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Samuel Bamford, the Radical
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The radical and writer Samuel Bamford of Middleton (1788-1872) is best known for his two-part autobiography, *Passages in the Life of a Radical (1839-41)*, with its superb account of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, and *Early Days* (1848). But an autobiographer also needs a full life, and Bamford was also a journalist, a poet, a diarist of distinction, and one of the longest-lived and best-documented working men of his age.

Samuel Bamford was born in 1788 in the Lancashire weaving village of Middleton, six miles north of Manchester. His father was an artisan weaver and a Methodist, and sometime Governor of the workhouse in Salford, where half the family, including Samuel's mother, died of fever; young Samuel himself nearly followed them. He received an intermittent formal education, including spells at the grammar schools in Middleton and Manchester, and then held a succession of jobs ranging from east coast sailor to Manchester warehouseman. He also enlisted in the local Volunteer force during the 1803-4 invasion scare' later writing a celebratory poem, 'Oldham Local'. He married his childhood sweetheart, Jemima, in the Collegiate Church in 1810, soon after the birth of their only child Ann who was, unusually, placed in his arms immediately afterwards. He was in Manchester at the time of the Luddite disturbances in Middleton in April 1812, and was back weaving in Middleton as the post-war movement for a radical reform of parliament took off.

Bamford became secretary of the Middleton Hampden Club, founded in 1816, just at the time when the leadership of the radical movement was moving from London (as it was to do again in the Chartist period). When the London Hampden Club proposed a national petitioning campaign for parliamentary reform lasting many months, a meeting at Middleton led demands for more urgent action, "as it is impossible for the People of this part of the Country, to SUBSIST on their present means, even with the support of the SOUP KETTLE, till the Date fixed by the London Hampden Club, (March 2nd).” (1) A delegate meeting for the Manchester area held in Middleton in December resolved to send out missionaries to rouse other manufacturing districts, and another in January chose delegates to the national Hampden Club meeting in London on 22nd January 1817, Bamford among them. In London he met his heroes Cobbett, Cartwright and Hunt, and made a crucial intervention in favour of manhood rather than taxpayer suffrage, pointing out that the militia lists provided a practical basis for an electoral register. "This was enough for me. The thing had never struck me before", wrote Cobbett; Hunt's radical line was adopted. (2)

The response of the Manchester reformers to the expected rejection of the bill by parliament was to organise a march on London to petition the Prince Regent: the "march of the blanketeers" on 10 March. Habeas Corpus was suspended, and internment introduced. Bamford opposed the expedition on practical grounds, accurately predicting its successful interception by the military. With equal shrewdness, he exposed and denounced a clandestine attempt to enlist him in a scheme to "make a Moscow of Manchester" in order to secure a base for a second march on London. The plans for this rising went ahead, involving some of his associates, but the organisation was penetrated (and perhaps instigated) by spies and the conspirators were arrested

at the end of March. Because of his radical connections Bamford was afterwards rounded up as a suspect, put for a time in chains, and taken to London for interrogation by Lord Sidmouth and the Privy Council. He took care to drill his comrades in a common defence; not a single one of them went

to trial, and Bamford was released ahead of the others in May 1817. His early return raised suspicions that he had turned informer, suspicions which were never entirely to leave him. They are refuted by the Home Office's records; others wavered, but not Bamford. He also rejected an approach from the instigators of the abortive Pentridge rising; his close associate Joseph Mitchell, bolder but less shrewd, was ruined by his role as the unwitting colleague of Oliver the spy.

Now a figure of some authority, Bamford was prominent in the series of local reform meetings that accompanied the spinners' and weavers' strikes of 1818. He continued to advocate petitioning, which many now felt was a discredited tactic; Bamford however was at heart a constitutionalist, submitting a petition to parliament about his imprisonment and seeking (in vain) a hearing at the bar of the House. He favoured an open, community-based style of campaigning and strewed his speeches with homely, common-sense political metaphors. He was an early advocate of women voting at meetings, which earned him scoffing comments from some of his fellow-orators. He was a natural local leader of the revived mass platform strategy in the Spring of 1819. No pacifist, he helped to form the guard for Hunt on his visit to Manchester in January 1819. He was the chief local organiser of the Rochdale and Middleton component of the march to Manchester for the great reform meeting of 16th August 1819, notable for its military-style discipline, its festive array, and its inclusion of women and families. He distributed laurels to the section leaders as the march moved off and urged peace and good order upon the marchers. Troops broke up the meeting, and in the "Peterloo massacre" that followed fifteen were killed and over 650 more sabred and trampled, among them many women and some children. Afterwards, reunited with a wife whom he had feared dead, he led a thousand of his comrades in a defiant and disciplined march back to Middleton beneath the only banner to survive the carnage. It was his finest hour. A few days later he was arrested, imprisoned briefly in Lancaster castle, and charged along with Henry Hunt and others with seditious conspiracy.

Bamford reacted fiercely to Peterloo, and was probably at his most militant in its aftermath. Nonetheless, he submerged himself in the quest for evidence to prove what had happened. He attended the inquest into the death of the Oldham Peterloo victim John Lees as a reporter, and he assiduously gathered evidence for the defence at the forthcoming trial, engaged by the Metropolitan Relief Committee. At the trial in York in March 1820 Bamford conducted his own defence. While Hunt took the attacking role Bamford's carefully-marshalled witnesses as to the peaceful and festive nature of the procession made such an impact on both judge and jury that the prosecution despaired of success. He was not alone in being shocked by the verdict of guilty, and his outburst at the subsequent sentencing hearing at the King's Bench in London probably exacerbated the penalty: one year in Lincoln gaol.

Bamford now began working to establish himself as a writer. For several years he had been producing poetry, and the radical *Manchester Observer* had printed his songs and verses extolling Hunt, Cobbett, Brandreth and liberty and denouncing corrupt lawyers and parsons. A slim volume, *The Weaver Boy*, was published in early 1819. From Lincoln he added many more, including two popular broadsides: a tribute to Queen Caroline and "The Song of the Slaughter" about Peterloo, the latter sung to imposing effect at the solemn anniversary gatherings in 1820 and 1821. A larger volume of *Miscellaneous Poetry* was published by Thomas Dolby of London in 1821. The radical moment however had passed. He had also fallen out with Henry Hunt over Hunt's incessant self-promotion, and again faced suspicion from some of his fellow-villagers. He returned to weaving, at which he was highly skilled, and the next year moved a little way out of Middleton to Stakehill to tend his loom and his family in peace.

Little is known of Bamford's life over the next eighteen years or so. He was among those local radicals who made some common cause with the liberal third Lord Suffield, lord of the manor of Middleton, on reform issues. In 1825 they accepted Suffield's patronage in establishing a Mechanics' Institute for Middleton, an episode which ended in acrimony as (in Bamford's account) Suffield tried to censor the publications in the reading room. In 1826 he went on a long expedition on foot to persuade north Lancashire calico weavers not to take part in machine breaking in Middleton, a successful mission which earned him death threats but which may have kept the weavers out of a trap laid by the authorities. By Bamford's own account he stopped weaving in 1826, although he was reported in 1840 to be weaving silk. He tried various other occupations, including beerseller, newsagent, auctioneer and post officer. He corresponded first with the *Morning Herald* and from 1826 was a regular correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*. (3) In 1832 he was forced to serve as parish constable in Middleton, getting involved in an undignified series of disputes with other reformers and townspeople and appealing to the magistrates for support; Bamford himself always claimed the issues were personal, but his rift with his former fellow-radicals was profound. He continued to write poetry, publishing *Hours in the Bowers* (1834) a largely new collection of more lyrical material with the most radical verses of his youth excluded. The following year saw the greatest blow of his life as his single daughter Ann died at the age of 25, apparently of a consumption which in his darker moments he attributed to his family's privations during his imprisonment in Lincoln.

Bamford's career as a writer took off in middle age, stimulated – or rather provoked – by the Chartist years of 1838-48. From the outset Bamford was a critic of the Chartists, rejecting what he saw as “mob law and mob violence” even as he maintained the justice of their wider cause. (4) Their tactical opposition to the Anti-corn Law League angered a veteran radical blooded in opposition to the ‘bread tax’. In the spring of 1839 he published an appeal to would-be insurgents in the form of a version of the epic poem *La Lyonnaise* by the French republican writer Pierre-Jean de Beranger, which detailed the awful consequences of the Lyon silk weavers' uprising of 1834. Later that year he began work on the first volume of his autobiography, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, which extolled the what he saw as the constitutionalist, community-based reform movement of his youth whilst at the same time warning of the risks of class-based insurgency. In 1841-2 he wrote a series of *Walks Among the Workers* for the conservative *Manchester Chronicle*. In 1843 there came a revised edition of his *Poems* and in 1844 an anthology of journalism and fictional sketches entitled *Walks in South Lancashire*.

At the same time as he wrote his memoirs, Bamford retreated from the present. As if to signal his distancing from his earlier life he moved from Middleton to Blackley, nearer Manchester, renting a cottage on the edge of the picturesque Boggart Hole Clough. He occasionally attended meetings of the Sun Inn circle of Lancashire poets and authors in Manchester, where he was something of an elder statesman in a circle of rising dialect writers and fireside poets whose common theme was nostalgia. He cultivated an interest in the history of Lancashire, idealising its old halls and paternalist gentry. He became friendly with the *Manchester Guardian*'s chief reporter and local history writer John Harland, assisting him with copying source material and later publishing a couple of antiquarian essays of his own on Middleton. (5) When Harland sent him a copy of a questionnaire about Lancashire dialect as part of a project by Bamford replied: “I am of opinion that the origin of the names of many of our streams, hills, and old places of habitation, are celtic, and if I were a young man, I would try to acquire a knowledge of that language as well as

Saxon, were it only to gather up as it were, and understand the memorials of the people who have been here before us.” (6)

Harland’s questionnaire was part of a project by Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society to compile a Lancashire dialect glossary. It prompted Bamford – who both spoke the dialect and studied it – to compile his own extensive glossary. He sent a copy to the society in November 1843; his original is now in the John Rylands Library. (7) J. H. Nodal later recounted how, “after the Council of the Lit & Phil Society had decided to proceed no further with the undertaking, Mr Bamford obtained permission to publish his own collection of words, and it forms the glossary appended to some of his works.” (8) This was Bamford’s *Dialect of South Lancashire*, published in 1850 and reissued in 1854. Bamford’s view that the Lancashire dialect preserved much of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon tongue was embraced by William Gaskell in his *Two Lectures on Lancashire Dialect*, and subsequently became generally accepted. (9) In the Autumn of 1872, about six months after Bamford’s death, a meeting of Manchester Literary Club (of which Bamford had been a revered member) resolved to compile a Lancashire dialect glossary, and approached the Lit & Phil via Gaskell for permission to use Bamford’s manuscript. Notwithstanding the work which had accumulated since, Bamford’s collection remained the principal resource for the resulting publications. (10)

Passages in the Life of a Radical made Bamford’s reputation as a writer. (11) It was widely reviewed in the newspaper and periodical press, both in Manchester and nationally, its author lauded for his moderation, his professed patriotism and his fluent and muscular prose style. His approving readers included Isaac Disraeli, William Gladstone, the Carlyles, the Gaskells, and Charles Dickens. Thomas Carlyle sent him admiring letters and a signed copy of *Past and Present*, and Jane Welsh Carlyle visited his cottage while on a tour of the region. He also became friends with the Sheffield “corn law rhymer” Ebenezer Elliott. Bamford’s poem “God Help the Poor” featured in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Manchester novel *Mary Barton* (1848), its author characterised as a “fine-spirited” son of toil. The Gaskells received him as a guest, and Elizabeth Gaskell obtained for him a signed copy of the poems of Tennyson whom he much admired. (12)

Bamford was uncomfortable with the sometimes patronising praise heaped by the middle classes on the head of a moderate working man. He supplemented his income from writing by occasional appearances as a lecturer, and became a regular speaker at meetings designed to promote self-education and mutual improvement among the working-classes. (13) In the afterglow of corn law repeal, as Bamford again found himself struggling to make a living, a testimonial fund was set up for him, but his undeferential insistence on taking the proceeds as a lump sum rather than as an annuity created acrimony and distrust amongst his supporters. Preferring independence to charity he invested the money in publishing a second volume of autobiography, *Early Days*, in 1848-9. This he followed in 1850 with *Dialect of South Lancashire*, a version of the founding text of Lancashire dialect writing, Tim Bobbin’s comical 1746 *Tummas and Mary*. Bamford used his own knowledge of Lancashire dialect to “correct” Tim Bobbin’s original, which he considered too close to the Merseyside dialect of its author’s youth, and appended his earlier glossary, now liberated from the grasp of the Manchester Lit & Phil. This provoked an anonymous satirist to publish an illustrated satirical poem entitled “Tim Bobbin’s Ghost” (1850) which homed in mercilessly on Bamford’s weaknesses and sensitivities. Bamford was deeply wounded at this attack by someone who had obviously been close to him at one time; he suspected a minor writer called George Richardson but it bore the fingerprints of his fellow dialect writer and former radical ally Elijah Dixon. It may have been this episode which prompted

him to accept the offer of a post in the Inland Revenue through the patronage of the Liberal Sir John Wood. (14)

In 1851, then, Bamford left his native Lancashire to work as a clerk in the once-hated tax-gathering machine, writing a heartfelt poem 'Farewell to My Cottage'. The move to London was not a success. Bamford was shifted from office to office as the Inland Revenue reorganised itself, finishing up at Somerset House cataloguing "a huge mass of old foisty, rotting, stinking books and papers". (15) The hours of work and his advancing age left him no time to visit the British Museum Reading Room to write his further history and memoir of Lancashire. He did however manage an extension of his autobiography into the 1820s, in the form of a hostile polemical memoir of his fellow-reformer Amos Ogden (1853). He also contributed three fictional sketches of the 1853-4 Preston cotton lockout to *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, a moralising fictional intervention which preceded those of Dickens in *Household Words* and *Hard Times* and Gaskell in *North and South*. (16). He was the occasional guest of Thomas Carlyle at his home in Chelsea and the drinking companion of the Northumberland poet Robert Story, a fellow clerk at Somerset House, but he never felt at home in London and revisited Lancashire from time to time. At the end of seven years he resigned his post and in May 1858 returned to live in humble Moston, on the opposite side of Boggart Hole Clough from his former cottage at Blackley, narrowly surviving a serious train crash on the way.

Now aged 70, Bamford sought once more to make a living as a writer and lecturer. In this he was assisted by the revival of the liberal reform movement in 1859-61 which adopted him as something of a respectable working-class figurehead. Dinners were held in his honour and he was befriended by Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, providing reminiscences and gathering historical material about the 1826 powerloom riots for Kay-Shuttleworth's novel *Scarsdale* (1862). (17) His public appearances however brought only mixed results and he fixed his hopes on obtaining a government pension for himself by way of compensation for the imprisonment he had suffered for the cause of reform in his youth. He was bitter at his failure to obtain more than a £50 one-off grant, and his prickliness again alienated potential patrons, but the death of his wife Mima in 1862 prompted a final testimonial which was this time used to provide him with a pension. During the years 1858-62 he kept a diary, filled with letters and cuttings. He also gave up his aim of writing further histories and memoirs, burning other "old and useless letters and papers", although the final edition of his poetry, *Homely Rhymes* (1864) included some further reminiscence. (18) He lived on peacefully, visited by friends, admirers and local children, until his death in February 1872. (19)

It would be easy to see Bamford's political life in terms of a familiar kind of age-related slide from radicalism to conservatism, fuelled by his own somewhat cantankerous personality. After his release from gaol in 1821 his resentments were increasingly expressed in personal rather than political terms, directed as often as not against his fellow-reformers, a tendency that reached its nadir in his unhappy term as a constable of Middleton in 1832-3. As he lost confidence in the immediate fitness of his class for the franchise, his belief in manhood suffrage became more a declaration of faith in educational progress than an immediate political demand: "the people themselves wanted reforming" was how he put it. (20) In his autobiography he suppressed mention of some of his insurrectionary associations and activities, and bid instead for recognition of his status as a pioneering working-class moderate and anti-corn law campaigner. If towards the end of his life his status as an honest, stalwart radical was largely unchallenged, it was partly because he had outlived and outwritten most of his critics. There will always be evidence for those who see

him as a renegade. Seen in a wider context, however, Bamford's consistency of principle is more apparent and his stature rises. (21)

From the time of his imprisonment, if not before, Bamford placed family and social values over short-term political targets; Victorian values came out to meet him, rather than vice versa. He understood from bitter experience the vulnerability of the radical movement to espionage and the disastrous human consequences of demagoguery, betrayal, and imprisonment. Peterloo shook him to the core, for the most peaceful of mass protests had been met with the most savage of responses, but by the same token he was able to recognise liberalisation when he saw it. The tendency of modern scholarship has been to downplay the significance of Chartist membership and class rhetoric as litmus tests of radicalism, and to recognise the importance of community, gender and culture; on all these counts, Bamford scores. While experience brought him to reject annual parliaments and payment for MPs, he never deviated from the long-term goal of universal manhood suffrage. In a political landscape which had changed almost completely over his long lifetime he stood by the old radical demands of cheap government and no bread tax. The Bamford who later in life insisted on toasting the whole royal family and not just the monarch was the same Bamford who had proclaimed the rights of the King's abandoned wife forty years before. Acutely class-conscious in his everyday life, he rejected the political language of class and remained at bottom an old-style radical patriot.

Bamford's well-known autobiography remains one of the founding documents of English radical history, and a literary classic. While he is occasionally disingenuous, making occasional strategic omissions, time and again the sources bear out his account. Other nineteenth-century working-class autobiographers such as William Lovett typically describe the alienation of the self-educated working man from the unreformed society of his youth. Bamford celebrated his community background, confessing to a dissolute youth and offering in *Early Days* a rich insider's account of the customs and culture of the weaving districts in the early industrial revolution. In *Passages in the Life of a Radical* Bamford (like the young Dickens) regularly pauses in his political narrative to relate anecdotes and ghost stories. His journalism and lectures tended to be didactic and moralising, although on the right topic he could also write with eloquence and power. His poetry has been less highly regarded, partly because its context has been lost: much of it was written to be sung rather than read, or had a topical political purpose, depended on local familiarity, or used dialect. Bamford's "Ode to a plotting parson" curses Hay, the Peterloo magistrate, with tremendous effect:

And here, like a good loyal priest shalt thou reign,
The cause of thy patrons with zeal to maintain;
And the poor, and the hungry, shall faint at thy word,
As thou doomst them to hell in the name of the Lord. (22)

"The Bard's Reformation" dwells lovingly on the pleasures behind the alehouse door as it closes for the last time, while Bamford's verses in ironic celebration of his quack doctor friend Healey have a robust vulgarity worthy of Tim Bobbin himself. Above all, his rough dialect elegy on "Tim Bobbin's grave" powerfully unites the spirits of two poets from a common soil in a timeless communion of brown ale. His 'Song of the Slaughter', written from Lincoln gaol to commemorate the first anniversary of Peterloo in 1820, was sung again at the 16 August 2015 commemoration on the site of the original rally.

As a working man seeking to make a living as a writer, Bamford encountered suspicion from his peers and a mixture of prejudice and condescension from his social superiors. The awkwardness stems in part from his attempt to speak simultaneously to both working-class and middle-class audiences, and to transmit the better values of each to the other, a near-impossible task for which he believed himself well-fitted. “God has...led me to dwell amongst this people, one of them, and still apart” he wrote in the preface to *Walks in South Lancashire*. (23) In a period when so many working-class writers succumbed to mental turmoil, alcoholism, and despair, Bamford’s rugged survival was exceptional. Into his seventies he remained strong, clear-eyed, upright and direct. He ripened rather than mellowed. On his death was the most celebrated of all English radicals. His funeral was attended by thousands. The procession, five-abreast, sombrely re-enacted in reverse the march to Manchester which Bamford led over half a century before. There could have been no finer tribute to the hero of Peterloo.

Notes.

- (1). National Archives, Home Office Disturbances Papers, HO42/157 fol. 182.
- (2). *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Pamphlet*, 22 Feb. 1817.
- (3). R. Poole, ‘Samuel Bamford: the lost years. Part 1: the 1820s’, *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 104 (2008), 93-117.
- (4). Samuel Bamford, *Homely Rhymes* (1864), Introduction.
- (5). John Harland scrapbooks (Manchester Central Library); Bamford, *Walks in South Lancashire* Part IV (1851) (Rochdale Local Studies).
- (6). Bamford to John Harland, 13 November 1840 (Manchester Central Library).
- (7). *A Glossary of some Words and Phrases in use amongst the Rural Population of South Lancashire. Noted Down By Samuel Bamford, 1843*, John Rylands Library, English MS. 969. The copy is Bamford’s own, with ms. additions for the 1854 second edition of *Dialect of South Lancashire*. It was donated in 1944 by one G. Whittall esq. of Reddish; it would be interesting to know more about Mr Whittall.
- (8). J. H. Nodal, “The Dialect and Archaisms of Lancashire; being the first report of the glossary committee of the Manchester Literary Club” (Manchester 1873), 18-19.
- (9). George Milner, ‘The Dialect of Lancashire considered as a vehicle for poetry’, *Manchester Literary Club Transactions*, 1874-5; Rosalind Slater, ‘The Novelist’s Use of Dialect’, *Gaskell Society Journal* vol. 8 (1994); William Gaskell, *Two Lectures on Lancashire Dialect* (Manchester, 1854).
- (10). Nodal, “Dialect and Archaisms of Lancashire”; George Milner & J. H. Nodal, *A Glossary of the Lancashire Dialect* (Manchester, 1875), introduction; J.C. Lockhart, “Sam Bamford”, in *Odds and Ends* xii (Manchester: St Paul’s Mutual Improvement Society, 1866), pp. 132-44 (MCL archives).
- (11). *The Diaries of Samuel Bamford* ed. M. Hewitt & R. Poole (2000), Introduction.
- (12). R. Poole, “‘A poor man I know’: Samuel Bamford and the making of *Mary Barton*”, *Gaskell Journal* 22 (2008) 96-115.
- (13). *Manchester Courier*, 6 May 1848; *Manchester Guardian*, 24 May 1848, 18 January 1851.
- (14). Bamford, *Dialect of South Lancashire* (Manchester, 1850); Anon, *The Ghost of Tim Bobbin* (Manchester, 1851).
- (15). Bamford diary, 11 March 1858.

- (16). Bamford, *Some Account of the Late Amos Ogden of Middleton* (1853); 'A Scene in North Lancashire', *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* 28 January, 11 February and 25 March 1854.
- (17). R. Poole, 'James Kay-Shuttleworth and Samuel Bamford: politics, culture and identity in 19th-century Lancashire', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 106 (2010), 46-72.
- (18). Bamford diary, 18 April 1861.
- (19). James Dronsfield, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Bamford* (1872)
- (20). Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* vol. I ch. 25.
- (21). Catherine Hall, "The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-class Culture in Nineteenth-century England", in H.J. Kaye & Keith McClelland, eds, *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (1990); Martin Hewitt, "Radicalism and the Victorian Working Class: the Case of Samuel Bamford", *Historical Journal*, 34.4 (1991), 873-892; Morris Garratt, *Samuel Bamford: Portrait of a Radical* (1992).
- (22). *Manchester Observer*, 26 Feb. 1820.
- (23). Bamford, *Walks in South Lancashire* (1844; reprinted 1974 ed. J. D. Marshall).