



**Eliza Flower's and Harriet Martineau's *The Gathering of the Unions*:
From the radical salon to the monster meeting**

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Led by bands and banners, the unions “poured [...] in one wide unbroken stream” on to Newhall Hill to assemble for the Birmingham Political Union monster meeting of 7 May 1832, famously described by Harriet Martineau in *The History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace, 1816-1846* (Martineau 465). A bugle from the platform invoked silence and Thomas Attwood, leader of the Birmingham Political Union, began to speak. But when the Bromley Union was seen approaching in the distance, the “assembled brethren” (Martineau 465), at least 150,000 in number, interrupted the chairman to greet the tardy group with a powerful rendition of the *Union Hymn*, which was, as Martineau noted, “deserving of record from being then familiar to every child in the land” (Martineau 465). Martineau continued her vivid account of the spontaneous performance: “It never was so sung before, nor after; for now, a hundred thousand voices pealed it forth in music which has never died away in the hearts of those who heard it” (Martineau 465). Performances of the hymn feature in the many subsequent accounts of that meeting and those that followed during the Days of May. The song's association with the Reform Bill agitation was such that the lyrics were reproduced on commemorative “reformware.” With its various titles of *The Gathering of the Unions*, the *Union Hymn* or *God is Our Guide*, it assumed an enduring place in radical song tradition, becoming a staple in the Chartist song repertoire later in the 1830s and into the 1840s, and was subsequently taken up by the suffragettes and early twentieth-century socialist movements.

This article reassesses the generally accepted provenance of *The Gathering of the Unions*, and proposes that, although it is complicated by questions of anonymity and lack of attribution, the song is a product of a collaboration between two middle-class women: the composer Eliza Flower and Martineau, whose words evoked the scene above. *The Gathering of the Unions* is a result of a friendship developed within the elite social networks of Anti-Corn-Law agitator and Unitarian Minister William Johnson Fox's South Place Chapel, the middle-class radical salon, and—through Flower's and Martineau's involvement with Fox's *Monthly Repository*—the world of periodical print. Taken together, an account of the song and the two women who produced it provides a singular example—a case study—that offers another dimension to the diverse and multifaceted story of female political participation during the turbulent decades of the early nineteenth century.

The production of political song has been noted only in passing by scholars of women's involvement in nineteenth-century British politics, and has not yet received the sustained and detailed consideration that other forms of participation have (Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens* 70). Kathryn Gleadle has identified collaborations between women as an area in pressing need of investigation; this article directly responds to her call and in so doing it suggests that the composition and performance of song should be recognised as part of the repertoire of agitation used by women activists in nineteenth-century Britain, and that in the context of political agitation, song and singing can do things that other forms of cultural production cannot.

A close exploration of Flower and Martineau's *The Gathering of the Unions* as a particular instance of creative collaboration is in part to redress the neglect identified by Gleadle, but it shall also consider the song as both a product of, and producer of, different forms of sociability.

By tracing the genesis of the song and its subsequent and enduring place in radical culture, it becomes clear that different forms of sociability were at play in different contexts. These included female friendship and the sociabilities of what Gillian Russell has termed "mixed-sex domains" such as the radical salon (Russell, "Sociability" 184) and the Unitarian chapel. The act of singing the song at the monster meeting in Birmingham, however, produced a very different sociability, one that was demotic in nature and that generated a widely shared sense of good will and shared purpose among a huge crowd. As such the song and the singing of it not only resonates with notions of sociability as amiability and friendship, but also with an obsolete definition of sociability from 1593 found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "united into one body." Participatory singing was the mechanism by which 150,000 individuals on Newhall Hill came together to create a form of plebeian sociability on a massive scale.

It has long been recognised that musical performance, particularly participatory singing, is a form of affective communication that forges shared identities. Communal singing is one of Russell's "social rituals" and a clear reminder of her claim that sociability was intrinsically a "performative event" ("Sociability" 176). The "spatial turn," as it has been called, provides a useful frame for this discussion that brings together the concepts of sociability, affect and place. Both Fox's radical salon and Newhall Hill are what Susan Broomhill in her work on emotion and sociabilities has usefully described as "spaces for feeling" (Broomhill 5). For Broomhill, "sociabilities and socialities are inherently emotional" (Broomhill 2), and music, given its potential for direct and immediate affective power, is perhaps best equipped of the creative arts to engender sociabilities. The creation and performance of song help create what Broomhill terms "communities of emotion" and is an often overlooked but vital part of the affective practices of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British culture (Broomhill 1). Hence,

I argue that music, or more specifically song, is especially able to transfer across diverse venues and fundamentally different kinds of spaces, not only physical (from the radical salon to the massive outdoor political meeting) but also across gender and class. It could even transform into different materialities as part of the process of commemoration and memory making. This fine-grained case engages several broader historical and analytical contexts to do with women's participation in public political life and related scholarship on gender and separate spheres within a broader framework of sociability that takes into account also considerations of gender and class. This interrelated set of themes and attendant historical contexts hinge on determining the authorship of the song Martineau described so vividly.

The question of authorship

Despite its popularity, the provenance of *The Gathering of the Unions* is murky, and its authors have remained relatively unknown and unacknowledged. From the outset, printed sources attributed the song to Reverend Hugh Hutton, a Unitarian minister integrally involved in the 1832 agitation.¹ Other accounts connected it directly to the leadership of the Birmingham Political Union by attributing it to Thomas Attwood's son, George De Bosco Attwood. While it has been generally accepted that it was composed by Hutton, a recent source crucially points out that "Hutton himself *denied* this" and goes on to explain that Hutton "maintained it was composed by a group of gentlemen at Th. Attwood's house, the principal contributor being Attwood's son, Bosco" ("Decorated egg," emphasis added). The song was also to play an important role in the 1834 trial of the Tolpuddle Martyr, George Loveless. Loveless purportedly had stanzas of the song clutched in his hand when his sentence was read out, but, like Hutton, he later denied authorship. A recent history of the Tolpuddle Martyrs continues to attribute the song to Bosco Attwood (Gallop 90).

However, on the shelves of the British Library is a bound volume of the collected music of the Unitarian composer Eliza Flower that contains a musical score of *The Gathering of the Unions* (fig. 1). It appears alongside other reform songs by Flower including *The Barons Bold on Runnymede* and *The Gallant Grey*, all published by Charles Fox in 1832.

¹ See for example, "A Recollection of the Political Union," *Birmingham Daily Post*, 10 Sept. 1872.

The stanzas set to Flower's music are those commonly attributed to Hutton or Attwood. The song's connection to Harriet Martineau was uncovered only recently when Gleadle found a reference to it by Martineau's brother, James, who, when commenting on the popularity of Martineau's and Flower's reform songs, made particular note of one that was "sung by all the political unions" (*Borderline Citizens* 174). Gleadle had already explicitly identified Martineau as the author of the lyrics in the entry on Flower in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: "A reform anthem, written to words by Harriet Martineau, became a popular song with contemporary political reform unions."

The Gathering of the Unions then, was one of several collaborations between Flower as composer and Martineau as lyricist that were produced in the early 1830s. Others commemorated contemporary events of a similarly progressive nature such as a *Hymn for the Polish Exiles* and a hymn for the Bengali reformer Rammohun Roy who was associated with the South Place Chapel. The exhortative lyrics of *The Gathering of the Unions* draw upon popular radical tropes of liberty, justice and freedom in opposition to tyranny; canvas types of working-class labour; extol the radical work ethic; and balance an emotional call to God alongside one that elevates reason above conflict. The sacralising of freedom throughout creates a hymn-like quality:

Lo, we answer! see we come,
Quick at Freedom's holy call,
We come, we come, we come, we come,
To do the glorious work of all.
And hark! we raise from sea to sea,
The sacred watch-word "Liberty,"

God is our guide! From field, from wave,
From plough, from anvil, and from loom,
We come our country's rights to save,
And speak a tyrant faction's doom, –
And hark! we raise, from sea to sea,
The sacred watchword "Liberty."

God is our guide! No sword we draw –
We kindle not war's battle fires;
By union, justice, reason, law,
We claim the birthright of our sires; –
We raise the watchword "Liberty,"
We will, we will, we WILL be free!
(British Library, Music Collections H.1917, 4.)

Flower, Martineau and middle-class sociability

By all accounts Flower was beautiful, unconventional, and musically talented. Her musicality is still part of South Place Chapel's lore. The daughter of radical printer and editor, Benjamin

Flower, Eliza and her sister, Sarah Flower Adams, had an “erratic and original” upbringing overseen by their father (Kinzer 64). He was involved in progressive Unitarian circles that brought them into contact with Fox. Fox became a close family friend and on the death of their parents assumed guardianship of the two sisters. Eliza became the “composer of South Place,” and Sarah, a poet, wrote many of the hymns for their collection, notably *Nearer My God to Thee*. In 1835, Fox left his wife to set up house with Flower, a decision that caused a major public scandal and split the South Place congregation. Martineau, notably, severed contact with Flower because of this breach of social mores. This breakdown in the women’s relationship possibly helps to account for Martineau’s reluctance to claim any connection to *The Gathering of the Unions*.

Whereas Flower is one of what Richardson characterises as the “few, atypical, well-connected eccentrics” (Richardson 4), Martineau had a more prominent position in public life. As a successful writer and social commentator, Martineau also challenged many boundaries. Ironically, her family’s fall from fortune allowed her to have a professional career. She became a successful journalist, novelist and essayist and wrote on many of the important issues of the day including the Poor Laws, taxation and political economy, and came to be recognised as a pioneer of sociology. Gleadle reminds us that Martineau’s intellectual achievements gave her “singular standing” among political men (*Borderline Citizens* 71); not only did they commission work from her, but they also came to her for advice. As a rare exception, she was allowed into the House of Commons library, albeit only “in the early mornings” (*Borderline Citizens* 56).

Flower and Martineau moved across a set of overlapping social networks. Notable among these was South Place Chapel. South Place was a crucible of progressive thought exemplifying the potential of progressive, even radical, religious organisations to promote various social networks (Richardson 12). Its congregation included poets, philosophers, scientists, journalists, artists, musicians, publishers, and liberals of all persuasions. It included among others Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt, J. S. Mill, William and Mary Howitt, William Lovett, the Cowden Clarkes and Vincent and Clara Novello. In addition to his work as a preacher and orator, from 1831 Fox also edited the *Monthly Repository*, which under his guidance became a beacon of progressive thought on a range of issues—political, religious and cultural. Under Fox’s mentorship, the young Martineau became a regular contributor to the *Repository* and part of his close intellectual circle and an enthusiastic member of South Place Chapel. Flower had many of her songs printed in the *Repository*. As such, both participated in the periodical culture that John Mee has described as the “virtual public sphere” (“Time for a change”). Fox’s inner circle included many among his congregation and the *Repository* contributors, who frequented his home in Stamford Park, which became a popular meeting place for this vibrant

group of intellectuals. His salon joined others, such as those cultivated by his friends Hunt and Vincent Novello, to create a set of overlapping networks which came together to produce what Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite have called a “suburban sociality” (2). Common to them all were the lively entertainments that encompassed the literary, dramatic and musical, or as memorably summed up by Hunt, “our old evenings, joco-serio-musico-pictorio-poetical” (Cowden Clarke 195).

Flower and Martineau took their place in a diverse section of the female population who participated in various ways in political discourse (Richardson 4). Neither Martineau nor Flower were conventional. They never married; and they worked in what were generally considered male domains: music composition and journalism. Early letters between them attest to an intimate friendship, and the subjects of the songs they produced together indicate a shared outlook on many of the main causes of the day such as the Reform Bill, the Anti-Corn Law movement and the plight of European political exiles. Flower and Martineau’s private worlds were not only suffused with politics but were also marked by progressive attitudes towards women. Indeed the “woman question” detained many in the *Repository* circle during the early 1830s. It was during this time that Mill and his future wife, Harriet Taylor, were formulating the fundamental arguments that would underpin their later influential work, namely Taylor’s “The Enfranchisement of Women” (1851) and Mill’s “The Subjection of Women” (1869). Martineau contributed to the debate. In 1859 she published the essay, “Female Industry,” for the *Edinburgh Review* in which she stated unequivocally:

Old obstructions must be removed; and the aim must be set before us, as a nation as well as in private life, to provide for the free development and full use of the powers of every member of the community [...]. This will secure our welfare, nationally and in our homes, to which few elements can contribute more vitally and more richly than the independent industry of our countrywomen.³ (Qtd. in Rendall 477)

The structures of sociability in which Martineau and Flower operated provided opportunities for cultural collaborations of various kinds. The two women produced songs together for different purposes but much of it was performed in venues appropriate for middle-class women. Some, however, such as *The Gathering of the Unions*, were intended for the political platform and for participatory singing. It is reasonable to conclude that Flower and Martineau’s interest in demotic politics was shaped by the views of the radical intelligentsia that frequented Fox’s salon, in particular Fox himself. Fox’s close links with the working-class radical causes and his constant advocacy of cross-class engagement in many areas of life including that of culture, would not have gone unnoticed by either his musical ward or his literary protégée. The women’s collaborative ventures transcended social divides to find a

³ For the original, see Harriet Martineau, “Female Industry.”

useful place in the plebeian public sphere of the radical monster meeting. Flower's sense of the song's function as political propaganda is made clear from the musical style. Unlike her more complex art song written for the salon or the polite concert, *The Gathering of the Unions* is simple, easy to learn and triumphal in its straightforward triadic motivic shapes (the shape of the opening phrase and the rhythmic gestures invoke the *Marseillaise*, which was of course the foremost radical anthem during the period).⁴ The penny song sheet provides two versions: one with piano accompaniment, and one arranged for flute solo renamed *The March of Reform* (see fig. 1). The latter was presumably to allow for performance in motion. The song, produced within the radical salon as a collaboration between close friends, was intended for the public political sphere and many renditions of it were led from the platform to which the women themselves never gained access. It is important to remember that while music-making was very much part of the domestic sphere and a certain level of musical proficiency was embraced as an attribute expected of the young, middle-class, respectable woman, musical skill was acceptable only in certain areas of performance—usually voice or keyboard. While music-making in the domestic sphere was regarded as a required female attribute, professional female performers risked opprobrium and were sometimes relegated to the same social level as prostitutes. This represented a great deterrent to many fine women musicians. Furthermore, to be a composer was far more unusual for a woman: musical creativity was seen as an overwhelmingly male attribute. Nonetheless, Flower's compositional gifts were recognised by many leading figures including Mill, Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Browning, who all declared her a genius. Flower was aware of her status as an outsider; indeed, she embraced it, disparaging the musical mainstream as “the factory” (Flower, Letter to Vincent Novello).

Political women, public participation and social class

The gender of the song's authors demands that the concept of separate spheres be given careful attention within a broader discussion of sociability. Since the 1980s there has been an abundance of literature on the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres, epitomised perhaps by Leonore Davidoff's and Catherine Hall's magisterial study of the English middle class and gender (Davidoff and Hall). This scholarship has considered separate sphere ideology's prescriptive nature designed to control and constrain alongside more recent recognition of its role in constructing complex middle-class feminine identities. The critique of the simplification inherent in the idea of two spheres has led to the subsequent theorising of multiple overlapping spheres.⁵ As Sarah Richardson has noted more recently, the “public

⁴ I am indebted to Roger Parker for this observation.

⁵ For British political history and gender see *inter alia*, work by Elaine Chalus, Anna Clark, Kathryn Gleadle, Catherine Hall, Clare Midgley, Jane Rendall, Sheila Rowbotham, Susie Steinbach and Martha Vicinus.

and private spheres [were] clearly gendered and contested spaces, but were not distinct and had multiple manifestations” (Richardson 191). Class was a key determinant in the forms of female participation. Middle-class women, constrained by the powerful demands of respectability, found alternative routes to their working-class counterparts. Gleadle has characterised women as borderline citizens, “whose status hovered permanently in the interstices of the political nation” (*Borderline Citizens* 25). She has elsewhere placed Eliza Flower among other women working “in the networks of metropolitan radicalism” who wrote music for political causes (*Borderline Citizens* 70). Flower and Martineau’s collaboration highlights their involvement and agency in multiple spheres and at the same time it throws light on the constraints and restrictions that middle-class women faced in gaining access to the public sphere, and offers one mode, namely the song, that could be used to access the political platform, albeit indirectly.⁶ While pursuing this argument of exclusion, I would acknowledge the important recent work done by scholars such as Richardson to redirect our attentions to the rich and diverse array of strategies and approaches by which women did participate in political life (Richardson 1). And although it is certainly the case that by the 1880s political actors such as Edith Brand were able to play a more influential role than her husband in his own electoral campaign, in her case by singing on the hustings, not enough time had elapsed between the Peterloo Massacre and the Reform Bill agitation for Flower or Martineau to contemplate a similar form of political participation; the question of exclusion and restriction does seem then to play an important part in this story (Bowan and Pickering 143-45).

In this context, the question of attribution and authorship demands further consideration. All the political song sheets in the bound volume of Flower’s works are anonymous. Anonymity was much more common with ephemeral forms of print and was a convention with popular song. The song sheet was one such form of ephemera produced to be what John Mee has called a “performance script” (“Time for a change”). Arguably, by not being associated with an individual, an unattributed song allowed for a sense of collective identity; it could find its place more easily in a wider tradition. Popular song is intrinsically malleable and frequently undergoes variation, adaptation and modification. In this particular instance, anonymity precluded any recognition of Flower and Martineau’s contribution while allowing other authorial attributions and significant alteration to occur. There are at least two accounts of the song’s provenance, both originating in Birmingham several decades after the event. Each gives a full text showing that Flower and Martineau’s song was incorporated into a longer piece structured as a kind of call and response, in which the three stanzas of *The Gathering of the*

⁶ Elaine Chalus makes a similar point when looking at the ways elite women worked “actively if indirectly to further politicize society” (qtd. in Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, 11).

Unions became an “Answer” to a “Call” of six stanzas by another individual, producing in effect, a hybrid work (Langford 613-15; Dent 408).

There were, however, other reasons for a lack of attribution. “Anonymity,” as David Donaldson suggests in a consideration of literature, “has primarily been used to present ideas considered beyond the pale for a person of respectable social standing, or for criticism that would have been dangerous to own” (“The Artist Is Not Present”). In the case of Flower and Martineau, anonymity provided a cloak of invisibility. It offered escape from the gendered constraints of middle-class society and allowed ascent, if only by proxy, onto the platform of the public political meeting. The song allowed them to engage with a plebeian polity without transgressing the conventions of polite society. Often, however, much more than reputations were at risk. When the luckless Loveless threw the scrap of paper with the two stanzas of *The Gathering of the Unions* into the crowd, it was intercepted and passed to the judge, who, on reading it, declared it—unwittingly referring to the women’s work—“a crime worthy of the charge of high treason” (Gallop 88). Anonymity was either a preferable or a necessary option.

This raises the question not only of women’s agency in various public contexts, but also their visibility. Flower and Martineau worked successfully across a range of intersecting spheres and networks from the intimacy of the radical salon, to the virtual sphere of the “Republic of Letters” and to what some have called either the “parochial realm” (Lofland 10) or “community sphere” of South Place Chapel (Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens* 17). Their artistic works, both individual and collaborative, were created and performed within these contexts. One sphere they could not enter into directly as middle-class women without risking their social standing, was that of the public political platform of the open-air monster meetings held throughout the campaign for reform, such as the one on Newhall Hill. When identifying the diversity of sites and styles of radical sociability in the late eighteenth century, James Epstein characterises the world of plebeian sociability as “masculine” (Epstein 50); similarly, Anna Clark speaks of “a gendered plebeian public” (qtd. in Rendall 481) and Nancy Christie has characterised the processes that gave rise to the development of the middle classes and public sphere as “masculinist” (Christie 237). Richardson, likewise, while stressing the “vast extent” of women’s participation in British politics, nonetheless concedes that some political areas remained “exclusively masculine” (Richardson 1, 3).

Despite the fact that the song was entirely a female product, it is at best an instance of indirect agency. Nevertheless, although Flower and Martineau may have been absent and unrecognised, their song was “familiar to every child in the land” (Martineau 465). It is interesting and worthwhile to consider this form of agency alongside those produced by writing and translation during the same period. Russell and Broomhill have reminded us

persuasively of women's ability to forge new "epistolary spaces" during this period and to participate in wider political debates through these avenues (Broomhill 5). Correspondence has been identified as a "key strategy of and for female sociability, both within family and household communities, and for participation in literary, intellectual, and political discussions" (Broomhill 5). And the written form more generally was identified as one of the "key methods" through which women "contributed to the political and cultural debates of the period" (Richardson 8). Russell argues that from the 1880s the novel was one way the women writers "negotiate[d] the stigma ascribed to women's active role in the public sphere." "[I]maginative literature," was, she suggests, a "means of dematerializing themselves from 'the world' while at the same time reconstituting those publics and their own role as authors in a potentially more expansive and far-reaching way" (Russell, "Sociability" 179). These observations resonate with Richardson's compelling description of women who undertook highly influential and important translations as working in "the shadowlands of the public realm": "a cerebral and private activity but nonetheless one which offered possibilities to intervene and even subvert key political conversations" (Richardson 192). Song-writing was another means by which these two activists pursued their political agendas.

Women had been actively involved in political agitation for many years before the campaign for the Reform Bill, perhaps most memorably at Peterloo in 1819. In the period leading up to the Peterloo Massacre, working women had begun to establish female reform societies predominantly in the industrial north. The members of these societies were determined to pursue parliamentary reform alongside their male counterparts. They met regularly, made speeches, passed resolutions and produced banners for rallies and demonstrations. They agitated for representation in public arenas and often appeared on the stage or platform during this period. It is important however to note that rarely, even in this comparatively open climate, were they actually allowed to speak. Even when they had written speeches, men "normally" read them to the audience (Bush 218). M. L. Bush has persuasively argued that Peterloo was central to the transformation of female political engagement. As we know from Bush's account, and from the many contemporary written accounts of the Peterloo Massacre, women were indeed on the hustings on that fateful day. The presence of the President of the Manchester Female Reform Society, Mary Fildes, on the hustings was captured by the iconic print published by Richard Carlile in October 1819. But, as Bush also highlights, women suffered vicious and brutal retaliation at the hands of the cavalry as a repudiation of their visible presence. He suggests that the arrest of leading female reformer, Sarah Hargreaves, came about simply "for being on the platform" (Bush 224).⁷

⁷ In his detailed account of the attacks against women, Bush points out that their decision to dress in white and adorn their bonnets with a "green favour" representing liberty was driven by the desire to both invoke the symbol of Vestal Virgin and connect their cause to the French Revolution's Festivals of

song spoke for them. Having said that, despite the enormous popular success of *The Gathering of the Unions* and its widespread dissemination across Britain, it nonetheless supports Gleadle's further observation that women's "direct participation" in the arena of reform politics was "a highly problematized and complex phenomenon" (*British Women in the Nineteenth Century* 150).

It is also important to keep in mind that the few women who did speak from the platform in this period were almost without exception working women. Middle-class women's access to political life had to take other routes; their involvement taking place for the most part in the philanthropic and charitable causes, themselves part of a fast-developing "voluntary and associational culture" (Richardson 191). Particular movements were instrumental in the establishment of middle-class political action and were therefore more acceptable sites for women's activism. These included the 1832 Reform agitation, the Anti-Slavery movement and the Anti-Corn Law League. These have assumed a particular "significance for understanding the emergent middle class" (Gleadle, "Revisiting Family Fortunes" 775). Scholars have shown that middle-class women were intrinsic to the movement for Reform in a range of auxiliary roles including "fundraisers, campaigners, songwriters, journalists and pamphleteers" (Saunders).

Robert Saunders joins Parolin in reminding us of the presence of women and children at public meetings. Saunders suggests that over half the crowd at the Newhall Hill meeting were women and children. His claim is supported from an unlikely source. London's conservative *Evening Standard* scoffed at the estimated crowd size and went to great lengths to prove that it was numerically impossible by asserting that there were not sufficient "adult males" in the two counties of Stafford and Warwick combined (*Evening Standard*, 14 May 1832). The women and children who evidently made up the numbers were not part of the *Evening Standard's* calculations. Further support for the presence of women in the crowd is found in the visual record of the meeting from Henry Harris's "'The Gathering of the Unions' on New Hall Hill, Birmingham" (fig. 3), a composite work of the three meetings that took place during May. Other depictions of the event such as the incomplete oil sketch by Benjamin Robert Haydon and a sketch included in R. K. Dent's account focus on the hustings and their gaze confirms that the situation was very different from Peterloo in 1819. There were clearly no women on the platform in 1832 (fig. 2 and fig. 4).

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that this was one of Haydon's historical paintings undertaken in an endeavour to establish his reputation for posterity. Scholars such as Catherine Hall, Clare Midgley, Alex Tyrrell and Gleadle have turned to Haydon's later study of the 1840 Anti-Slavery Conventions in their discussion of women's activism. Gleadle uses this

work to show that Haydon's careful positioning of the women around the edges of the canvas served to reinforce their "borderline" status "within the contemporary political imagination" (*Borderline Citizens* 51).⁹ Flower and Martineau were working at one step further remove—



Figure 3. Henry Harris. *The Gathering of the Unions on New Hall Hill, Birmingham*, published Edgbaston, August 20th 1832.



Figure 4. Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The Meeting of the Unions on Newhall Hill Birmingham* (1832-33). Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust licensed under CCo.

⁹ For further discussion of female representation in Haydon's *The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840*, see the review article of Gleadle's *Borderline Citizens* in the *British Academy Review* and Catherine Hall's "The Lords of Humankind Re-Visited."

beyond the frame entirely. *The Gathering of the Unions* was nonetheless critical to the success at Newhall Hill both at the time and in public memory.

The Gathering of the Unions, commemorative practices, material culture and public memory

The song also provided an unexpected connection between the women and Haydon, for it was the vivid accounts of the “spirit-stirring hymn” (misattributed to Hutton) rolling out across the crowd at Newhall Hill that fuelled Haydon’s creative imagination and caused him to seek a commission to represent the historical moment on canvas. Tom Taylor, the editor of Haydon’s autobiography, remembered: “When the great Reform meeting of the Trade Unions took place at Newhall Hill, near Birmingham, it occurred to Haydon that the moment the vast concourse joined in the sudden prayer offered up by Hugh Hutton would make a fine subject for a picture” (Taylor 340). Haydon travelled to Birmingham to begin his sketches while seeking a commission to complete the painting. In his desire to capture the “sublimity” of the imagined scene, he sought verisimilitude, informing Attwood in a letter: “You must all tell me, as nearly as possible, how you stood, what you wore, even to gloves and hats” (Taylor 341). Although the commission never eventuated, Haydon managed to complete sixteen portraits and the oil sketch.

A further reminder of the emblematic status the song assumed can be found in a sketch included in Dent’s account, which features a large placard of the *Union Hymn* placed on the front of the platform, directly beneath Thomas Attwood. The song was remembered long after Attwood’s works faded.



Figure 5. “The Gathering of the Unions on Newhall Hill, May 7th, 1832” (in Dent 412).

Saunders has claimed that *God is Our Guide* was the “official anthem” of the Birmingham Political Union. The song’s virtually metonymic association with Reform Bill agitation was such that it also found an enduring place in the material culture generated by what two scholars have called “the most prolifically and imaginatively commemorated political event of nineteenth-century British history” (May and May 135). One example is a commemorative ceramic egg now held in the British Museum on which the song’s title, *The Gathering of the Unions*, appears above the words, “Reform Bill. Passed 7 June 1832” (“Decorated egg, British Museum). The song’s three verses appear in full as three distinct prints.¹⁰



Figure 6. Decorated egg. Whitehaven Pottery c. 1832. © Trustees of the British Museum CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Technological advances had occurred from the late eighteenth century, allowing the mass production of ceramic objects, and this kind of commemorative ware became part of what Paul Pickering has called the “trade of agitation” (Pickering 221 ff.). Simon Morgan has explored the ways in which “material objects, particularly ceramics, had long been used as media of political communication” and their importance in the “imaginative construction and performance of political identity and allegiance” (Morgan 132, 129). Other scholars have observed the “greater use of pottery both as a persuasive medium [...] and as a celebratory souvenir” coinciding with the emergence of a robust artisan class. According to the British Museum curator’s comments, the egg was produced by the Whitehaven Pottery and is part of a collection of objects that were “used for darning miners’ stockings similarly decorated with prints.” At the time of the Reform Bill, Whitehaven was emerging as an industrial centre in need of parliamentary representation and, like Birmingham, was heavily involved with questions of electoral reform. The very utility and gendered nature of the egg reminds us of the kind of working people who both sang the song and supported the cause. It takes its place

¹⁰ The curator’s notes also reference a jug held as part of London’s Reform Club collection that is similarly illustrated with lines from Flower’s song.

among the huge body of political memorabilia produced in Victorian Britain as popular politics grew alongside consumer markets and technological advances in industry.

The materialising of intangible heritage occurs, in effect the darning egg represents another form of spatial transfer of sociability. It effectively returned Martineau and Flower's song to the domestic sphere from whence it sprang, and politicised women's labour that took place in a working-class alternative to Russell's "domiciliary sociability" of the female elite (Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre* 11).

Spatial transfer and participatory singing as a form of plebeian sociability

As Paul Pickering and I have recently shown, songs often escape their authors and take on a life of their own (Bowen and Pickering 41 ff.). The unison song easily moves beyond the coffee house or tavern of the public sphere, and is a genre ideally suited to open air meetings, which, as R. G. Hall has reminded us, could reach "ordinary men and women, many of whom remained to a large extent outside print culture" (Navickas 238). Song bypassed this obstacle and its range was far greater. And as I have argued above, *The Gathering of the Unions* was conceived as a simple unison song for communal singing and, as its title suggests, was intended to transfer from the salon to the outdoor political platform.

The affective power and unifying force of participatory singing is often described in celebratory terms, but I suggest that in the context of the monster meeting there were additional important considerations to do with sound and audibility. Many of the outdoor venues, Newhall Hill included, were chosen with acoustics in mind. Martineau made this point telling her readers that:

The hustings were erected at the bottom of the slope of Newhall Hill, in a position so favourable that the voices of most of the speakers reached to the outskirts of the great assemblage, and to the throngs on the roofs of the surrounding houses. (Martineau 464-65)

But even so, the peripheries of the enormous crowds would have found it difficult to hear the speakers on the platform. Singing obviated the problem of audibility and distance. By singing, an individual created their own immediate sound; they were no longer straining to hear the distant voice on the hustings but were themselves contributing to the production of a huge body of sound. In choosing to be one of the tens, possibly hundreds, of thousands of people to sing that song on that hill, the individual was at once actively producing and being enveloped by, or even losing themselves in, the sound. The embodied experience allowed a shift from passive recipient to active participant. Songs such as *The Gathering for the Unions* were written *for* "the people," but more importantly the singing of them produced "one body" (see above p. 2) *creating* in a discernible if evanescent way, "the people." With the performative act

of singing this song, the vast gathering coalesced into a community of emotion with a shared identity and showed how, as Broomhill suggests, “the emotional structures and acts of particular sociabilities were also shaped by the sites that sustained them” (Broomhill, 5). Furthermore, the continued singing of *The Gathering of the Unions* served to keep alive the meeting in public memory: the act of singing becomes a form of commemoration.

The enduring place of the song

With *The Gathering of the Unions* the issue of anonymity and attribution is further complicated by the collapse of the two women’s friendship after the 1835 scandal. Martineau’s detailed account of the song’s performance combined with her refusal to claim authorship is therefore noteworthy in and of itself, but all the more so given that radical songbooks continued to use her words as a headnote well into the twentieth century. Flower is completely lost from view, except for her music. In 1843 the Stockport Chartists repurposed the song for a meeting to discuss the Repeal of the Union between Britain and Ireland (“Chartist Intelligence”). Unsurprisingly, the suffragettes took it up towards the end of the nineteenth century, but in an ironic twist assumed Thomas Attwood to be the author. Like the Chartists they were more interested in adapting the song for their own ideological ends:

God is our Guide, and in His name
From *hearth*, from *workshop*, and from loom,
We come, our *ancient rights to claim*,
Those rights, with duties, to resume.
Then *sisters*, raise from sea to sea,
The sacred watchword “Liberty”.

(Crawford 644, emphases added to show modifications from the original)

Although it is often impossible to know what music was chosen to accompany a popular song on any particular occasion, there is evidence that Flower’s original music, albeit unattributed, was performed into the twentieth century as seen in the 1906 edition of the *Labour Church Hymn and Tune Book* (fig. 7). By the next edition in 1912 Flower’s music was gone, replaced by that of W. H. Bell.

The Gathering of the Unions made a significant and enduring contribution to public life, albeit without recognition and acknowledgement. This is a story of anonymity and amnesia; of two women’s determined but unrecognised effort to participate in public political life. It also brings into sharp relief the gendered constraints of separate sphere ideology and its interplay with broader structures of sociability. Flower and Martineau’s collaboration shows one way that middle-class women as “borderline citizens” navigated spheres and their song writing stands as yet another example of the creativity and imaginativeness of female political activism. While

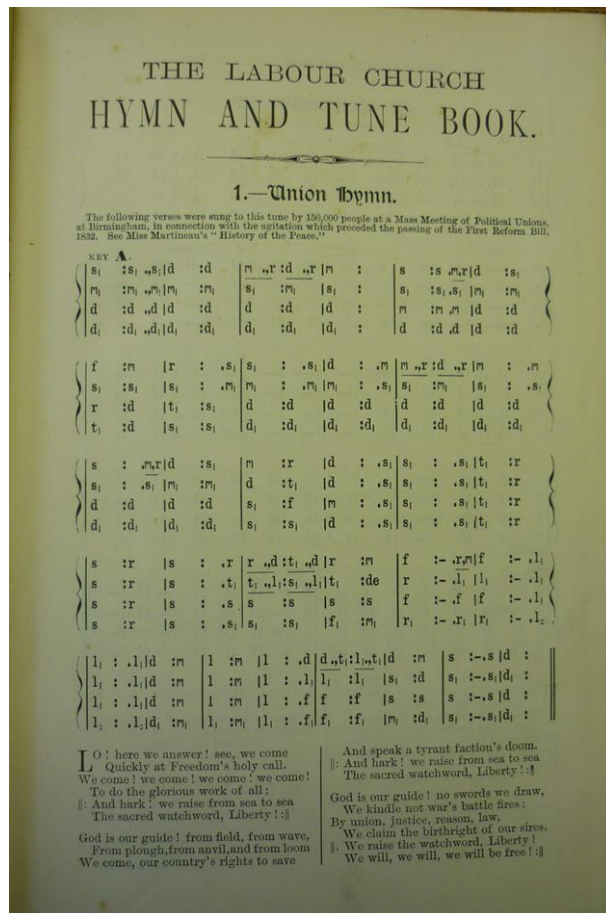


Figure 7: The “Union Hymn” set to Flower’s music in tonic sol-fa notation, *Labour Church Hymn & Tune Book*, 1906, 3

there is evidence that these boundaries were fluid up to a point, some were crossed more easily by the creative work of the women rather than the women themselves. During this period women’s writing was gaining purchase within political culture that only increased with the production of cheap print, but song and the performative act of singing had an immediacy and a wider reach beyond literacy that helped to shape public political discourse. Music operates in all spheres and can cross over with relative ease. Different forms of sociability are integral to the story of this song, not only in terms of its creation as a collaborative effort, but also in the kind of sociability that the singing of it in turn produced. It is one of many examples of political song that contributed to the ongoing transformation of the public sphere; the detailed account given here helps reconstitute the rich history of nineteenth-century British female political activism, and at the same time reminds us of the place of music in this history.

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