

Richard Carlile

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Richard Carlile was born on 9th December 1790 in Ashburton, Devon. His father deserted the family and the family depended on the profits of the small shop. Richard received six years free education from the local school and learnt to read and write.

At the age of twelve Richard left school and was apprenticed as a tinplater in Plymouth.

In 1813 Richard married and soon afterwards the couple moved to London. Over the next few years Jane Carlile gave birth to five children, three of whom survived. Richard found work as a tinsmith, but in the winter of 1816 Carlile had his hours reduced by his employer. Short-time work created serious economic problems for the Carlile family. Carlile began attending political meetings and heard radical speakers like Henry Hunt complain about a parliamentary system that only allowed three men in every hundred to vote. Carlile remembered the vicar of Ashburton condemning Tom Paine as an evil man for advocating parliamentary reform, which roused the people to burn his effigy at the stake.

Carlile decided to try and earn a living by selling the writings of Tom Paine in London. In 1817 he rented a shop in Fleet Street and became a publisher. He started by dividing "The Rights of Man" into sections to sell as small pamphlets.

Carlile also began a radical newspaper called "The Republican". It reported political meetings, and extracts from books and poems by supporters of the reform movement such as Shelley and Byron. Carlile's newspaper was very popular and soon he was making £50 a week profit.

On 16th August 1819, Richard Carlile was asked to join Henry Hunt on the platform at a meeting on parliamentary reform at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester. The local magistrates ordered the yeomanry (part-time cavalry) to break up the meeting. Eleven people were killed when they charged. This event became known as the Peterloo Massacre. The next edition described how the military had charged the crowd, but also criticised the government for its role in the incident.

The laws on seditious libel prohibited publications which might encourage people to hate the government. The authorities also disapproved of Carlile publishing Tom Paine's Age of Reason, which was extremely critical of the Church of England.

In October 1819, Carlile was found guilty of blasphemy and seditious libel and was sentenced to three years in Dorchester Gaol. His Fleet

Street offices were raided and his stock confiscated. Carlile was determined not to be silenced. While he was in prison, he continued to write material for the paper, which was now being published by his wife. Circulation had increased dramatically as a result of the publicity of the trial, and was now outselling pro-government newspapers such as The Times.

In December 1819 the government took further action by imposing a 4d. tax on cheap newspapers and stipulating that they could not be sold for less than 7d. As most working people were earning less than 10 shillings a week, this severely

reduced the number of people who could afford to buy radical newspapers.

The government also continued its policy of prosecuting those involved in publishing radical newspapers. In 1821 Jane Carlile was sentenced to two years imprisonment in Dorchester for seditious libel; their daughter Hypatia was born in the prison. Jane was replaced by Richard Carlile's sister, Mary Carlile, but she was also in prison six months later. During the next few months, over 150 men and women were sent to prison for selling "The Republican"

After leaving prison in 1825 Carlile returned to publishing newspapers. He was now a strong supporter of women's rights. His articles suggested that women should have the right to vote and be elected to Parliament. In 1826 he also published Every Woman's Book, a book that advocated birth control and the sexual emancipation of women.

In 1830 Carlile was back in prison for writing an article in support of agricultural labourers campaigning against wage cuts. When Carlile left prison two years later, he was deeply in debt and lived in extreme poverty. He died in 1843; a packed funeral recognised the important role that he had played in achieving a free press.



Richard Carlile (left); his offices at 62 Fleet Street with a tableau protesting against church tithes (right)

Note bishop with devil in left first floor window.



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Additional notes

Source: Website: Spartacus Educational website - <https://spartacus-educational.com/PRcarlile.htm>

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Additional notes: Many of Carlile's books and pamphlets are held by the British Library.