

THE
STORY
OF

WILLIAM



CUFFEY

BLACK CHARTIST

introduction

William Cuffay, a black tailor who lived in London, was one of the leaders and martyrs of the Chartist movement, the first mass political movement of the British working class. His grandfather was an African, sold into slavery on the island of St Kitts, where his father was born a slave. Cuffay was made to suffer for his political beliefs and activities. In 1848, Europe's year of revolutions, he was put on trial for levying war against Queen Victoria. At the age of 61 he was transported for life to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), where, after being pardoned in 1856, he spent the rest of his days active in radical causes.

'a very delicate constitution'

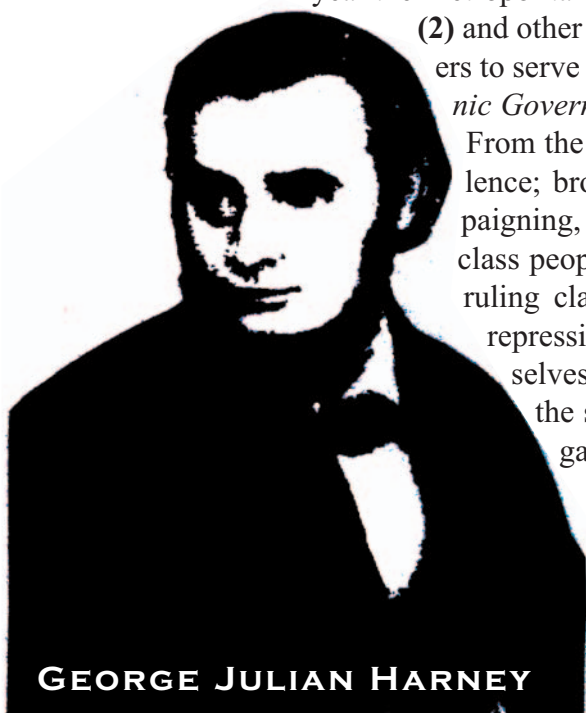
William Cuffay was born in Chatham in 1788. Soon after coming to Britain his father, who had evidently been freed, found work as a cook on a warship. William was brought up in Chatham with his mother and his sister Juliana. As a boy, though *'of a very delicate constitution'* - his spine and shin bones were deformed - he *'took a great delight in all manly exercises'*. He became a journeyman tailor in his late teens and stayed in that trade all his life. He married three times but left no children.

Though he initially disapproved of the Owenite Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, formed in 1834 on the initiative of the London tailors, and was nearly the last to join the appropriate affiliated lodge, Cuffay came out on strike with his fellow-members in the Tailors' Strike of 1834 (1). As a result he was sacked from a job he had held for many years, and found it very hard to get work afterwards. That was what took him into politics. In 1839 he joined the great movement in support of the People's Charter drawn up by the cabinet-maker William Lovett with the help of Francis Place, demanding universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, vote by secret ballot, payment of MPs, abolition of property qualifications for MPs, and equal electoral districts. It was a year when *'magistrates trembled and peaceful citizens felt that they were living on a social volcano'* - a year when one noble general wrote to his brother *'It looks as if the falling of an empire was beginning.'* Before long Cuffay, the neat, mild-mannered black tailor, 4ft 11in. tall, had emerged as one of the dozen or so most prominent leaders of the Chartist movement in London. Unlike the movement's more celebrated national leaders, these were artisans, for Chartism in the capital was *'a sustained movement which produced its own leaders, stuck to its traditional radicalism yet worked out its own class attitudes'*. In the autumn of 1839 Cuffay was helping to set up the Metropolitan Tailors' Charter Association - about 80 joined on the first night - and in 1841 the Westminster Chartists sent him to represent them on the Metropolitan Delegate Council. In February 1842 Cuffay chaired a 'Great Public Meeting of the Tailors', at which a national petition to the Commons was adopted. Later the same year the Metropolitan Delegate Council responded to the arrest of George Julian Harney (2) and other national leaders by appointing Cuffay (as president) and three others to serve as an interim executive *'to supply the place of those whom a tyrannic Government has pounced upon'*.

From the beginning, the Chartists had been divided over the question of violence; broadly speaking, the so-called 'Moral Force' wing believed campaigning, pressure & petitions could win political representation for working class people, and the 'Physical Force' Chartists felt the government and the ruling classes would not give in to moral pressure, and would use such repressive measures that the workers would have to seize power themselves by force of arms. While the latter group were proved right about the state's response, their attempts to organise an uprising were disorganised and farcical.

'the Black man and his Party'

For all his mildness of manner, Cuffay was a left-wing, militant Chartist from the beginning. He was in favour of heckling at meet-



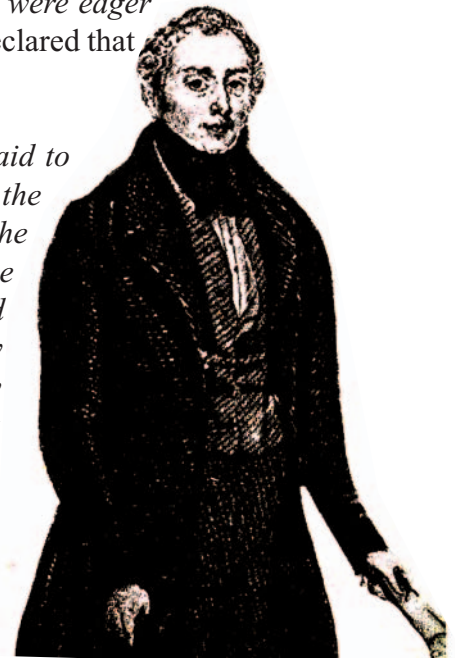
GEORGE JULIAN HARNEY

ings of the middle-class Complete Suffrage Movement and Anti-Corn Law League. His militancy earned him recognition in the press of the ruling class. *Punch* lampooned him savagely and *The Times* referred to London's Chartists as '*the Black man and his Party*'; (3) as a direct result of this press campaign his wife Mary Ann was sacked from her job as charwoman. In 1844 Cuffay was a member of the Masters and Servants Bill Demonstration Committee, opposing a measure which would have given magistrates power to imprison a neglectful worker for two months merely on his master's oath. The radical MP Thomas Slingsby Dunscombe was parliamentary opponent of what he called "*one of the most us, oppressive, arbitrary, iniquitous, and tyrannical attempts the working classes that had ever been made*" and Cuffay was the tailors' delegate at meetings to arrange a soiree for Dunscombe. A strong supporter of Feargus O'Connor's Chartist land scheme - the idea was to take the unemployed out of the slums and give each family two acres of good arable land - Cuffay moved at the Chartists' 1845 National convention "*that the Conference now draw up a plan to enable the people to purchase land and place the surplus labourers who subscribe thereto on such land.*" In 1846 he was one of London's three delegates to the land conference, and he and another London tailor, James Knight, were appointed auditors to the National Land Company which soon had 600 branches all over the country. (4) In the year Cuffay served as one of the National Anti-Militia Association's ten directors and was a member of the Democratic Committee for Poland's Regeneration, of which Ernest Jones (5), friend of Marx and Engels, was president. In 1847 he was on the Central Registration and Election Committee, and in 1848 he was on the management committee for a Metropolitan Democratic Hall.

'the year of decision'

For Cuffay, as for so many other working people in western Europe, 1848 was '*the year of decision*'. He was one of the three London delegates to the Chartists' national convention that met in the April. From the start of the proceedings he made his left-wing position plain. Derby had sent as delegate a sensational journalist and novelist called George Reynolds (he gave his name to the radical magazine that eventually became *Reynolds News*) and Cuffay challenged the middle-class newcomer, demanding to know if he really was a Chartist. Cuffay also at first opposed the granting of credentials to Charles MacCarthy of the Irish Democratic Federation, but the dispute was settled, and MacCarthy admitted, by a sub-committee of which Cuffay was a member. The convention's main task was to prepare a mass meeting on Kennington Common and a procession that was to accompany the Chartist petition, bearing almost two million signatures, to the Commons. When Reynolds, moved an amendment declaring '*That in the event of the rejection of the Petition, the Convention should declare its sitting permanent, and should declare the Charter the law of the land*', Cuffay said he was opposed to a body declaring itself permanent that represented only a fraction of the people: he was elected by only 2,000 out of the two million inhabitants of London, He moved that the convention should confine itself to presenting the petition, and that a national assembly be called - "*then come what might, it should declare its sittings permanent and go on, come weal or come woe.*" At length the idea of a national assembly was accepted. In a later debate Cuffay told his fellow delegates that "*the men of London were up to the mark, and were eager for the fray*". In a speech sharply critical of the national leadership, he declared that the Irish patriots, ('confederates'):

"were also in an advanced state of preparation, and if a spark were laid to the train in Ireland, they would not wait for Chartists. A deputation from the two bodies met together on Monday night last, and the result was, that the confederates were ready to march in procession with them under the green flag of Erin (cheers). The trades were also coming out, and amongst the rest the tailors, to which he belonged (a laugh). Well, if they did not get what they wanted before a fortnight, he, for one, was ready to fall; and if the petition was rejected with scorn, he would move at once to form a rifle club (cheers) ... He did think that their leader Feargus O'Connor was not quite up to the mark, and he suspected one or two more of the executive council strongly, and if he found that his suspicions were correct, he would move to have them turned out of office (laughter and cheers). The country had no right to despair of the



FEARGUS O'CONNOR

men of London ... There were only 5,000 soldiers in London.”

When a moderate speech was made, Cuffay burst out: “*This clapping of hands is all very fine, but will you fight for it?*” There were cries of 'Yes, yes' and cheers. “*the time is now come for work*”

Appointed chairman of the committee for managing the procession, Cuffay was responsible for making sure that “*everything... necessary for conducting an immense procession with order and regularity had been adopted*”, and suggested that stewards wear tricolour sashes and rosettes. Things had now come to a crisis, he said, and they must be prepared to act with coolness and determination. It was clear that the executive had shrunk from their responsibility. They did not show the spirit they ought. He no longer had any confidence in them, and he hoped the convention would be prepared to take the responsibility out of their hands and lead the people themselves.



A Chartist march in London, 1842.

At the final meeting, on the morning of the demonstration, Cuffay opposed endless debate. “*The time is now come for work,*” he insisted. An observer recorded that, as the convention broke up and delegates took their places on the vehicles, carrying the petition, Cuffay ‘*appeared perfectly happy and elated*’ for the first time since the proceedings opened.

The commissioner of police had declared that the proposed procession was illegal. The queen had been packed off to the Isle of Wight for her safety, and the royal carriages and horses and

other valuables had been removed from the palace. Tens of thousands of lawyers, shopkeepers, and government clerks had been enrolled as special constables. All government buildings were prepared for attack: at the Foreign Office, the ground-floor windows were blocked with bound volumes of *The Times*, thought to be thick enough to stop bullets, and the clerks were issued with brand-new muskets and ball cartridges... The British Museum was provided with 50 muskets and 100 cutlasses... The Bank of England was protected with sandbags... Along the Embankment, 7,000 soldiers were distributed at strategic points. Heavy gun batteries were brought up from Woolwich. The bridges were sealed off and guarded by over 4,000 police. O'Connor was interviewed by the Commissioner of police - who said afterwards that he had never seen a man so frightened - and decided to call off the procession.(6)

'the very chief of the conspiracy'

When the crowd at Kennington Common heard this, many of them were very angry. There were shouts that the petition should have been carried forward until actively opposed by the troops then withdrawn altogether on the ground that such opposition was unlawful. One of the protesters was Cuffay, who spoke in strong language against the dispersal of the meeting, and contended that it would be time enough to evince their fear of the military when they met them face to face! He believed the whole Convention were a set of cowardly humbugs, and he would have nothing more to do with them. He then left the van, and got among the crowd, where he said that O'Connor must have known all this before, and that he ought to have informed them of it, so that they might have conveyed the petition at once to the House of Commons, without crossing the bridges. They had been completely caught in a trap.

Cuffay was elected as one of the commissioners to campaign for the Charter after its rejection by Parliament... Most of our scanty information about his activities comes from police spies, one of whom was actually a member of the seven-strong 'Ulterior Committee' that was planning an uprising in London. Cuffay was certainly a late, and almost certainly a reluctant, member of this body. On 16 August 1848, 11 'luminaries', allegedly plot-

THE GREAT CHARTIST MEETING ON KENNINGTON COMMON April 10th 1848



ting to fire certain buildings as a signal for the rising, were arrested at a Bloomsbury tavern, the Orange Tree, near Red Lion Square. Cuffay was arrested later at his lodgings. He had not been a delegate to the committee for more than 12 days, and had not been elected secretary until 13 August. So he was certainly not, as *The Times* called him, *'the very chief of the conspiracy'*. Indeed it is claimed that, before the police swooped, he had realised that the plan was premature and hopeless but, from solidarity, had refused to back out. He could have gone underground, but he chose not to: he *"refused to fly, lest it should be said that he abandoned his associates in the hour of peril."* (7)

"Cuffey," sneered The Times, "is half a "nigger". Some of the others are Irishmen. We doubt if there are half-a-dozen Englishmen in the whole lot." Cuffay's bearing in court soon wiped the smirk off the face of *The Times*. He pleaded not guilty in a loud voice and objected to being tried by a middle-class jury. *"I demand trial by my peers,"* he said, *"according to the principles of Magna Charta."* Then the prospective jurors were challenged, and one, asked if he had ever expressed an opinion as to Cuffay's guilt or innocence, or what ought to be the result of the trial, replied: *"Yes, I have expressed an opinion that they ought ought to be hanged."* He was told to retire, *"and after considerable delay a jury was at length formed."* Though counsel for the boot cleaver Thomas Fay and the bootmaker William Lacey - two Chartists who stood in the dock with Cuffay - said his clients were satisfied, Cuffay made it clear that he himself was not. *"I wish it to be understood,"* he exclaimed, *"that I do object, to this jury. They are not my equals - I am only a journeyman mechanic."*

'a severe sentence, but a most just one'

Cuffay's conviction for levying war on the queen was obtained through the evidence of two police spies. One, Thomas Powell, widely known as 'Lying Tom', said in cross-examination that he had told the Chartists how to

make grenades: *"I told them that gunpowder must be put into an ink-bottle with an explosive cap, and I dare say I did say that it would be a capital thing to throw among the police if it had some nails in it."* The other spy, George Davis (he wasn't innocent ok?), a second-hand book and furniture dealer from Greenwich and a member of the Chartist 'Wat Tyler Brigade' there, told how he had attended its meetings and 'reported within two hours all that had occurred at each meeting to the inspector of police. For the past few weeks the people of Greenwich had suspected him of being a spy, and he had lost his trade as a result (Shame!). The Metropolitan Police had paid Powell £1 per week, Davis a lump sum of £150, and had also bought information from at least two other Chartists.

In his defiant final speech, Cuffay denied the court's right to sentence him. He had not been tried by his equals, and the press had tried to smother him with ridicule. He asked neither pity nor mercy, he had expected to be convicted. He pitied the attorney-general - who ought to be called the spymaster-general - for using such base characters to get him convicted. The government could only exist with the support of a regular organised system of police espionage. Cuffay declared his total innocence of the charge: his locality never sent any delegates, and he had nothing to do with the 'luminaries'. He was not anxious for martyrdom, but he felt that he could bear any punishment proudly, even to the scaffold. He was proud to be among the first victims of the Act of Parliament making the new political crime of 'felony' punishable by transportation. Every proposal that was likely to benefit the working classes had been thrown out or set aside in Parliament, but a measure to restrain their liberties had been passed in a few hours.

Cuffay and his two comrades were sentenced to transportation *"for the term of your natural lives"*. *'A severe sentence, but a most just one,'* commented *The Times*. The radical press praised the tailor's steadfastness and courage. The *Northern Star*, most influential of Chartist newspapers, said:

'The conduct of Cuffay throughout his trial was that of a man. A somewhat singular appearance, certain eccentricities of manner, and a habit of unregulated speech, afforded an opportunity to the 'suckmug' reporters, unprincipled editors, and buffoons of the press to make him the subject of their ridicule. The 'fast men' of the press ... did their best to smother their victim beneath the weight of their heavy wit ... In a great measure, Cuffay owes his destruction to the Press gang. But his manly and admirable conduct on his trial affords his enemies no opportunity either to sneer at or abuse him ... His protest from first to last against the mockery of being tried by a Jury animated by class resentments and party-hatred, showed him to be a much better respecter of 'the constitution' than either the Attorney-General or the judges on the bench. Cuffay's last words should be treasured up by the people.'

'banished by a government that feared him'

The author of *'A word in defence of Cuffey'* in the *Reasoner* had this to say:

'When hundreds of working men elected this man to audit the accounts of their benefit society, they did so in the full belief of his trustworthiness, and he never gave them reason to repent of their choice. Cuffay's sobriety and ever active spirit marked him for a very useful man; he cheerfully fulfilled the arduous duties devolved upon him.'

And the *Reasoner* added: *'He was a clever, industrious, honest, sober and frugal man.'* A profile of Cuffay in *Reynold's*



A Physical Force Chartist arming for the fight, as satirised in *Punch*.



Political Instructor said he was

'loved by his own order, who knew him and appreciated his virtues, ridiculed and denounced by a press that knew him not, and had no sympathy with his class, and banished by a government that feared him... Whilst integrity in the midst of poverty, whilst honour in the midst of temptation are admired and venerated, so long will the name of William Cuffay, a scion of Affric's oppressed race, be preserved from oblivion.'

After a voyage lasting 103 days on the prison ship *Adelaide*, Cuffay landed in Tasmania in November 1849. He was

Convicts under guard in Van Diemen's land (Tasmania), 1831.

permitted to work at his trade for wages -which he did until the last year of his life - and after much delay his wife was allowed to join him in April 1853. Cuffay was unique among veteran Chartists in exile in that he continued his radical activities after his free pardon on 19 May 1856. In particular, he was active in the successful agitation for the amendment of the colony's Masters and Servants Act. He was described as *'a fluent and an effective speaker'*, who was *'always popular with the working classes'* and who *'took a prominent part in election matters, and went instrongly for the individual rights of working men.'* At one of his last public appearances he called his working-class audience 'Fellow Slaves' and told them: *"I'm old, I'm poor. I'm out of work, I'm in debt, and therefore I have cause to complain."*

In October 1869 Cuffay was admitted to Tasmania's workhouse, the Brickfields invalid depot, in whose sick ward he died in July 1870, aged 82. The workhouse superintendent described him as *'a quiet man, and an inveterate reader. His grave was specially marked 'in case friendly sympathisers should hereafter desire to place a memorial on the spot.'*

Cuffay makes fleeting appearances in three mid-nineteenth-century works of literature. Thackeray, in *The Three Christmas Waits* (1848), poked fun at him as *'the bold Cuffee'* and a *'pore old blackymore rogue'*. A character in Charles Kingsley's novel *Alton Locke, tailor and poet* (1850) praises Cuffay's *'earnestness'*; in the same novel the police spy Powell is described as a *'shameless wretch'* and Cuffay is patronisingly called *'the honestest, if not the wisest speaker'* at Kennington Common. (8)

A fuller, more faithful portrait was painted by Cuffay's friend admirer, and fellow-Chartist Thomas Martin Wheeler, whose semi-autobiographical *Sunshine and Shadow* was serialised in the *Northern Star* in 1849. Wheeler recalled how, at a Chartist meeting in the early 1840s, he first

'gazed with unfeigned admiration upon the high intellectual forehead and animated features of this diminutive Son of Africa's despised and injured race. Though the son of a West Indian and the grandson of an African slave, he spoke the English tongue pure and grammatical, and with a degree of ease and facility which would shame many who boast of the purity of their Saxon or Norman descent. Possessed of attainments superior to the majority of working men, he had filled, with honour, the highest offices of his trade society... In the hour of danger no man could be more depended on than William Cuffay - a strict disciplinarian, and a lover of order - he was firm in the discharge of



Cuffay in his cell, by William Dowling

his duty, even to obstinacy; yet in his social circle no man was more polite, good-humoured, and affable, which caused his company to be much admired and earnestly sought for - honoured and respected by all who knew him ... Yes, Cuffay, should these lines ever meet thine eyes in thy far-distant home, yes, my friend, though thou hast fallen - thou hast fallen with the great and noble of the earth ... Faint not, mine old companion, the darkness of the present time will but render more intense the glowing light of the future. '

notes

1. 1834 Tailors strike: the London tailors had a long tradition of organisation and struggle. The 'Knights of the Needle' had an organisation that could be fairly described as *'all but a military system'*. But it was weak due to its division into two classes, called Flints and Dungs - *"the Flints have upwards of thirty houses of call, and the Dungs about nine or ten; the Flints work by day, the Dungs by day or piece. Great animosity formerly existed between them, the Dungs generally working for less wages, but of late years there has not been much difference in the wages... and at some of the latest strikes both parties have usually made common cause."* (Francis Place)

In 1824 Place estimated a proportion of one 'Dung' to three 'Flints'; but the 'Dungs' work a great many hours, and their families assist them.' The upsurge in tailors union activity, after the repeal of the Combination Acts, led to the founding of a Grand National Union of Tailors in Nov 1832. It was a general union, containing skilled & unskilled tailors and tailoresses. It affiliated to Robert Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trade Union.

By the early 1830s the tide of the cheap and ready-made trade could be held back no longer. In 1834 the 'Knights' were finally degraded only after a tremendous conflict, when 20,000 were said to be on strike under the slogan of 'equalisation'. But the 1834 strike was unsuccessful, which led to the collapse of the Union and reductions in wages.

2. Harney was the son of a poor sailor from Deptford, a former radical newspaper seller for the radical Poor Man's Guardian, who became one of the leaders of the Physical Force party. He was jailed in 1840, after calling for Chartists to arm, when riots broke out in Birmingham. Later he worked with Marx and Engels.

For a good brief account of Harney's life, see 'Deptford's Red Republican' by Terry Liddle, available from the Friends of George Julian Harney, 83 Sowerby Close, Eltham, London SE9 6EZ.

3. William Cuffay was by no means the only black radical who played an active part in the London Chartist movement. Two of the leaders of a riotous demonstration in Camberwell on 13 March 1848 were 'men of colour': David Anthony Duffy (or Duffey), a 21-year-old out-of-work seaman, described as 'a determined looking and powerful fellow' and known to the police as a beggar in the Mint, where he was said to go without shirt, shoe, or stocking'; and another seaman, an 'active fellow' called Benjamin Prophitt (or Prophet), known as 'Black Ben', aged 29. After the March riot in Camberwell, Duffy was transported for seven years, Prophitt for fourteen.

4. The Chartist Land scheme: Feargus O' Connor was undoubtedly the most influential Chartist leader in the 1840s. His grand scheme to settle poor families on the land as peasant smallholders. After some years of propaganda the Chartist Co-operative Land Society (later the National Land Company) was founded in 1845. O'Connor's vigorous propaganda work collected a mass of subscribers and donations, and in 1846 "O'Connorville" was founded at Heronsgate, near Chorleywood, northwest of London. Other estates were bought and let out in smallholding to subscribers picked by ballot. But by the end of 1847, the financial difficulties facing the scheme and the incompetence of its directors, became obvious. In 1848 a House of Commons Committee reported that the Company was illegal, its finances in a state of chaos, and its promises impossible to fulfill. The Company was eventually wound up with O'Connor out of pocket. It was in many ways a futile sidetracking from the Chartists main political struggle, and heavily embittered many Chartists against O'Connor, who had already come under suspicion as a vacillating demagogue, who bottled it when the chips were down.

O'Connorville at Heronsgate collapsed a few years later, but interestingly a beer shop from those times survives as a very fine pub with the Chartist-inspired name of the 'Land of Liberty, Peace and Plenty', worth visiting for good beer, fine food, and you can read a copy of *Heronsgate: Freedom Happiness and Contentment*, by local historian Ian Foster, the fine book about O'Connorville and the subsequent history of the area. (Published by Manticore Europe Ltd, Silver Birches, Heronsgate, Rickmansworth, WD3 5DN)

5. Ernest Jones was one of the leaders of Chartism in its later phase, he attempted to move Chartism towards socialism. He later fell out with George Julian Harney and Marx, coming to dominate Chartism in the 1850s, but was powerless to stop the movement's decline.

6. O'Connor and other Chartist leaders certainly called off the procession, afraid of the power ranged against them, (and possibly afraid of the true power of the working class?); and also aware that the numbers of demonstrators was much less than expected. But there was some fighting in Blackfriars and Southwark, as large crowds of Chartists tried to fight their way to Parliament.

7. In 1848, some Chartists clearly *were* planning an uprising or revolution, at a time when barricades were going up in much of Europe. Heavy fighting took place in London between Chartists and cops in Camberwell (March), Clerkenwell (May), Bethnal Green (June), but government spies had totally infiltrated the plotting. On 16 August 18 members of the 'luminaries' or 'Ulterior Committee' were busted at the Orange Tree Tavern, Red Lion Passage, Holborn, and at the Angel tavern, Southwark, and elsewhere. At the Orange Tree, a regular Chartist meeting point, a meeting was raided; cops found "*a number of loaded pistols, pikes, daggers, spearheads, and swords, and some of the prisoners wore iron breast plates, while others had gun powder, shot and tow-balls.*"

Cuffay, Fay, W. Dowling, W. Lacey, William Ritchie were transported; 15 others were jailed for 18 months to 2 years.

8. Kingsley, author of *The Water Babies* and *Westward Ho!*, was of course not averse to a bit of racism himself. He wrote of the slaughter of Native Americans: "*One tribe exterminated...to save a whole continent. Sacrifice of human life? Prove that it is human life. It is beast life.*" And touring the West Indies he wrote of his dislike of black people "*especially the women*". The Irish he called "*human chimpanzees.*" He joined a committee to defend Governor Eyre of Jamaica when the latter massacred hundreds of black farmers putting down a rebellion, not only protesting possible charges but proposing Eyre be given a seat in the Lords; it was only through such men as the Governor that the English could fulfill their destiny to rule the "savage races" of the world. On this committee he was joined by such enlightened folk as Tennyson, Dickens, Carlyle; on the other hand a Committee including Darwin & John Stuart Mill demanded Eyre's prosecution and a working class meeting burnt the Governor in effigy.



reprinted from

'staying power:
the history of black people in Britain"
by Peter Fryer

republished with notes and
illustrations by Past Tense
October 2005

Past Tense
c/o 56a Info Shop,
56 Crampton St,
London, SE17.