A Call to Arms (and Print)

The 1884 franchise reform movement produced a vast quantity of material – objects such as banners, badges, sashes and models, and, of course, literature. Speeches, letters to the newspapers, and both poems and songs can give historians some fascinating insights into the thoughts and desires of the protestors of 1884. There are also ways in which the material culture and the written culture of the 1884 demonstrations cross-pollinate, and nowhere is this more the case than in the printing of poetry and song on single sheet flyers. These products of the printing presses – thousands of which were printed, but only a very small number of which have survived – were not made before the demonstrations as part of the build-up, nor afterwards as commemorative pieces, but by printers working presses on lorries being pulled by horses as part of the processions themselves.

Falkirk Archives hold a single surviving example of such a sheet, printed, as it says on the reverse ‘at the Bo’ness Franchise Demonstration on Saturday, 13th September, 1884’, featuring the poem 'The Banner of Reform' by a James Smith of Edinburgh. Smith's poem had also been printed on the Edinburgh demonstration procession on 12 July. We know from newspaper evidence that the demonstrations at Huntly, Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth, Hamilton, Paisley, Brechin and elsewhere had featured printing presses on lorries as part of the processions. In all cases, they were run by the members of the local printing trades, often workers associated with the very local newspapers whose reports are essential evidence for what was going on at the demonstrations.

In part, their presence and their enthusiasm were a result of their close alliance at this time with Gladstonian Liberalism – Gladstone was the hero of the 1884 movement, but it was also Gladstone who, while Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1855, repealed what were known as 'the taxes on knowledge', including, crucially, the stamp duty on newspapers, thus making a popular provincial press newly viable. However, there are also strong links between radical and liberal ideology, and what we might call the ideology of the printing trades, as exemplified by the sheet produced at the Stirling demonstration, a copy of which has survived in the collections of the National Library of Scotland. The heading features two mottoes which neatly encompass this connection: 'Knowledge is Power' and 'A Free Press and a Free People'. That sheet also features a poem, 'The Printers' Cry Against the Lords', signed by 'An Old Comp.' [ie compositor] working at the Stirling Observer, in those days a radical newspaper which had already come out by 1884 as in favour of universal adult suffrage. The poem drew on the language of printing in constructing its political meanings, for example opening with the lines 'A LOWER CASE was never known/Than what the Lords now show'.

Most of the poetry and song of the 1884 movement was published in the pages of these local newspapers. Many of these titles regularly published poetry written by their readers, on diverse topics, and the political poetry which appears is merely one branch of that popular literary culture, and many of the 1884 political poets can be found authoring poems on non-political topics in earlier or later issues, as well as on other political topics. The editor of the West Lothian Courier, however, went one step further by explicitly inviting poetry in support of the Bathgate demonstration, by announcing a competition for the best poem on the topic. The prize for the best was to be the poem used by the printing trades of Bathgate on the sheets they intended to print on the press they would have on the procession. The prize to be sought, then, was the distribution of hundreds or thousands of copies of your poem around the town, a prize of great value to an unpublished poet. The paper was inundated with over 40 entries, far more than they had expected, and ended up awarding first, second, and third prizes, as well as awarding 'highly commended' or 'commended' to a number of others. All of these were published in the newspaper. The winner, entitled 'Call to Arms' by a reader who signed it simply 'Jim', was printed on the procession;
unfortunately, no copies appear to have survived, although we have the words as printed in the *Courier*.

"Call to Arms" is not the most illustrative of 1884 poems – lacking the very common use of a Burnsian idiom, for instance, and being somewhat less radical in its language than many, in particular on the issue of the Lords and hereditary privilege – but it does feature the two most prevalent tropes of 1884 literature, whether prose or verse. The heritage of the reform movement and of radicalism, and other moments of political memory such as Covenanting, Bannockburn and Wallace, is constantly referred to in 1884, including the carrying of older banners at the processions, and the special status accorded to the 'veterans' of 1832, 1819 (in Paisley) and Chartism (in Dundee) who were given their own carriages at the heads of the processions. Thus 'And shout to those who would oppose –/“Remember Thirty-Two.”' (ll.55-56), 'How powerful is the people's voice,/The Lords have felt before;' (ll.77-78, also recalling 1832), and '...let the old flag float in the air,/The old flag of Reform.' (LL.67-68). The second common trope of 1884 is that of the military, in which martial objects – including weapons, drums, bugles and medals – were carried and military metaphor drawn upon. Hence, 'Then move ye on in bold array,' (l.81), 'Their gage of battle strong;' (l.14), 'So show this in the fray;--/Be fair in fight, but strong in might,' (ll.22-23), 'And pierceth as a bugle-blast' (l.39), and both the title and the whole of the first stanza.

With the production of these poems, the dividing lines between material culture, print culture, literary culture and political culture disappear. For historians of political poetry, methods of production and distribution are as important as questions of authorship and literary tradition; language cannot be considered without attention to other products of the movement; and the political context has to be treated as only one possible reason for a writer to pick up a pen.