New Times* saw itself as the voice of a deeply religious conservatism in which blasphemy was akin to prostitution in terms of the moral outrage and danger it posed, particularly from the mouth of a woman: 'Blasphemy from any lips is shocking, but from those of a female it is beyond expression horrible.'

Not satisfied at excoriating Susannah, Stoddart (or Dr Slop as radicals had dubbed him) broadened his attack to include her female supporters. Women choosing openly to support Wright were left in no doubt that they would be tarnished as the lowest form of 'public woman'.²⁸ Noting the 'several females' in attendance with Wright at her trial the *New Times* editor ranted:

this is the first time ... that a *body of women* has defied all shame, and trampled upon all decency, in so profligate and daring a manner – in a manner at which the lowest

prostitutes would shudder! ... It is manifest that these female brutes came prepared, not only to applaud what the She-Champion of Impiety had already done; but to hear her load with fresh insults the law of her country and the law of her GOD.²⁹

This was not the first time Stoddart had attacked female reformers so voraciously. In 1819, one month before the events at Peterloo, the Blackburn Female Reform Society gained national prominence with their involvement at one of the great reform meetings in Blackburn. The *New Times* compared them to the murderous 'Poissardes of Paris, those furies in the shape of women' and likened Mrs Alice Kitchen, who addressed the meeting, to a 'hardened and shameless Prostitute'.³⁰ Affronted by the collective and public response of women to Wright's trial, the vehemence of the *New Times* attack was a stark warning for women who were beginning to find a place in public politics: participation put reputation and moral standing at grave risk.³¹ Significantly Wright's supporters – inside and outside the court – included many men but they received no mention in the *New Times* report. The commentary conflated the moral heresy of radicalism firmly with its women.³²

Faced with Wright's obduracy and her refusal to plead for a lighter sentence, the Judges chose the most feared and detested of London's prisons as punishment. Despite the handiwork of its celebrated City of London architect, the façade of Newgate held no illusion for the London populace: the cruelty, squalor, destitution, filth and disease accumulated in the collective memory over the centuries and earned the prison a loathsome and detested reputation akin to that of the Bastille across the channel. Although some contemporary accounts credit the work of Quaker prison reformers with the almost miraculous transformation of the female prison population, voices from within the prison during the 1820s (few as they are) depict an environment still desperately over-crowded and impoverished.³³

Just as the conservative press linked Wright firmly with the maligned figure of the prostitute, so too did the authorities when they criminalised her heterodoxy and confined her with the most marginal of the prison population, the female felons. Writing to Jane Carlile shortly after her imprisonment, Susannah recalled how she and her now seven-month-old baby were sent to a 'small and disgustingly filthy' cell in the female felons' ward with five convicted felons of 'the most wretched stamp', two of whom were facing execution for their crimes. With stiflingly overcrowded cells, poor ventilation, and minimal hygiene facilities, it is little wonder that Wright was plunged into 'an atmosphere of the most offensive nature'.³⁴ An exchange with a turnkey gives an idea of the conditions under which she lived. When Susannah was directed that she and the baby were to sleep on the floor with an 'old blanket and rug ... as filthy as the streets and full of holes', she was furious. Wright scoffed at the turnkey's suggestion that there was nothing he could do to improve her situation; for years, he claimed, even 'well-off' women were forced to sleep on the floor in Newgate. Wright retorted that had she been one of them 'I would have excited a rebellion against you'. Given the choice of her original cell, or another with two women as 'filthy' with snuff 'as I never before saw', she reluctantly made her own way back to her first cell. After spending a freezing night with her baby on the damp stone floor, the next morning she took her fight to the prison Keeper who also advised that a bed was 'against the rules'.

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Wright pressed on, demanding that she be moved to the prison infirmary where she was aware that 'good beds' existed.³⁵

The Keeper insisted that the judges intended Wright to be treated as a felon, but he did defer to the visiting Sheriff with whom Wright successfully negotiated an upgrade to more comfortable lodgings. When she vowed not to 'unfold the object of religion to the prisoners', she gained a sense of her bargaining power within this otherwise powerless space: 'I cannot describe the difference this expression made on their countenances', she wrote.³⁶ Contagion was an ever-present danger in the unreformed prison, but here was the threat of contamination of a different sort. Prison officials had long feared the spread of radical views of political prisoners within prisons since the 1780 Gordon riots razed Newgate.³⁷ Radical men were generally housed separately from other prisoners to ensure that their views were contained within prison. Even though prison authorities considered female prisoners already morally destitute, the strength of Wright's character perhaps convinced them that even such depraved women were in need of protection from the 'She-Champion of Impiety'.

Notwithstanding any concessions, the structure of the prison itself worked against Wright and others like her. Newgate's floor-plan allowed for some male prisoners, with the necessary financial means, to be housed in the less crowded 'Masters Side' which had rooms specifically designated for state prisoners. There were no state rooms allocated in the female section of the prison.³⁸ In the case of Jane and Mary-Ann Carlile the problem had been resolved by housing them in Richard's apartment, but Susannah Wright was on her own in her battle to distance herself both physically and morally from the female felons. Wright's negotiation of her accommodation in Newgate forced a change to the rules to place her on a similar footing to her radical male counterparts.³⁹ We should not underestimate the significance of this struggle to forge a radical identity and reject the stigma of the female criminal. Wright's challenge to both the spatial and regulatory boundaries of the prison saw her achieve recognition within the prison that often eluded other radical women: prison officials saw Wright first and foremost as a radical; her gender became of secondary significance.

Wright issued further challenges to the prison regime and to her status as a criminal by insisting on special visiting rights rather than those more restrictive rules enforced with the female felons. She also vehemently refused the religious instruction and redemption efforts of the Quaker ladies. These she dismissed as mere entertainment: 'I know you would help me to laugh at them if you were here' she wrote to Jane Carlile.⁴⁰ It is not surprising that she reported the Ladies were 'afraid to have anything to say' to her: Wright's most biting insult was to label an opponent 'Christian'.

Despite Susannah securing some comforts in Newgate, the wholesale squalor, closed environment and the daily ritual of standing in an open air yard 'with snow burying her shoes and icy water running into the clogs' left her health severely compromised.⁴¹ The *Morning Chronicle* noted that she returned to court on 6 February 1823 after the end of the ten week sentence 'genteelly dressed' but in 'infirm health'.⁴² She nevertheless showed remarkable resolve, for she was determined to 'see the old women of the bench go into hysterics' by continuing to

challenge the very basis of Christianity and its place in the law. She took her battle directly to them, sending copies of her statement to their private residences. The appearance was a short one: once it was clear to the judges that she would not yield by pleading mitigating circumstances, they immediately pronounced sentence. She was ordered to be held in Cold Bath Fields prison for a further 18 months with heavy penalties; a fine of £100 and £200 in sureties for good behaviour – an impossible sum for Susannah and William. Despite her ill-health, she managed to leave the court with a 'laugh of triumph' and a 'contemptuous smile on her countenance'.⁴³

Unlike Newgate's ancient presence in the landscape of inner London, Cold Bath Fields was a newer prison, designed with reform intentions of separate and solitary confinement. In consequence, it was sited further away from the centre of London in nearby Clerkenwell. Distance meant supporters, such as the Joneses who had previously visited three or four times a week and often with Susannah's children, now could only visit on the weekend. From her letters published in the *Republican*, it is clear that she regarded the relative geographic isolation from family and friends as a small price to pay: in Cold Bath Fields she was quickly afforded higher standing than the female felons. Unlike other prisoners, she was permitted to receive her female friends within her ward in a 'manner quite satisfactory'. She reported that she was housed in 'the best part' of the prison. Even so, this caused problems when she had to share her ward with those committed for short periods; the 'vagrants and other disorderly persons ... unhappy beings, wretchedly filthy and diseased ... disease which is attendant upon a want of cleanliness and bad living, or a connection with persons in that state'. Despite all her care, she despaired that she could not keep herself and her infant free from 'that disease'.⁴⁴ Carlile reported in the *Republican* that compared to her experience in Newgate, Wright was 'treated with kindness approaching to paternal attention' by the magistrates and by Mr Vicary, the Keeper, his family and the newly appointed matron, Mrs Adkins.⁴⁵ Other than the issues of hygiene and space, and the continuing health problems from her stay in Newgate, Wright could claim from Cold Bath Fields that 'prison has no terrors for me'.⁴⁶

Her ability to cross the gender divided walls of the prison to meet with other male radicals imprisoned in Cold Bath Fields also attests to her success in forging a radical identity. Despairing that 'prejudice and ignorance were so fast rooted in the minds of the people', fellow radical prisoner James Watson reassured her that '*perseverance on our part will work wonders*'.⁴⁷ Indeed, this contact with James Watson was reminiscent of the radical collectives forged decades earlier in both Newgate and Cold Bath Fields, where many radical men had continued their publishing endeavours and transformed their prisons into virtual colleges that offered unprecedented opportunities for self-improvement.⁴⁸

Improved conditions at Cold Bath Fields did not mean Wright acquiesced quietly in her confinement. She continued to rage against the conduct of the magistrates, mostly religious men, whose 'order is the law, until another comes and contradicts it by some new whim'.⁴⁹ Like her radical male counterparts, Wright defied her containment in the private prison space by maintaining a presence in the public eye through letters to radical journals. She also continued trenchant public

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assaults against those responsible for her incarceration. In a caustic public letter to Judge Bayley, published in the *Republican*, Wright cursed the 'Christian' Judge and threatened that when justice presided in the country he would 'be a criminal at her bar', if he failed to first follow the suicide of his 'late patron *Castlereagh* and inflict justice on yourself prematurely'.⁵⁰ After almost six months in prison, her defiance continued unabated and she concluded her letter: 'Conscious in my opinion that I am right: cheerful in my dungeon's solitude; happy even in my widowhood; proud in being the Christian's victim: smiling on each pang as you inflict them, I remain, Yours, &c. Susanna [sic] Wright'.⁵¹

Wright might have made the best of her incarceration – politically and personally – but women were particularly vulnerable to the moral scarring of prison and the stigma of criminality at a time when an emerging middling class increasingly equated feminine ideals with passivity, gentleness and childrearing. Jane Carlile remained defiant when she wrote that 'neither me nor my children will ever have occasion to blush at the cause of my incarceration'.⁵² Similarly, Susannah Wright gave no hint of concern as to her reputation. Interestingly, none of the accounts of Susannah accuse her of abandoning or disgracing her family, or of failing to fulfill the duties of wife and mother. Even the ultra-conservative *New Times*, so afraid of her monstrous influences on a generation of unsuspecting and unthinking mothers and their infants, passed no judgment on Wright's own role in this respect.

The attempts to question the morality of Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann provoked a counter-assault from radical supporters. The pages of radical journals such as the *Republican* and *Black Dwarf* assured the women that their actions were seen as both praiseworthy and virtuous. Relief funds were organised all over the country, and financial subscriptions were offered to 'Susannah the Chaste' or to 'the heroine in the cause of Free Discussion',⁵³ or were accompanied by letters from group leaders such as Alfred Cox of Nottingham, who wrote to Susannah Wright: '... you may assure yourself of the sympathy of every virtuous character as well as the approving testimony of a good conscience, of which no earthly power can deprive you'.⁵⁴ Allen Davenport celebrated her moral inspiration in his poem 'The Captive':

What tho' the Christian bigots blame thee,
What tho' they frown upon thee still;
While truth is thine they cannot shame thee,
Rail and bluster how they will.⁵⁵

Importantly, many women independently offered their support through financial subscriptions, gifts and letters of support. Moreover, the prosecution and martyrdom of some radical women provided an opportunity for a wider circle of women to participate in public debate through that hitherto essentially masculine dominated medium of the printed word. The harsh treatment of Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann enticed other female radicals out of the private world of the family and provided the platform on which they could join the radical public sphere. Letters of support came in from around the country and were reproduced in the *Republican*

(along with their replies). Subscription lists were printed weekly and featured women's names more prominently than at any other time during the 1820s (and dropped off noticeably after their release).⁵⁶ While some subscribers preferred to remain anonymous – 'a female republican' – others listed specific donations against their own name, and that of their daughters, alongside their husband and sons.⁵⁷ For Richard Carlile it was glaringly obvious that the three female 'martyrs' had given a 'kind of zest' to the struggle for free expression. Carlile clearly saw Wright and the female support she engendered as a means to mobilise women more widely to join the cause: the transcript of her defence was dedicated to the 'Women of the Island of Great Britain' for 'their example, consideration [and] approbation'.⁵⁸

The financial subscriptions and letters of support confirmed the contribution of these women as equals of men. The radical martyr was becoming a familiar trope in radical literature: correspondence about Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann showed that women could be radical martyrs as well and that their contribution to the cause was no less valued because of their gender. The three women were toasted at radical meetings throughout Britain along with male heroes such as Thomas Paine. Similarly, when Adam Renwick, a Sheffield silversmith, sent a gift to Richard Carlile in the form of an elegantly fashioned sixteen blade pen knife, he allocated a blade each to Susannah, Jane and Mary-Ann Carlile, forging them into the radical movement as equals alongside the names of radical icons such as Mirabaud, Paine, Volney and Richard Carlile.⁵⁹

On 8 July 1824 Susannah received the news she was no longer a prisoner: she had been released one month early from her 18 month sentence and her fine had been waived. Despite flaunting her apparent comfort with prison life, Wright left prison in a 'dreadful state with the loss of sight in one eye' and a spate of 'nervous disorders'.⁶⁰ She virtually disappeared from the radical scene during the winter of 1824–5, and Carlile feared that she had succumbed to the raft of 'disorders' with which she left prison.⁶¹ By the end of 1825, however, Wright had sufficiently recovered in strength to battle with yet another prison Keeper when she was refused entry to Dorchester gaol to visit Richard Carlile. Admonished for arriving at the prison without a letter requesting a visit, she was then denied the use of pen and paper to comply with the Keeper's edict. Like so many before, he underestimated her indomitable spirit. Wright made the arduous trip back to the village to compose the letter and eventually gained entry to see Carlile. At that time, he enthused, she 'so delighted me with the detail of the particulars of her share of the campaign since 1821' that for ten days the radical luminary 'neglected everything to listen to her'.⁶²

Ironically, William Wright must continue to be accorded the fate in the historical record that normally falls to the female spouse in a radical family. William and the children were ignored in the public accounts and in private correspondence much as many radical wives and children were.⁶³ We know little of his involvement in the radical movement, or of his relationship with Susannah. The fact that she was married was even ignored by all the press accounts. We do know that William had a short stint as a radical bookseller in Fleet Street, although his name disappears in publishing circles after 1821. From the accounts of both the

newspapers and reflected in her court proceedings, Susannah endured Susannah's radicalism, attended to the day-to-day details of their relationship for eighteen months after her release. Susannah's radicalism provided him with a financially hazardous one if it is

Noting her liberal 'enthusiasm, her personal part' of the radical struggle and 'some day receive entitled'.⁶⁴ He was not had done 'more public efforts worthy of

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What then explains radical literature of association with Richard Carlile's contemporaries. The press were many who continued her extreme tenets was radical movement still. Despite Carlile's 'religion has no other undoubtedly curbed female. While she defenders still lame such an honour, at thought her worthy

Susannah Wright attention she received cause. On the same

newspapers and reflections of Susannah's closest friends, William was absent from her court proceedings. We know the Wrights had more than the one child who endured Susannah's prison experience with her; perhaps it was William who attended to the day-to-day task of child care. And we know of William's death, eighteen months after Susannah was finally released from prison. The intimate details of their relationship are lost, yet there is a sense that William supported Susannah's radical role, and that the radical community supported him, both by providing him with a home (with the Joneses) during her imprisonment, as well as financially. The Wrights are a reminder that the concept of a radical couple is a hazardous one if it is used to imply a hierarchy of dedication or service.

Noting her liberation in the *Republican*, Richard Carlile praised Wright for her 'enthusiasm, her perseverance, her undauntedness, her coolness' during the 'hottest part' of the radical struggle. He earnestly hoped that she would recover her health and 'some day receive that great reward from the public, to which she is eminently entitled'.⁶⁴ He was not alone in the esteem he held for Wright as the woman who had done 'more public good than any other one'. Allen Davenport clearly thought her efforts worthy of a place in history:

"That captive," said the friendly spirit,
With pallid cheeks, and tender frame,
Has won the laurel wreath of merit,
And purchased everlasting fame.

For not a name in hist'ry's pages,
Shall be found more fair and bright,
Which may descend to future ages,
Than the name of - Susan Wright.⁶⁵

What then explains the relative absence of Susannah Wright from the broader radical literature of the period, and in the historical record? Wright's close association with Richard Carlile goes some way to explaining the dereliction by her contemporaries. Even among those who admired Carlile's struggle for a free press were many who were disgusted by his anti-religious zeal and by the most marginal of his advocacies, birth control. A woman imprisoned for blasphemy, who continued her trenchant attacks upon Christianity and supported Carlile's most extreme tenets was a direct affront to a newly evolving moral code; from which a radical movement struggling for a place in the hegemonic order was not immune.⁶⁶ Despite Carlile's 'most anxious wish' to impress on his female readers that 'religion has nothing to do with morality',⁶⁷ the extremism of Wright's politics undoubtedly curbed her influence among mainstream radicals, both male and female. While she engendered popular support during her imprisonment, her defenders still lamented: 'Alas! How few of her countrywomen have attained to such an honour, and how very few there are of her own sex, who have even thought her worthy of notice'.⁶⁸

Susannah Wright's fierce public denouncement of Christianity also limited the attention she received even within the pages of papers sympathetic to the radical cause. On the same day that her hometown paper, the *Nottingham Review*, briefly

reported her trial, it publicly supported the work of local Bible Societies to counteract the unpleasant consequences of the infidel press.⁶⁹ The limits to the exposure Susannah Wright gained at the time may also help to explain why historians have failed to see her as a significant player in the radical movement. Yet Susannah Wright's independent contribution to extreme postwar radicalism deserves a more prominent place in radical historiography. Her story, and that of her female supporters, advances our growing understanding of women's involvement in the radical public sphere; how they negotiated and operated within the radical movement not only as radical wives and daughters but as women with independent agency. This essay suggests that despite the fewer sources left by radical women from which to elucidate their experience, we can know more about female radicalism in early nineteenth century Britain. We simply have to look harder.

Susannah Wright's prison experience evinced neither reform nor redemption. After William's death, she returned to live with her mother in Nottingham to open the radical bookshop which caused such a furore in August 1826. By mid September, however, she reported to the readers of the *Republican* that she had witnessed a remarkable turnaround in her situation. The riots, death threats and curses had ceased and even some of her most vehement opponents, she claimed, were now enquiring for her publications. In what seems to be her last entry in the public record, Wright jubilantly announced that 'the Victory is ours' for she had succeeded in establishing free discussion in Nottingham; a triumph indeed for the She-Champion of Impiety.

Notes

- 1 *Republican*, 29 Aug. 1826.
- 2 *New Times*, 16 Nov. 1822.
- 3 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London, Penguin, 1968), pp. 802–803.
- 4 B.B Jones, 'The Peoples' First Struggle for Free Speech and Writing', *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859, pp. 178–9.
- 5 Edward Royle, *Radical Politics 1790–1900 – Religion and Unbelief* (London, 1971) pp. 104–105. Apart from Thompson and Royle, historians including James Epstein and Joel Wiener also mention Wright in the story of Richard Carlile but do little to explore her independent contribution to the radical movement.
- 6 Iain McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History*, no. 38 (1980), pp. 6–13. Historians who have followed McCalman's lead in documenting radical women have neglected to fully explore Wright's contribution to early nineteenth-century radicalism.
- 7 Several radical historians have revised Habermas' original theory of the public sphere to include a plebeian or radical public sphere. See Geoff Eley 'Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, 1992) for his convincing argument for how the public sphere was characterised both by diversity and conflict. See also Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1–10.

- 8 *Republican*, 23 Aug.
- 9 *The Reasoner*, 5
- 10 *The Reasoner*, 5
- 11 *Republican*, 15 Nov.
- 12 *The Reasoner*, 5
- 13 For other accounts see Gilmartin, *Print Politics* and sociability and see *and Literary C* (Cambridge 2000) Discourse during *Journal of the Soc*
- 14 *The Times*, 9 July
- 15 This is in contrast argues that Gerr courtroom environment See James Epstein *Age of Revolution Politics in Mode*
- 16 *The Times*, 22 Nov.
- 17 Epstein, *In Practice*
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 19 There are other period. See the case in Malcolm (London, 1982).
- 20 *Republican*, 23 Aug.
- 21 *The Times*, 15 Nov.
- 22 McCalman, 'Female Movement' (1980)
- 23 *Republican*, 20 Aug.
- 24 Printed in the *Reasoner*
- 25 *The Times*, 15 Nov.
- 26 E.P. Thompson found was a 'conventional Class', p. 803.
- 27 *New Times*, 16 Nov. See also W.H. (1928).
- 28 Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Class* (California a notion of citizen prostitutes, p. 51
- 29 *New Times*, 16 Nov.
- 30 See James Epstein *England, 1790* reformers help towards Stoddard immensely successful

- 8 *Republican*, 23 Aug. 1822.
- 9 *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.
- 10 *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.
- 11 *Republican*, 15 Mar. 1822.
- 12 *The Reasoner*, 5 June 1859.
- 13 For other accounts of radicals using trials and courts as extensions of the public sphere see Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, pp. 139–43; James Epstein, 'Equality and No King': sociability and sedition: the case of John Frost' in *Romantic Sociability, Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840*, eds Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge 2002), pp. 43–61; and Michael T. Davis, 'Prosecution and Radical Discourse during the 1790s: the Case of the Scottish Sedition Trials', *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, 33, 3 (2005), pp. 148–58.
- 14 *The Times*, 9 July 1822.
- 15 This is in contrast to the radical trial of Joseph Gerrald in 1794 where James Epstein argues that Gerrald – a Godwinite and believer in natural rights – was forced by the courtroom environment to couch his defence in terms of 'our ancient constitution'. See James Epstein, 'Our Real Constitution': Trial Defense and Radical Memory in the Age of Revolution', in *Practice, Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (California, 2003) pp. 59–82.
- 16 *The Times*, 22 Nov. 1822.
- 17 Epstein, *In Practice*, p. 111.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 19 There are other examples where women defended themselves in the courts in this period. See the case of Mary Ann Tocker who successfully defended herself in a libel case in Malcolm Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett, *Women in Protest 1800–1850*, (London, 1982), p. 90.
- 20 *Republican*, 23 Aug. 1822.
- 21 *The Times*, 15 Nov. 1822.
- 22 McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement' (1980), p. 6, note. 31.
- 23 *Republican*, 20 Sept. 1822.
- 24 Printed in the *Republican*, 9 Jan. 1824.
- 25 *The Times*, 15 Nov. 1822; *Morning Chronicle*, 15 Nov. 1822.
- 26 E.P. Thompson first noted the use of the term 'abandoned creature' against Wright which was a 'conventional epithet for prostitutes'. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 803.
- 27 *New Times*, 16 Nov. 1822. The quotes which follow originate from the same edition. See also W.H. Wickwar, *The Struggle for Freedom of the Press, 1819–32* (London, 1928).
- 28 Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (California, 1995), pp. 140–57. Clark argues that where 'public man' represented a notion of citizenship and civility, 'public women' was a term employed to describe prostitutes, p. 51.
- 29 *New Times*, 16 Nov. 1822.
- 30 See James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790–1850*, (Oxford, 1994) pp. 88–9. Such scathing attacks on female reformers helped fuel the loathing of radical publisher and satirist William Hone towards Stoddart. Hone, in collaboration with George Cruikshank, dedicated his immensely successful satire, *The Political House that Jack Built*. Hone dubbed

- Stoddart 'Dr. Slop' and the *New Times*, the 'Slop Pail'. In 1820 the pair produced another satire *A Slap at Slop* which ran to four editions. See Edgell Rickword, *Radical Squibs and Loyal Ripostes: Satirical Pamphlets of the Regency Period, 1819–1821*, (Bath, 1971) pp. 9–10; p. 37.
- 31 Eileen Yeo documents the 'dangerous territory' that faced women entering the political public sphere in the nineteenth century. See her introduction in Eileen Yeo (ed.) *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-representation in the Public Sphere* (Manchester, 1998). See also Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 35–7; 51–3.
 - 32 At times radical men were also charged with posing a threat to the morals of the young and unwary. See for example the trial of William Tunbridge in Christina Parolin 'Let us have Truth and Liberty': contesting Britishness and Otherness from the prison cell, London 1820–1826', *Humanities Research*, vol. XIII. No. 1, 2006, p. 71.
 - 33 For a rare account of Newgate from within see the fascinating article by Deidre Palk 'Fit Objects for Mercy': Gender, the Bank of England and Currency Criminals, 1804–1833', *Women's Writing*, 11, 2 (2004), pp. 237–58. Her paper is based on letters from female felons convicted of forgery that requested and received regular pecuniary assistance from their prosecutors, the Bank of England.
 - 34 Letter to Jane Carlile reproduced in the *Republican*, 13 Dec. 1822.
 - 35 Ibid.
 - 36 Ibid.
 - 37 Iain McCalman and Jon Mee, 'The Gordon Riots', Appendix A in Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 662–6.
 - 38 Until the work of prison reformers such as John Howard and Elizabeth Fry, male and female felons mixed freely in Newgate although their sleeping quarters were designated separately on Newgate's architectural plans.
 - 39 For accounts of radical male prisoners see Christina Parolin, 'Let us have Truth and Liberty', 2006, pp. 71–83 and note 49 below.
 - 40 *Republican*, 13 Dec. 1822.
 - 41 *Republican*, 7 Feb. 1823 and 16 July 1824.
 - 42 *Morning Chronicle*, 7 Feb. 1823.
 - 43 *The Times*, 7 Feb. 1823; *Morning Chronicle* 7 Feb. 1823.
 - 44 *Republican*, 11 Apr. 1823.
 - 45 *Republican*, 16 Jul. 1823.
 - 46 *Republican*, 11 Apr. 1823.
 - 47 *Republican*, 18 Sept. 1826.
 - 48 See Iain McCalman, 'Newgate in Revolution: Radical Enthusiasm and Romantic Counterculture', *Eighteenth Century Life*, 22 (1998), pp. 95–110; Michael T. Davis, Iain McCalman and Christina Parolin (eds), *Newgate in Revolution: An Anthology of Radical Prison Literature in the Age of Revolution*, (London, 2005); my forthcoming PhD thesis *Radical Spaces: Architecture, Identity and Popular Politics, 1800–1840*, which explores the prison experience of radicals in Cold Bath Fields and Newgate in the 1820s.
 - 49 *Republican*, 11 Apr. 1823.
 - 50 Lord Castlereagh was detested by radicals for his keen support of Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth's anti-radical legislation. The Cato Street conspirators planned to march the streets with the men's heads on pikes. The radical community viewed his suicide in 1822 as a cause for celebration.
 - 51 *Republican*, 13 June 1823.
 - 52 *Republican*, 10 May 1822.
 - 53 *Republican*, 20
 - 54 *Republican*, 23
 - 55 *Republican*, 9 J.
 - 56 McCalman, *Fer*
 - 57 Mary Walker fo
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 - 58 *Report of the Ti*
 - 59 *Republican*, 23
 - 60 *Republican*, 24
 - 61 Ibid. Reports
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 - 62 *Republican*, 18
 - 63 See Eileen Ye
Autobiography
Malcolm Chas
 - 64 *Republican*, 16
 - 65 *Republican*, 9
 - 66 As Eileen Yeo
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 - 67 *Republican*, 25
 - 68 *Republican*, 30
 - 69 *Nottingham R*
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- 53 *Republican*, 20 Dec. 1822; 6 Feb. 1824.
- 54 *Republican*, 23 Aug. 1822.
- 55 *Republican*, 9 Jan. 1824.
- 56 McCalman, *Females, Feminism and Free Love*, pp. 7–8.
- 57 Mary Walker forwarded a subscription from over 60 female reformers from Manchester for Jane and Mary-Ann to 'convince our enemies that we approve of your conduct, and glory in your spirit'. *Republican*, 10 May 1822.
- 58 *Report of the Trial of Mrs Susannah Wright* (London, 1822).
- 59 *Republican*, 23 Oct. 1823.
- 60 *Republican*, 24 Sept. 1825.
- 61 *Ibid.* Reports from male radical prisoners in Newgate report her visiting on two occasions shortly after her release from Cold Bath Fields. See *Newgate Monthly Magazine*, 1 October 1824; 1 Nov. 1824.
- 62 *Republican*, 18 Nov. 1825.
- 63 See Eileen Yeo, 'Will the Real Mary Lovett Please Stand Up?' *Chartism, Gender and Autobiography* in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison*, ed. Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (Cambridge, 1996) pp. 163–81.
- 64 *Republican*, 16 July 1824.
- 65 *Republican*, 9 Jan. 1824.
- 66 As Eileen Yeo notes, the rising middling classes made religious family life a key factor in their claim to moral superiority. Yeo, *Radical Femininity*, p. 3.
- 67 *Republican*, 29 Nov. 1822.
- 68 *Republican*, 30 July 1824.
- 69 *Nottingham Review*, 22 Nov. 1822. Susannah's close alignment to Carlile also alienated her from many of the prominent radicals with whom Carlile had public disputes, such as William Cobbett and Henry Hunt, and therefore from the other radical journals and pamphlets that recorded the public life of radicals.