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## ***The Horrors of Convict Life:* British radical visions of the Australian penal colonies**

On September the 15<sup>th</sup> 1856, a huge demonstration took place in London during which, if *The People's Paper* is to be believed, up to a million people assembled.<sup>1</sup> Their purpose was to march from the centre past the city's financial districts, St Paul's, Fleet Street, the West End and Regent's Park to a final destination point at Primrose Hill. They had come to welcome Chartist leader John Frost - transported for his role in the 1839 rising at Newport - home from nearly two decades of exile in Van Diemen's Land. 'Mighty multitudes lin[ed] the streets', *The People's Paper* recorded, 'vast numbers [formed] the cortege ... men march[ed] in great part twenty-six abreast' and an 'almost ceaseless storm of applause and cheers ... rose from all around'.<sup>2</sup> Travelling in 'a splendid open carriage' drawn by 'four greys with postilions in gala dress' and 'decorated with laurels' Frost himself was showered in flowers and surrounded by the crowds as many of those who had assembled tried to shake his hand.

In the immediate aftermath of the London demonstration, Frost embarked upon a tour of Britain that would last from September 1856 through the following spring. The professed purpose of this tour was to detail and denounce *The Horrors of Convict Life*. For Frost this task was nothing short of a 'mission'. 'I am performing a duty to God and to my country', he repeatedly told his audiences, 'in going through the country for the purpose of showing in what manner our countrymen in Van Diemen's Land are treated'.<sup>3</sup> Portraying his tour as an act of courage *and* as a testament of his manly character, Frost rejected the advice of those who counselled him to hold his peace. 'Is there', he enquired, 'a man in

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<sup>1</sup> *The People's Paper* (hereafter *PP*), September 13 1856. The numbers were certainly disputed. *The Times*, for example, claimed that 20,000 people attended. At least one old Chartist also remembered the day as a disappointment. W.E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* (New York: Augustus Kelley, 1968), p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> *PP*, September 20 1856.

<sup>3</sup> *PP*, April 30 1856, John Frost, *The Horrors of Convict Life* (Hobart: Sullivan's Cove, 1973), p. 16, John Frost, *A Letter to the People of Great Britain and Ireland on Transportation showing the effects of Irresponsible Power on the Physical and Moral Conditions of Convicts*, by John Frost, late of Van Diemen's Land (London: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1857), p. 22.

England possessing the feelings of a man, who will say that I am acting improperly [sic] in exposing the conduct of the authorities?’<sup>4</sup> He was simply incapable, he declared, of remaining ‘at home at peace’. Such a peace would ‘with me’ be ‘a state of war’, and the worst of wars, war with myself. I should deem it a base desertion of my duty to God and man’.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, for months following his return, Frost toured the country. Thousands paid to hear him lecture. Many more were turned away from packed halls. Quickly reproduced in cheap pamphlet form, his lectures also sold out rapidly and ran into several editions.<sup>6</sup>

Frost’s lectures were dominated by a tale of brutal tyranny, arbitrary rule, physical torture, human degradation and destruction. Since 1788, he argued, the British government had ‘destroyed thousands, and probably scores of thousands, of the bodies and souls of [the] men and women placed in their charge’.<sup>7</sup> In Van Diemen’s Land, Frost claimed, the system’s officers were selected for their lack of ‘humanity’ and their rule had resulted in a tyrannical code ‘not equalled in severity in any part of the civilised world’.<sup>8</sup> Convicts were routinely flogged for breaches of regulations so minute that they were impossible for any man to remember never mind obey.<sup>9</sup> Among the many tales of injustice related by Frost was that of an old, almost deaf and blind man, flogged for his failure to recognise,

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<sup>4</sup> *PP*, August 30 1856.

<sup>5</sup> *PP*, April 30 1856. Frost’s decision to speak out before the general amnesty enabling many of the political exiles, himself included, to return to Britain had even been issued had been informed by this same sense of duty. His first lectures on the convict system were consequently given to radical audiences in New York in early 1856.

<sup>6</sup> Frost published several versions of his account of convict life. The first, produced while he was still in America awaiting a full pardon was entitled John Frost, *A Letter to the people of the United States showing the effects of aristocratic rule* (New York: the author, 1855). The content of one of his earliest lecture appearances on return to Britain then appeared in autumn 1856 as *The Horrors of Convict Life: two lectures* (London: Holyoake, 1856). A reworked version of this was published in two editions, both of which were printed in 1857, as John Frost, *A Letter to the People of Great Britain and Ireland on Transportation showing the effects of Irresponsible Power on the Physical and Moral Conditions of Convicts, by John Frost, late of Van Diemen’s Land* (London, 1857). Lengthy verbatim passages from Frost’s pamphlets, as well as from the lectures, were also published in the *People’s Paper*.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 28, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 10-11, *PP*, April 30 1856.

and therefore give due respect, to the Commandant of Port Arthur penal station. Only a 'tyrant', Frost concluded, could punish a man for being *unable* to obey.<sup>10</sup>

To make matters worse, the punishments were, in turn, imbued with a spirit of 'merciless severity'.<sup>11</sup> The system was characterised by sadism and torture: cruelty reigned for cruelty's sake and the men who were responsible for inflicting punishment allegedly 'felt a gratification in inflicting and witnessing human misery'.<sup>12</sup> To drive his point home, Frost repeatedly regaled his audiences with graphic accounts of floggings. 'The knot', he declared, 'was made of the hardest whipcord, of an unusual size. The cord was put into salt water till it was saturated; it was then put into the sun to dry; by this process it became like wire, the eighty-one knots cutting the flesh as if a saw had been used'. When he was cut down from the triangle, the victim's chest was 'quite black' and 'in such a state that no one could ever see anything like it who had not lived in the penal colonies'. 'Twenty-five lashes at Port Arthur', Frost concluded, 'produced more suffering than three hundred would have produced as they are inflicted in the army'.<sup>13</sup>

For Frost, the inevitable end point of this tyrannical rule and brutal injustice was the descent of man into a permanent state of immorality and bestiality. 'Never, in my opinion', Frost asserted, 'in any age or country, has society existed in so depraved a state as I have witnessed in the penal colonies'.<sup>14</sup> The 'mode' in which convicts 'are treated drives them to desperation', Frost declared, 'and the very worst passions then become excited'. 'Injustice and cruelty', he proceeded to explain,

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<sup>10</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 9, 13-14. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 11, Frost, *Horrors*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 30-31. Frost, *Letter*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 16.

destroy the reflecting faculties and leave no thought or wish but for the immediate gratification of the sensual. In such cases no moral feelings can restrain men from the commission of the very worst acts.<sup>15</sup>

It was thus to the subject of 'unnatural' offences, and to sodomy in particular, that Frost repeatedly led his audiences. 'The state of society in Van Diemen's Land', he declared, was 'not equalled even in the worst days of the Canaanites'. Akin to the 'Cities of the Plains', the colony was 'the modern Gomorrah'.<sup>16</sup>

Frost's lectures can of course be read as a straightforwardly factual recounting of the conditions faced by convicts.<sup>17</sup> There are, however, at least two central problems with this approach. Firstly, although Frost claimed that his sole aim was to save the convicts from hell, by 1856-7 this was a somewhat unlikely cause. Transportation to Van Diemen's Land, the colony upon which Frost focused, had, after all, ended in 1853.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, although Frost presented his lectures as a sensational exposé, the stories that he narrated were neither particularly novel nor new. Rather, allegations of cruelty, inhumanity, and more specifically of the prevalence of 'unnatural' sexual acts among the convicts, had been central to critiques of transportation for decades and were, as a result, extremely well known in Britain.<sup>19</sup> Frost's audiences were consequently almost certainly already well versed in the 'horrors' of convict life.

The *Horrors* were almost certainly partly designed to fulfil a commemorative role; both the tour and the pamphlet helped to mark and celebrate Frost's return. By emphasising the horrors of convict life, Frost's status as an heroic survivor

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<sup>15</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 34, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 34-6. *PP*, July 5 1856.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this kind of literal interpretation has been the approach of most of those historians who have considered Frost's account. See, for example, Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: a History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1788-1868* (London: Pan, 1987), pp. 403-4, 530.

<sup>18</sup> However, although transportation to New South Wales had ended in 1840 and to Van Diemen's Land in 1853, transportation to Western Australia, Bermuda and Gibraltar continued until 1868. During 1856 transportation had, moreover, once again become a subject of major political debate and of yet another British Parliamentary Select Committee.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Kirsty Reid, *Gender, crime and empire: convicts, settlers and the state in early colonial Australia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), especially chapters 5 & 6.

was also certainly bolstered and enhanced. In addition, his inspirational tale simultaneously promised to give new life to a now largely defeated and declining Chartist movement. However, this article argues that the relationship between Frost's lectures and British radicalism was significantly more multi-faceted than this. It contends firstly that Frost's *Horrors* were designed less as a condemnation of the penal colonies *per se* and more as a radical allegory of a coming British dystopia. Throughout his lectures, Frost set out a nightmarish vision of the ultimate physical and spiritual unmaning which a state of full-scale tyranny would surely bring. Secondly - and related to this - the article explores the idea that Frost's lectures were embedded within a complex of ideas about masculinity and the male body integral to nineteenth-century British popular radicalism. The figure of the sexually degraded convict - a man supposedly reduced to sodomy by tyranny - served both to dramatise and thus to reinforce and extend these ideas. Thirdly, the article contends that Frost's lectures also functioned in ways that highlighted and extolled the supposedly innate manly moral virtue and courage of the ordinary British workingman. If we are to fully understand Frost's *Horrors*, we must then leave Van Diemen's Land behind and return, like Frost himself, to mid-nineteenth-century Britain.

### **The 'horrors of convict life': Van Diemen's Land as radical dystopia**

The formation of 'metropolitan identities' was, James Epstein reminds us, 'partially shaped by visions and experiences associated with distant spaces, by the connections and exchanges - often hidden or forgotten - between metropolitan sites of empire and subjugated colonial sites.'<sup>20</sup> Although the historiography of nineteenth-century British popular politics still remains (rather curiously) almost wholly nation-bound, this inter-relationship between metropolitan and colonial spaces also played a role in the forging of radical

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<sup>20</sup> James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003), p. 116.

identities.<sup>21</sup> Thus, writing of the relationships between nineteenth-century British radicals and America, Epstein emphasises the ways in which 'British political and cultural identities were shaped in exchanges with a space that was not Britain, a place away'. In particular, Epstein concludes, early Victorian British radicals 'envisioned democratic space as expressed in terms of a desired or an imagined America'.<sup>22</sup> But, if America was thus a tenacious site 'of populist yearning' for British radicals, the Australian penal colonies figured very differently, providing instead a persistent set of nightmarish visions. That this should have been so is in some ways not surprising. Radicalism had, after all, lost many of its members to exile and other forms of repression. Frost was just one of over four thousand political and social protesters to be deported from Britain and Ireland between 1788 and 1868.<sup>23</sup> Others had gone to the gallows and thousands more to prison. The machinery of state repression therefore lay at the heart of the radical experience and had, moreover, played a significant role in Chartist defeat.<sup>24</sup>

The mutually constitutive nature of the relationship between metropolitan and colonial spaces and identities is clearly apparent in Frost's *Horrors*. Central to Frost's account of tyranny and sexual immorality in Van Diemen's Land was his claim that the blame for these conditions was to be laid at the door of the British aristocracy and its undemocratic hold on power. Van Diemen's Land, where men and boys were allegedly routinely brutalised, flogged and raped, was, in Frost's view, a powerful portent of the depths to which tyranny, left unchecked, could take society. The 'state of things' in Van Diemen's Land, Frost alleged,

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<sup>21</sup> There are nevertheless a handful of notable exceptions including, for example, Peter Linebaugh & Marcus Rediker, *The many-headed hydra: sailors, slaves, commoners and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Epstein, *In Practice*, pp. 116-25. For a different reading of the meanings of America in Chartist culture see James Bronstein, 'From the land of liberty to land monopoly: the United States in a Chartist context', in Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson & Stephen Roberts (eds.), *The Chartist Legacy* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1999), pp. 147-70.

<sup>23</sup> According to Rudé, 1793 protesters were transported from Britain, 2495 from Ireland, and 154 from Canada in the period from 1788 to 1868. George Rudé, *Protest and Punishment: the Story of the Social and Political Protesters transported to Australia, 1788-1868* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), pp. 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> On the role of the state in Chartist defeat see: John Saville, *1848: the British state and the Chartist movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

'shows, too clearly, what men possessed of power are capable of when subject to no restraint [and] when far removed from public observation and censure'. The cause of the 'evil' of convict sodomy was 'irresponsible power in the hands of vicious men'.<sup>25</sup> In Frost's view, moreover, the appalling situation in Van Diemen's Land would simply never have come to pass had 'the people been fairly represented in Parliament'.<sup>26</sup> This was a view with which other radicals agreed. The only way to remedy the 'evils of the convict system', a meeting at Leeds in Frost's honour unanimously agreed, was 'the achievement of political power by the masses'.<sup>27</sup>

Frost's lectures might then be read as much as a warning of a dangerous future for Britain as a narrative retelling of actual colonial conditions. 'I am', Frost repeatedly told his audiences, 'now here in my country for the purpose of showing the good people of England what sort of rulers they have'.<sup>28</sup> It was the British government, he argued, which must bear the ultimate responsibility for the horrors suffered by the convicts. Ministers in London had not only sanctioned the despotic convict system but they had done so because – just like those who ran the system on the ground – they too gained pleasure from 'human misery'.<sup>29</sup> Government's consistent failure to act even as a stream of official reports had ostensibly revealed that every convict station was becoming like 'a Gomorrah, full of misery, crime and disease of the most frightful kind' was thus, in Frost's view, a further condemnation both of its appetite for cruelty and tyranny and, despite the 1832 Reform Act, of its still corrupt, opaque and unreformed character.<sup>30</sup> Australia, Frost declared, had been 'a beautiful and fertile country, admirably calculated to produce everything necessary for the comfort of man' and yet despite this, government had still managed to turn it into an uncivilised, morally

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<sup>25</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 43, 45.

<sup>26</sup> *PP*, October 11 1856.

<sup>27</sup> *PP*, October 25 1856.

<sup>28</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.



diseased and depraved society.<sup>31</sup> "By their fruits", Frost concluded, "shall ye know them".<sup>32</sup>

Building on these ideas, Frost claimed that he had, through his experiences in Van Diemen's Land, gained *unique* insight into the depths of tyranny and that it was now his duty to share those insights with those at home. 'Few men', Frost declared, 'have seen as much as I'.<sup>33</sup> Frost, the Chartists of Yorkshire and Lancashire likewise agreed, was a man who 'by dear-bought experience, has the power to unravel the iniquities of the vile English rule, both at home and abroad'.<sup>34</sup> Frost likewise considered his tales of the colonies to be a spur to mass action. The horrors Frost had 'witnessed in Australia' had 'made a powerful and permanent impression on my mind' and, he explained, 'excited in a ten-fold degree the hatred which I have ever felt for the tyrant'. 'Would to God', he exclaimed, 'that this feeling were more common'.<sup>35</sup> The ultimate object of his lecture tour was consequently self-evident to Frost: by revealing the truth about the barbaric and uncivilised conditions suffered by convicts he hoped to excite a similarly intense hatred for tyranny in the people of Britain and thus to rouse them to again demand 'a Radical reform in the House of Commons'.<sup>36</sup>

To fully achieve this Frost had, of course, to generate widespread public sympathy for the convicts. He endeavoured to achieve this in two key ways. Firstly, he sought throughout his lectures to humanise the convicts in order to encourage his audiences to identify with them as fellow Britons. He achieved this most obviously by relating individual stories and voices. His lectures consequently wove together a general analysis of the convict system with a medley of personal narratives and experiences. Extending this strategy, Frost also made efforts to get particular audiences in particular locales to identify and

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<sup>31</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> *PP*, August 2 1856.

<sup>34</sup> *PP*, August 30 1856.

<sup>35</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *PP*, April 30 1856.

empathise with the convicts of whom he spoke. When addressing the people of Newport Frost therefore told the tragic tale of 'a native' of Newport who had died as a result of a brutal flogging at Port Arthur but while he was in Lancashire he related stories about the sufferings of several young boys from Manchester, and so on and so forth.<sup>37</sup> In an attempt to drive home a sense of connection between the convicts and the people, Frost also regularly reminded audiences that 'it is not impossible that some of those with whom I have been acquainted' – and whose stories he was telling – 'may be relatives or friends of persons who are now present'.<sup>38</sup> Those who had been transported were, he stressed, 'human beings', 'your own countrymen' and 'unfortunate brethren'.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, Frost used his lectures to construct a model of a society in which crime figured less as the product of individual character flaws and more as the inevitable outcome of a distorted economic and political system. Tyranny and poverty had turned most convicts to crime in the first place. Consequently it was not just colonial conditions that were *against nature* but also those in Britain. 'Wise and virtuous statesmen', Frost explained, always endeavoured to make 'the laws of nature the foundation of the social structure' but in Britain the 'object of the laws' was not only 'to take from those who produce' but to take so much 'that the wants of nature cannot be supplied' thereby forcing men into theft. Crime was thus a potent symbol of aristocratic misrule: 'if the helm of state be guided by wisdom and virtue', Frost contended, 'the people will be flourishing and content'. By contrast, the 'dishonest, foolish, brutal law-givers' who governed Britain had used the law 'to oppress and impoverish ... degrade and brutify' and thus to 'fill their country with poverty, misery and crime'.<sup>40</sup> 'How many' convicts, Frost asked, 'have been brought to shame and disgrace by the poverty of their parents, while the property which ought to have maintained and educated them was, and is, in the possession of the aristocracy and [the] ministers of the Church

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<sup>37</sup> *PP*, October 4 1856, August 30 1856.

<sup>38</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>39</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 29-30. *PP*, September 27 1856.

<sup>40</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 5, 22.

of England'.<sup>41</sup> Under more favourable economic and political circumstances, the majority of convicts would have remained 'useful members of society'.<sup>42</sup> Instead, driven into crime by a state of misrule, the convict's moral descent was made final when he was transported and made subject to a vicious, unnatural and radically demoralising colonial regime. In Frost's hands, transportation and its associated degradations therefore figured as prospects which everyman had reason to fear.

Parallels between the conditions of the convicts and the people of Britain were also drawn in other ways. The penal colonies, Frost contended for instance, were just one component of an entire interlocking system of tyranny, poverty and cruelty which had produced 'jails and hulks ... penitentiaries ... lunatic-asylums and poor-houses' as well as brutal and brutalising forms of punishment like 'solitary confinement ... chain-gangs and floggings'.<sup>43</sup> The people therefore shared much in common with those who had been transported. The terrible torments that Frost had endured in Van Diemen's Land were, Ernest Jones declared, akin to the broader experience of oppression and exploitation suffered by those in Britain. 'We are here', Jones told the crowds at one mass welcome rally,

to meet an illustrious martyr to our cause, but he is here to meet an army of the martyrs, for such are most of those assembled on this mountain. The victims of the dungeon and the chain-gang are not the only martyrs – poverty is a fearful rack – hunger is a dreadful torture – wage-slavery is a terrible enchainment. Yes! The man who is not allowed to work for himself but must devote his strength at the bidding of another is a martyr. The man who is robbed of his earnings and dares not murmur is a martyr. The man who sees his wife fade with overwork and hunger, and cannot save her, is a martyr. The father who sees his child pine and wither in the factory and die before his eyes, while those who rob him of life roll in wanton waste – is a martyr. The man who grows poorer the longer he lives, while he enriches others, treading his hard pathway to the workhouse and the pauper

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<sup>41</sup> *PP*, October 4 1856.

<sup>42</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

grave – he is a martyr – the greatest of all martyrs – and thus this mighty meeting turn to you, and cry ‘brother, we welcome you from exile’.<sup>44</sup>

The idea that the convict colonies were a direct cause of tyranny’s strength and so of its continued ability to reign at home was also well established. Thus, for example, George Cruikshank’s print, ‘The freeborn Englishman’, published in the wake of Peterloo and in the midst of the Six Acts, drew a series of parallels between the condition of the people and convict transportation. The freeborn Englishman appears dressed in rags and painfully thin, his wife and child lying behind him, homeless and abandoned in the streets. Connections between this state of poverty and family dissolution and the country’s political system are in turn forged through a number of other powerful visual symbols: the freeborn Englishman’s lips are padlocked, the Bill of Rights is trampled under his feet, he stands with the Transportation Act in his hands and his whole body weighed down by convict chains. Over the decades, the transportation of high-profile political offenders had stimulated a range of similar critiques and remarks. Thus, in the midst of the Tolpuddle crisis, one trade union newspaper contended that, rather than the birthright of liberty that freeborn Englishmen were due, labouring men were instead subject to the ‘wanton thirst of arbitrary power’ and could consequently only expect a ‘Felon’s Heritage’.<sup>45</sup> The transportation of the Glasgow cotton spinners in 1838 had been similarly interpreted as an illiberal and repressive act. ‘It was clear’, the Chartist *Northern Star* declared, that by stifling trade union organisation ‘the Whigs were resolved to reduce the populace to the lowest possible state of existence’. The deportation of the men was thus an act of ‘tyranny’ which, the *Star* advised, the people must not submit to.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *PP*, August 30 1856. Jones’s poem ‘The prisoner to the slaves’, written while he himself was in prison in the early 1850s, drew a similar link: From my cell, I look back on the world – from my cell/ And think I am not the less free/ Than the serf and the slave who in misery dwell/ In the street and the lane and the lea./ What fetters have I that ye have not as well./ Though your dungeon be larger than mine?/ For England’s a prison fresh modelled from hell’. Peter Scheckner (ed.), *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry. Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s-1850s* (London: Associated University Presses, 1989), pp. 205-6.

<sup>45</sup> *The Pioneer; or Trades’ Union Magazine*, April 12 1834.

<sup>46</sup> *Northern Star* (hereafter *NS*), January 27 1838.

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRgagging.JPG>

George Cruikshank, 'The freeborn Englishman' (1819).

If convict transportation was thus interpreted as a major block to reform in Britain, the nation's illiberal state was equally considered a potent cause of cruelty and tyranny in the empire. Radicals consequently drew links between repression at home and abroad. These ideas were perhaps most clearly enunciated by William Ashton. Transported to Van Diemen's Land for his part in the 1829 Barnsley weavers' strike, Ashton had returned to England in the late 1830s - largely as a result of a successful public campaign for him to be pardoned - at which point he embarked upon a series of public lectures on the convict system and published a cheap pamphlet describing conditions in the colonies.<sup>47</sup> In Ashton's view, colonial cruelty not only ran across several different yet integrated fronts - causing intense suffering to convicts, free emigrants and aborigines alike - its ultimate origins were located in the despotic and unjust nature of the British class system and the British state. The cruel treatment of convicts in Van Diemen's Land was, in Ashton's view, driven by the desire to make profits regardless of the human costs and also by the demoralising and hardening effects of living surrounded by a constant spectacle of suffering. The colonial elite was thus, like its counterpart in Britain, devoid of 'the finer feelings ... of nature', that 'tender feeling for their fellow-creatures'.<sup>48</sup>

Like Frost's later narrative, Ashton's critique was framed within a sensationalist, moralistic and sexualised discourse. Rather than sodomy, however, it was the metaphor of prostitution which dominated. Writing of assisted female emigrants, Ashton emphasised the idea that they were victims of the 'lustful passions' of a monstrous colonial aristocracy. Imagine the scene, he instructed his audiences, when a female emigrant ship arrived at Hobart: faced

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<sup>47</sup> William Ashton, *A lecture on the evils of emigration and transportation* (Sheffield: J.Lingard, 1839). For more on Ashton see: John Knott, 'A Chartist's view of Australia, 1838', *Push from the Bush*, 13, 1982, pp. 2-13.

<sup>48</sup> Ashton, *Lecture*, p. 6.

with the 'satanic smiles' of these 'bloated profligate[s] ... who exulted with infernal joy at their hapless condition', these 'young victims, with their hearts ready to burst with unmovable anguish' were reduced to hopelessly 'calling upon their far distant mothers to protect and assist them'. Aboriginal women, Ashton argued, had been subjected to a similar experience of 'carnage, bloodshed and violation'.<sup>49</sup> Like convicts and emigrants, aborigines had moreover also been forced into exile. 'Driven from the land that had hitherto afforded them subsistence and which they considered their own and their children's inheritance', they had, Ashton declared, been 'hunted like beasts of prey and murdered'.<sup>50</sup>

These kinds of critiques not only targeted the reputation of the British *and* colonial ruling classes – challenging their claim to be moral men of feeling who were driven by sympathy and rationality rather than by the passions – they also served to question and undermine a range of associated contemporary discourses about 'progress' and the 'civilising mission'. Thus Ashton challenged the idea that Britain was pre-eminently fit to conquer and civilise the world, arguing, instead, that the *ultimate* cause of cruelty and rapacity lay, not in the corruption and failings of individuals, but in the despotic nature of the British state. 'Look at the annals of the country', Ashton urged his audiences,

keep in mind the Manchester massacre, and the butcherings ... at Derby ... bear in mind the horrid murdering propensities of Bishop and Williams, and scenes of other blood thirsty wretches, with the disgusting, cruel and deliberate sacrifice of life under the *New Poor Law Bill*, and then say are there not Englishmen to be found capable of being employed in a distant colony to perpetrate any act that the fiendish heart of man can devise?<sup>51</sup>

Others too pursued the idea that the political and social order was inverted in Britain. 'If an Englishman could hold a conversation with an inhabitant of some

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<sup>49</sup> Ashton, *Lecture*, pp. 5-6, 9, 22-3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

uncivilised nation', the *Pioneer* asserted, and explain to him the extremes of poverty and luxury and the conditions of oppression and exploitation which characterised his country, the 'savage', the paper concluded, 'would assuredly suspect, either that 'his informant was endeavouring to deceive him, or that we were a nation of the veriest fools and slaves the sun ever shone upon'. If the visitor were further to be told 'that we called ourselves a civilised nation', he would surely 'laugh at our folly, scorn us for our submission, and thank the gods that he was born a barbarian'.<sup>52</sup> Tyranny's reign therefore threatened to invert the ordering of space and time associated with imperial progress and civilisation.

These kinds of ideas were similarly extended to critiques of government and the convict transportation system. Those who ruled the country were bad men, radicals argued, and thus unfit for the power that they had illegally assumed, while those who were moral and virtuous were treated cruelly and unjustly. Many radicals had consequently paid a terrible price for attempting to resist tyranny. Instead of being rightly celebrated as 'patriots' trying to save their country from ruin they had been transported and condemned to degradation and oppression. In Britain, one commentator noted, 'tyrants are kept in palaces' while 'patriots are kept in prisons'.<sup>53</sup> It was not virtuous, patriotic radical men who ought to be transported, other critics likewise asserted, but the aristocrats who were destroying and corrupting the nation. Popular prints of transported radicals like the Tolpuddle Martyrs consequently imagined scenes in which the government was put on a boat, while the Martyrs were brought home. The tyrannical character and foreign origin of the British monarchy also gave cause for comment. The Glasgow spinners should be released, the *Northern Star* declared, and the 'King of Hanover' arrested, tried and transported for treason in their place.<sup>54</sup>

<http://images.statelibrary.tas.gov.au/Fullimage.asp?ID=AUTAS001124071861>

'The Ministers and their cronies off to Botany Bay and the Dorchester men returning',  
London, 1834

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<sup>52</sup> *Pioneer*, October 5 1833.

<sup>53</sup> *NS*, April 10 1841.

<sup>54</sup> *NS*, January 20 1838.

Frost drew on a series of similar analogies to highlight what he perceived as the dynamic and reciprocal links between colonial suffering and the denial of justice, liberty and freedom in Britain. Standing the notion of the imperial civilising mission upon its head, Frost declared that 'there was nothing in sacred or profane history at all equal' to the moral evil that had been fostered by the British in Van Diemen's Land for government had produced 'a state of society' there 'unequalled in depravity in any part of the civilised world'.<sup>55</sup> Yet, despite this emphasis upon the idea that the situation in Van Diemen's Land was without parallel, Frost nevertheless repeatedly drew parallels with biblical tales about Egypt. 'There are plenty of places in our country', he declared, 'where the darkness of Egypt prevails'.<sup>56</sup> In making this link with the Old Testament, Frost not only associated nineteenth-century Britain with a backward and archaic society – thus undermining the idea that Britain embodied modernity and progress - he also laid the ground for the idea that Britain and empire were on the brink of destruction. Unless 'Englishmen' did their 'duty' by protesting against the cruelty that beset Van Diemen's Land, an apocalypse was certain, Frost declared.<sup>57</sup> Just as Sodom and Gomorrah had once suffered, so now the whole British nation should fear for the 'same all-powerful Being' still existed with the 'same hatred for this monstrous crime as He had in the days of Abraham'.<sup>58</sup>

### **Capitalism consumes: poverty, tyranny and the male body.**

Frost's account of the convict colonies drew upon *and* extended a key theme within British popular radicalism: the idea that economic exploitation and political tyranny were physically consuming and even cannibalistic. Critiques of the economic system depicted the body of the worker as an object which was variously being used up, exhausted, eaten and consumed by capital. Capital, the

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<sup>55</sup> *PP*, September 27 1856. October 4 1856. For similar comments see *PP*, October 11 1856.

<sup>56</sup> *PP*, August 2 1856.

<sup>57</sup> *PP*, April 30 1856.

<sup>58</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 39, Frost, *Letter*, p. 20.



*Pioneer* declared, was intent on squeezing the 'marrow' from 'the poor man's spine'.<sup>59</sup> 'Mammon', it warned its readers, was an 'insatiable monster' whose 'jaws' were 'open' to 'devour you'.<sup>60</sup> The rich were able to continue 'rioting on luxury', one Chartist similarly reminded the crowds at one of the Frost welcome rallies, because of the wealth they had acquired by playing with the 'sinews of the suffering poor'.<sup>61</sup> The colonies too were depicted as sites of tyranny, exploitation, cruelty and consumption.<sup>62</sup> The aristocracy, one radical newspaper commented for example, was like a 'monster'; so determined to 'torture', 'victimize' and 'murder' that it had created an 'empire of tyranny' and an 'ocean of blood'.<sup>63</sup> Emigration was particularly denounced as a trade in human flesh designed, as one radical put it, to 'gratify the greedy grasping of a monopolising faction'.<sup>64</sup>

Images of a carnivorous economic and political system were also routinely deployed in the depictions of transported radicals. 'To capital our blood and bones are sold', a poem commemorating the deportation of the Glasgow spinners in 1838 noted, 'and Mammon boasts the unbounded power of gold'. The spinners were 'brave, fearless, working men' who were to be transported for their attempts to vanquish the 'monster in his den' by demanding 'Labour's fair profit from the murderous hand of Capital; whose pestilential breath has dragged the thousands to the shades of death'.<sup>65</sup> The transportation of the Newport Chartists had, likewise, been denounced as an act of state rapacity: Frost, Williams and Jones were described as government 'prey', they had been 'carried off' by 'blood-

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<sup>59</sup> *Pioneer*, April 26 1834.

<sup>60</sup> *Pioneer*, September 28 1833.

<sup>61</sup> *PP*, August 30 1856.

<sup>62</sup> *NS*, December 18 1841.

<sup>63</sup> *Voice of the West Riding*, June 1 1833, August 31 1833.

<sup>64</sup> *NS*, December 11 1841. Chartist views on emigration and the colonies were, however, contradictory and shifting, particularly by the later 1840s and 1850s. For a discussion see: Alan Beaver, 'From a place of 'horrible destitution' to a paradise of the working class. The transformation of British working-class attitudes to Australia, 1841-1851', *Labour History*, 40, 1981, pp. 1-15.

<sup>65</sup> *NS*, February 3 1838.

hounds' and 'body snatchers' and Chartism's task was to 'wrest them' from the 'clutches' of the aristocracy, that 'vulture-like crew'.<sup>66</sup>

The experience of convicts in the colonies in turn served as powerful allegories of the workingman's struggle to maintain his manly independence by preserving the autonomy and integrity of his physical self. Here Frost's emphasis upon the destruction of convicts by flogging was a particularly important theme. Flogging, Frost asserted, conjuring up the spectre of cannibalism, signified a form of human 'sacrifice' to the 'ferocious spirit of those who rule'.<sup>67</sup> The destruction of the body was powerfully condemned. Raising and then breaking the flesh, contemporary descriptions of convict floggings repeatedly emphasised their ability to strip a man's back bare to the white of his bones and thus to leave him permanently scarred and incapacitated. The convict's back, Frost revealed, was normally 'cut to pieces by the infernal knout'.<sup>68</sup> 'I have seen the flesh of men thus punished', the Tolpuddle martyr George Loveless likewise declared, 'fly from their back into the air'.<sup>69</sup> Flogging was, moreover, interpreted as a 'contest' between two contrasting forms of manhood. On the one side stood the flogger, who, 'like his master, felt a gratification in inflicting and witnessing human misery'; on the other side the man who still retained his spirit and self-respect. 'The flogger', Frost declared, used 'every means in his power to break' this.<sup>70</sup> It was consequently 'unprincipled' men 'who had no sense of debasement' who got on in the colonies, while men 'of spirit', who rightly struggled to retain their manly independence, were flogged and gradually 'broken down by suffering'.<sup>71</sup> On this point Loveless again concurred. It was the most manly convicts – those who had even a 'stirring' of 'spirit left in them' and who consequently refused to just 'lie

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<sup>66</sup> NS, March 7 1840, May 1 1841.

<sup>67</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, pp. 30-31. Frost, *Letter*, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> George Loveless, *The victims of Whiggery; being a statement of persecution experienced by the Dorchester Labourers; their trial; banishment & c. Also reflections upon the present system of transportation; with an account of Van Diemen's Land, its customs, laws, climate, produce and inhabitants*. (London: Cleave, 1838), p. 36.

<sup>70</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 30.

<sup>71</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 9.

down and die' - who rose up against their cruel enslavement and who were consequently most likely to face the flogger.<sup>72</sup>

These experiences were believed to engender the total demoralisation and destruction of man; a state that was symbolised for Frost by the prevalence of 'unnatural' offences. Surrounded by 'misery and crime in almost every possible form' and forced to 'associate with persons reduced to such a state', a man's 'heart', Frost alleged, inevitably became 'hardened'. Without hope to 'sustain' the moral feelings or to 'restrain the fell passions', the convict consequently became like 'a demon' and 'crimes which at one time would have been thought of with horror, are committed with avidity'.<sup>73</sup> 'Blasphemy, rage, mutual hatred and the unrestrained indulgence of unnatural lust' were thus the terrible outcomes of the convict state.<sup>74</sup> This was moreover a point of no return: crimes of this 'nature so thoroughly debase the human character' as to take it 'beyond repentance', deadening the heart to 'every renovating influence'.<sup>75</sup> There 'are English mothers present', Frost consequently told his audiences, 'whose sons are at this moment in situations infinitely worse than death'.<sup>76</sup>

These kinds of narratives of human brutality, corporeal dissolution and consumption were, in turn, related to a whole genre of popular melodramatic tales about ruling-class sexual excess. The image of the aristocratic libertine seducing and debauching the poor but virtuous moral maiden was, Anna Clark tells us, a recurring theme in these decades: appearing not only in political critiques but also in nineteenth-century chapbooks, ballads and other cultural

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<sup>72</sup> Loveless, *Victims*, p. 36. Convict narratives, among other sources, suggest that some men undoubtedly experienced flogging as a state of intense powerlessness and as a physically degrading and profoundly humiliating act which penetrated and debilitated their bodies. Flogging, historians Raymond Evans and William Thorpe have suggested, may even have been experienced by some men as akin to rape. Raymond Evans & William Thorpe, 'Commanding men: masculinities and the convict system', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 56 (1998), pp. 17-34 and Raymond Evans & William Thorpe, 'The last days of Moreton Bay: power, sexuality and the misrule of law', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 53 (1997), pp. 59-77.

<sup>73</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 35.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

forms.<sup>77</sup> This melodramatic sensationalism provided a tale that was both readily accessible to all and intensely popular. The use of sexual symbolism enabled a unity to be engendered out of the many diverse experiences of oppression and exploitation.<sup>78</sup> Narratives about rape and seduction thus helped to foster and sustain an easily translatable world-view; one of good versus evil, light versus dark, in which radical virtue did battle with aristocratic vice.<sup>79</sup> Radical discourses about sodomy belonged within this cluster of ideas. Radicals had counter-posed their own claims to a virile and virtuous masculinity against images of an effeminate and debauched aristocratic 'other' for decades.<sup>80</sup> Those in power, such critiques claimed, lacked the necessary self-discipline and restraint which idealised forms of manly authority and citizenship were supposed to entail. Sodomy, to Frost, as to his audiences, was thus an easily interpretable 'sign', a readily recognisable symbol, of tyranny's excess.

It seems likely that these kinds of emphases upon the integrity of the male body served at least three key and overlapping functions within popular radicalism. Firstly, they undoubtedly drew upon the ideas of classical liberalism and, in particular, the belief that the autonomous, self-possessing individual was the foundation of liberty and of individual rights. Secondly, the theme of individual physical strength and corporeal integrity also figured in some radical discussions as a metaphor for collective or class strength. A striking example of this kind of approach can be seen in the *Pioneer's* response to the Tolpuddle crisis. Calling upon its readers to stand firm against the decision to transport the Tolpuddle men, the *Pioneer* advised,

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<sup>77</sup> Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: gender and the making of the British working class* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> On melodrama and sensationalism see also: Patrick Joyce, *Democratic subjects: the self and the social in nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>79</sup> Seduction narratives belonged to a broader array of ideas linking 'sexual danger' with political misrule. See, for example: Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: narratives of sexual danger in late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English feminism and sexual morality, 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>80</sup> See, for example: Clark, *Struggle*, esp. chapter 8.

No model can be presented to man more worthy of contemplation than his own form. His head – his body – his arms – his legs – his feet, are all essential parts to constitute him man; and should any part be wanting, every other part would feel pain and inconvenience. ... Nothing can more clearly shew us the necessity of combination ... than an attention to what we experience in our own bodies.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, an emphasis upon the integrity and strength of the individual body may also have helped to underpin and sustain a more secure sense of personal self among some radical men. Attachment to the notion of a continuous, unassailable selfhood was, Kelly Mays argues, central to many radical men in this period. Faced with constant challenges to the maintenance of self – in the form of economic insecurity, poverty, injury and illness – Mays contends that some workingmen looked to forms like autobiography to help them bridge the gap between their own objective experiences of the world as chaotic and beyond their control and their subjective desire to cultivate a sense of identity rooted in notions of self-autonomy, individual integrity and command.<sup>82</sup> Frost's *Horrors* may thus have served both his own personal need to narrate, and thus impart a sense of continuity to his own life (not least by negotiating the physical and psychic rupture occasioned by long exile) and the needs of some members of his audiences to likewise narrate their selves in more coherent and continuous ways.

### **'Our returned champion': suffering, heroic manliness and self-making.<sup>83</sup>**

If the *Horrors of Convict Life* painted a terrible picture of the physical and moral price paid by tyranny's victims, Frost's tales of the colonies also served to draw out and dramatise a further key discourse of masculinity within nineteenth-century radical thought. For, for all that the workingman was deemed the victim of tyranny, he was also simultaneously held up as the agent of his own liberation.

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<sup>81</sup> *Pioneer*, October 5 1833.

<sup>82</sup> Kelly Mays, 'Subjectivity, community and the nature of truth-telling in two Chartist autobiographies', in Ashton *et al*, *Chartist Legacy*, esp. pp. 223-4.

<sup>83</sup> *PP*, September 6 1856.

Suffering, in other words, was depicted both as a source of dissolution *and* as a great challenge against which ordinary men must and could do battle. Indeed, the workingman's ability to stand firm against tyranny's onslaught was declared a sign of his intrinsic capacity for virtue and thus his entitlement to citizenship. Unlike contemporary melodramatic tales of female seduction and rape, where women remained largely passive victims, Frost's *Horrors* were therefore designed to throw the workingman's capacity for moral heroism and thus his innate capacity for agency or self-making into sharp relief.

Not surprisingly, Frost's return was itself considered a powerful symbol of this potential for manly moral might. He had, he repeatedly told his audiences, despite his own sufferings and the more general horrors of the convict system, nevertheless returned with his convictions undiminished and his courage undaunted. 'So far from my love to Old England, and to the great cause of Liberty being diminished by the sufferings of fifteen years it is', he announced, 'increased'.<sup>84</sup> His physical body also remained manly and strong. Declaring that 'he believed himself to be as capable of physical and mental labour now as when only 40 years old', Frost proceeded to set out the many terrible challenges that he had faced and overcome;

I suffered much for many years in Van Diemen's Land ... but I was sustained. I bore it ... I am now in my 72<sup>nd</sup> year, knowing nothing of the effects of age, physical or mental. I do believe that I am a heartier man than when I left England nearly seventeen years ago. The great men thought to destroy me ... this, instead of weakening, strengthened me, and aroused me to new life and vigour.<sup>85</sup>

Others drew similar lessons. 'John Frost has returned', Ernest Jones announced, and, 'it will gratify every lover of truth and courage to learn that he is hale, hearty, and full of courage' and just 'the same as of old'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *PP*, August 2 1856.

<sup>85</sup> *PP*, April 30 1856.

<sup>86</sup> *PP*, July 19 1856, July 26 1856.

Frost's ability to survive his ordeal was, in turn, interpreted as a sign of his individual moral might. His emphasis upon the horrors of convict life thus served to place into sharp relief his strength of will and his ability to endure. Where lesser men had apparently succumbed to the brutality of the convict system by degenerating into a state of unmanly physical and moral depravity, Frost had overcome. *The Horrors* might, in part, then be read as a kind of secular *Pilgrim's Progress*. Frost stood at the centre of his own narrative; a radical, rational and enlightened man able to survive the terrible tests thrown in his path and thus to endure. His 'soul', as one radical poem explained, had simply proved 'too pure for the torture to bend'.<sup>87</sup> Frost's continued commitment to Chartist principles was particularly highlighted and extolled. 'Seventeen years of exile have rolled over his head', Jones declared, 'it is grey with age – but it has never once bowed to expediency or power. John Frost is a noble evidence of Chartist faith, endurance and courage – he is an omen of Chartist triumph'.<sup>88</sup>

Many of these interpretations of Frost's ability to endure were founded upon the contradictory and multi-layered understandings of slavery that permeated radical, and particularly Chartist, thinking in these decades.<sup>89</sup> Within these models, slavery figured simultaneously as a physical state or objective position imposed upon men *and* as a state of mind which those with manly morals were able to resist and overcome. As one radical poem for example explained, 'The tyrants' chains are only strong, While slaves submit to wear them'.<sup>90</sup> This dualistic view of slavery was, in turn, interpreted as a test or sign of manliness which, for many radicals, was defined by a spirit of independence and thus by a 'natural' determination to resist slavery. The slave was, as a result, considered

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<sup>87</sup> *NS*, June 20 1846.

<sup>88</sup> *PP*, July 19 1856.

<sup>89</sup> For a fuller discussion see: Mays, 'Subjectivity' and particularly Kelly Mays, 'Slaves in heaven, laborers in hell: Chartist poets' ambivalent identification with the (Black) slave', *Victorian Poetry*, 39:2, 2001, pp. 137-63.

<sup>90</sup> *NS*, May 9 1846.

the unnatural antithesis of the man. Thus, failure to rise up and resist the transportation of the Glasgow spinners would, the *Northern Star* declared, reveal the vast majority of workingmen to be ‘crawling slaves – unworthy of the name of manhood and disgraceful to its nature’.<sup>91</sup> Frost’s survival was thus read above all as a symbol of his innate strength of manly character and capacity for moral heroism. Festooned with laurels, riding in open carriages and welcomed in many places by marching bands playing ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes’, Frost’s return to Britain was repeatedly and ritualistically celebrated in this way.<sup>92</sup>

These insistent celebrations of Frost’s heroic character in turn provided the opportunity for a series of broader explorations on the meanings of manliness. Frost’s moral and virtuous character was held up, on the one hand, as a marked contrast with élite forms of masculinity and simultaneously as a mirror *and* an instructive model to ordinary men. The spectacle of suffering had the capacity to produce two radically different responses, Frost contended. In most cases, it hardened the heart and weakened the morals and consequently stimulated the ‘most repelling’ forms of ‘human nature’, creating men who were ‘callous to their suffering fellow-creatures’ and who experienced ‘gratification’ in ‘human misery’.<sup>93</sup> In other cases, by contrast, ‘the heart’ was ‘softened at the sight of so much misery’.<sup>94</sup> Frost belonged to this latter category of men. Thus, ‘despite the fact that he had been ‘long subject to the will of the most brutal of mankind’ and had often ‘had language addressed to me, having committed no offence, which set the blood dancing through my veins’, he had nevertheless remained a virtuous man of feeling.<sup>95</sup> ‘Human misery’, Frost declared of the British

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<sup>91</sup> *NS*, January 20 1838, February 3 1838. Likewise, those who failed to be moved to protest by the plight of Frost and the other Newport men, had been denounced as individuals who had sunk ‘lower than ... eunuchs’ and who were consequently no longer fit to ‘be called men’. *NS*, April 10 1841.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, *PP*, October 4 1856.

<sup>93</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Frost, *Letter*, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> *PP*, April 30 1856. For a more detailed discussion of these themes see: Karen Halttunen, ‘Humanitarianism and the pornography of pain in Anglo-American culture’, *American Historical Review* 100 (1995), pp. 303-34.



government more generally was, by contrast, 'pleasing to the merciless men who rule'.<sup>96</sup>

Two opposing models of manhood were thus being contrasted and compared – the one moral, rational and capable of feeling and sympathy, the other passionate, irrational and cruel. In Frost's view, both the colonial elite and the aristocracy more generally stood on the wrong side of this manly divide. 'Every reader of history', Frost told his audiences, knew that 'the aristocracy' was 'insatiable and mean in the pursuit of wealth'; 'merciless in the pursuit of ... ambition' and in 'the gratification' of 'the passions' and that the aristocrat was 'like a raging lion seeking whom it may devour'.<sup>97</sup> Those who knew about and yet failed to be moved by the horrors of convict life were particularly questionable men. 'If a man, a father, a husband, can hear and believe the truth of these statements without having his best feelings excited', then Frost asserted, 'he scarcely deserves the name of a man'.<sup>98</sup> Government's alleged failure to act and its strategy of variously ignoring, obscuring, denying and even lying in response to negative reports about the conditions of the convicts was thus read as a sign of its deficient masculinity. By contrast, Frost had no such fears about the manly credentials of the crowds of workingmen who came to hear him lecture. Unlike the government and the aristocracy, these men were capable of moral sympathy and Frost was consequently certain that, 'as men, as Christians' and 'as fathers', they would leave his lectures, determined to 'do all in [their] power to change a system which is a curse to the world'.<sup>99</sup>

These kinds of ideas were once again embedded within radical discourse more broadly. Thus the capacity for rationality, morality and sympathy that supposedly defined the workingman was regularly contrasted with the passion-ridden, immoral and cruel habits that reportedly characterised the rich. In these

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<sup>96</sup> Frost, *Letter*, pp. 14-5.

<sup>97</sup> Frost, *Horrors*, p. 12.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

analyses, the pursuit of wealth, in particular, was interpreted as both a product *and* a sign of an unmanly descent into the passions and of a consequent loss of sympathy and feeling. Depictions of transported radicals likewise drew upon opposing models of unmanly vice and cruelty and manly morality and sympathy. Thus, commemorative portraits of those who had been transported, including several of Frost himself, repeatedly positioned them in gentlemanly poses and clothing and often sought, in their accompanying commentaries, to lay emphasis

<http://images.statelibrary.tas.gov.au/Fullimage.asp?ID=AUTAS001124071895>

The Dorchester Unionists imploring mercy of their King,  
State Library of Tasmania

upon their respectable qualities and credentials.<sup>100</sup> These kinds of arguments were further developed in satirical prints including some of the Dorchester Labourers depicting them as loyal and virtuous workingmen but the King as an undisciplined, sensual and hard-hearted man. Underpinning these kinds of ideas more broadly was the contention that – if it was ultimately ‘MANNERS, not money’ that made ‘the gentleman’ – then workingmen had at least as much right to the franchise as those with great wealth.<sup>101</sup>

If Frost’s moral and heroic manliness appeared in stark contrast to the reputed lack of manly character among the aristocracy, the relationship between his character and that of the ordinary workingman was more complicated and contradictory. Thus, in many of the commentaries on his return, Frost figured simultaneously as both a mirror to be held up to the equally heroic morality of the ordinary workingman and yet also as an instructive lesson for him. Depicted as a

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<sup>100</sup> On the attempts in these decades to commemorate and represent transported radicals through other means, including particularly statues, see: Paul Pickering & Alex Tyrell (eds.), *Contested sites: commemoration, memorial and popular politics in nineteenth-century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>101</sup> *Pioneer*, November 9 1833. Emphasis in original. On nineteenth-century ideas about masculinity and citizenship see: Anna Clark, ‘Manhood, womanhood and the politics of class in Britain, 1790-1845’, in Laura Frader & Sonya Rose (eds.), *Gender and class in modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 263-79

great leader and as a supremely exalted example, Frost was variously lauded as 'the noblest and truest of our living champions', 'a glorious and a good man', 'the patriarch of politicians' and 'the bond of patriots' and likened to a range of great historical and religious figures including Cromwell and Moses, and was on one occasion even depicted as a 'God in the midst of men'.<sup>102</sup> Frost's story was thus repeatedly portrayed as inspirational and uplifting. His experiences therefore set him above and apart from the crowd and the people were consequently urged to attend the rallies and lectures in his honour in order that they might 'learn a lesson from one that has suffered so much'.<sup>103</sup> By following Frost's example, another commentator declared, it would be possible for the people to free themselves 'from the shackles of an aristocracy more beastly than those who formed the courtesan characters of a by-gone age'.<sup>104</sup> If only more men would emulate Frost, Finlen advised, the nation would be transformed. 'We want ... sturdy men today', he declared, 'men who are conscious of their manhood'. 'The example given by Mr Frost to his country is, and ought to be, invaluable. In him no cringing was found'. 'Would to God', Finlen concluded, 'that Britain today could boast of an army of such men'.<sup>105</sup>

At the same time, however, both Frost's return and the mass popular receptions of him were also interpreted as signs of the *mutual* moral strength and fidelity of both leader and people. Thus, just as Frost's suffering was depicted as emblematic of the people's suffering more generally, so too his innate moral capacity to conquer and overcome was considered to resemble and even mirror theirs. Frost, Ernest Jones declared for example, was 'the living evidence of *our* constancy and *our* suffering'.<sup>106</sup> Just as Frost's experiences and pain had made him 'heroic and noble', so too the martyrdom of the people had had similarly transforming effects.<sup>107</sup> Pain was therefore deemed a crucial part of the journey

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<sup>102</sup> *PP*, July 19 1856, September 6 1856.

<sup>103</sup> *PP*, October 11 1856.

<sup>104</sup> *PP*, August 30 1856.

<sup>105</sup> *PP*, September 6 1856.

<sup>106</sup> *PP*, September 20 1856.

<sup>107</sup> *PP*, July 26 1856, August 2 1856.

to democracy and reform. 'Few I think will imagine', Finlen told the crowds at one Frost rally, 'that the penal colonies, the hulks, the jails, are the only places where men suffer. Chartists suffer everywhere. The earth to them is a prison while tyranny prevails and despots are dominant'. 'Those who travel our way must therefore 'expect to suffer', for the Chartist way is 'the rough and harrowed way'.<sup>108</sup> Suffering was thus envisaged both as an opportunity for moral heroism and as a crucial means of manly self-making.

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<sup>108</sup> *PP*, September 6 1856.