

The True Life and History of Captain Swing. Rhetorical Construction and Metonymy in a Time of Reform

Peter Jones

In April 1831, the *Poor Man's Guardian* published an anonymous verse which lauded the character and behaviour of a certain Jack Swing. It was to Jack or Captain Swing that the eponymous rural disorders of the previous autumn were attributed:

Jack Swing is the greatest Reformer,
The fellow what burns all the hay;
His reasons got warmer and warmer,
Till the Slaves of Corruption gave way.

Our tyrants have bred a fine fellow,
They have foster'd and reared Master Swing;-
But oh, how the wretches do bellow,
When fire-balls fly from his sling!

Yet "the Church" (so they tell us) "will smother,
"The fires that blaze all around;
"And a SPECIAL COMMISSION, her brother,
"Will hang every Swing that is found;

"And those who escape from the gallows,
"Will fall by a General Fast!"

And these are the means, which (they tell us)
Will master Jack Swing at the last!

Why, the brains of the tyrants are rotten,
As sure as Jack Swing is alive;
'Twas on fasting that Swing was begotten,
And on fasting he always will thrive.

But the Country news, every Post, is
 The best that our wishes could bring;
 That nought, but AGRARIAN JUSTICE,
 Can kill that great Radical Swing.¹

Jack Swing was certainly a player of considerable versatility. Not only was he a 'great radical' – indeed, 'the greatest Reformer' – but he assumed the guise of an emissary from the revolutions in Europe, he was an 'adept in chymical ignition', and a member of the Catholic Association. A master of disguise, he was sometimes described as a 'defective being, with calfless legs and stooping shoulders',² and at others as having the appearance of a farmer and a gentleman.³ Sometimes he sported 'very large black whiskers', at other times they were red.⁴ He travelled on foot or rode a 'sorrel coloured ... Blood Horse with a Switch Tail'.⁵ He was often spotted at the scene of an incendiary attack, yet never apprehended and rarely approached. Even those at the very highest levels of government believed that there was substance to the tall tales of conspiracy: barely a week after standing down as Prime Minister, the duke of Wellington wrote to Lord Malmesbury that 'I am sorry to add my conviction that there is a conspiracy in action as well to destroy property and to cause these disturbances', and not seven days after that Malmesbury was in turn moved to tell new Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, of 'information that I have obtained on this as well as on the other side of the water that Emissaries have been, & are, actively engaged in exciting discontent among our Peasantry, & perhaps in some instances have themselves been engaged in acts of incendiarism'.⁶

In other words, those who wrote the story of the Swing disturbances at the time were clearly alive to the symbolic resonance and dramatic potential of the events of 1830. They identified in 'Jack Swing' a cast of shadowy and dangerous characters, each with his own agenda, and all

1 'Jack Swing' (anonymous), *Poor Man's Guardian*, 2 April 1831, p. 8.

2 E.G. Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked: or, the Causes of Rural Incendiarism* (London, 1831), p. 9.

3 The National Archives, London [hereafter TNA], HO52/11/5, J.P. Bouverie to Home Office, (n.d.).

4 TNA, HO52/6/131, Examination of Susan Day of Berkshire, 28 November 1830.

5 TNA, HO52/6/408, Handbill from Pampisford, Cambridgeshire; Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office, Trowbridge, A1/740/4/1, Anon to Mr Wyndham, Barford St. Martin, 21 December 1830.

6 Hampshire Record Office, Winchester, [hereafter HRO] 9M73/406/2 Wellington to Lord Malmesbury, 20 November 1830; HRO, 9M73/406/24 Malmesbury to Lord Melbourne, 1 December 1830.

entirely explicable within the context of the time. Historians, on the other hand, have tended to describe a much more prosaic set of events. It is now all-but accepted that the so-called Swing risings had very little to do with the metonymical Swing, and that instead they were the result of a variety of structural and influential factors that led agricultural labourers and others in the south of England to take arms against their own particular sea of troubles.⁷ True enough, a few have argued for the influence of specific Radicals, and of 'Radicalism' more generally, on the events of 1830. In his pioneering spatial analysis of the disturbances, Andrew Charlesworth suggested as long ago as the late-1970s that 'the mobilisation [of agricultural labourers]...required, albeit loose, a form of organisation', and that 'news from up the road was not enough' to explain the 'contagious' nature of the disturbances. As a result, he argued for the role of 'politically conscious men' in rural communities, who had 'contacts with the outside world', and who took the lead in spreading the conflagration from village to village.⁸ Perhaps the best known advocate of the view that there was more to the disturbances than simply rural distress and a breakdown of social relations is Roger Wells who argued that the politicisation of agricultural labourers was much further advanced in 1830 than has been acknowledged elsewhere.⁹ He also identified the influence of a cast of characters in and around Battle in Sussex (including Cobbett, on a lecture tour of the south of England spreading word of Reform; Charles Inskipp, a recently resigned and at least partially unhinged London policeman apparently bent on fomenting revolution in the pubs and beer shops of the area; and Treasury Solicitor Charles Maule, charged with suppressing the disturbances who attempted – unsuccessfully – to indict local farmers for inciting the labourers to riot) to rival that of any Georgian melodrama. Nonetheless, neither he nor Charlesworth found any central place in their work for the charismatic Captain Swing himself, Free Irishman, French Revolutionary, arch-Radical, and metonym extraordinaire. This is unfortunate because, as we will see, despite his mythical, manifold identity, he was, in the end, *absolutely central* to the events of Autumn 1830, and in particular to the way that

- 7 The literature on Swing is extensive, and growing, but for a recent discussion of the historiography, see P. Jones, 'Finding Captain Swing: Protest, Parish Relations and the State of the Public Mind in 1830', *International Review of Social History*, 54 (2009), 429–30, 432.
- 8 A. Charlesworth, *Social Protest in a Rural Society: The Spatial Diffusion of the Captain Swing Disturbances of 1830–1831* ((Historical Geography Research Series, 1, Liverpool 1979), p. 31.
- 9 R.G. Wells, 'Mr. William Cobbett, Captain Swing and King William IV', *Agricultural History Review* 45 (1997), 47.

they were understood by contemporaries and mediated by the press and pamphleteers.

By now, it is well known that 'Swing' began life as the signatory of letters sent to farmers at Dover at the beginning of the disturbances warning 'that if you doant put away your thrashings machines against Monday next you shall have a "SWING"'.¹⁰ Thereafter, he put his name to a range of correspondence of varying provenance, and his cause was taken up by the local and national press.¹¹ It is this last element of his career that is of particular interest to us here, for Swing the synonym quickly became shorthand for events in the country, and the question of how this happened and why it should be the case has been almost entirely neglected by historians. Undoubtedly, the proximity of revolutions abroad and reformist agitation at home were part of the rich mix into which newspapermen dipped their quills in response to the disturbances: as Roger Wells has recently suggested, '[t]he contexts of the insurrection were both long-term conditioners, shorter term developments, and phenomena coincident with the three months of Swing mobilisations'.¹² Nonetheless, even this potent concoction of Radicalism, revolutionary fervour and rural distress does not *in itself* explain the speed and agility with which 'Jack' Swing sprang into the public mind in November and December 1830.

Perhaps the first place to look for Swing's heritage is, as many contemporaries feared, across the Irish Sea. Captain Rock had, after all, been putting his name to threatening letters there for a decade and more by the time the first fires lit up the skies of southern England, and the *modus operandi* of the two Captains was so similar that reports of Swing's first letter at Dover could not help but make explicit mention of it: 'The whole proceedings,' according to the *Examiner*, 'bear so close a resemblance to Captain Rock that it is impossible not to notice it. Like him, too, the insurrectionary spirit here has taken a *nom de guerre*, and the epithet adopted is "Swing"'.¹³ Small wonder, then, that those who should perhaps have known better were drawn in by this simple equation: 'we used to talk of the outrages in Ireland,' wrote John Fitzgerald in November, 'why the very same things are doing close to London ... we must conclude that the people are discontented by agency for concealed

10 *The Examiner*, 17 October 1830.

11 Jones, 'Finding Captain Swing', 434–38.

12 R.G. Wells, '1830: the Year of Revolutions in England, and the Politics of the Captain Swing Insurrection' (unpublished), pp.1–2. My thanks go to Professor Wells for his permission to cite this work.

13 *Examiner*, 17 October 1830.

purposes'.¹⁴ But the *proximity* of the actions of Captain Rock is not the only possible explanation for his influence on the rhetorical construction of his English counterpart. During the most intense phase of his epistolary activity, Rock was famously celebrated by the Catholic Romantic Thomas Moore in his 1824 *Memoirs of Captain Rock, the Irish Chieftain, Written by Himself*. In a scholarly introduction to the 2008 edition, Emer Nolan explains that 'the central satiric strategy' of the book (which was published anonymously) 'was to make that well-known name a secret identity by effectively merging the individual and the generic voice in the first-person narrator'.¹⁵ By this means, Moore merged myth with reality, religious and political commentary with rhetorical construction, and in so doing made the kind of narrative sense of the shadowy and multivalent activities of the Rockites (and, for that matter, their proximate counterparts, the Whiteboys and the Molly Maguires) that had probably eluded a genteel English audience at all times previously. As Nolan notes, Rock's *Memoirs* were an immediate publishing success, running to five London editions in 1824 alone, as well as to others in Paris and New York, and being later translated into German and French.¹⁶ By this means Captain Rock was cemented in the public mind as a semi-mythical figure whose works were nonetheless there for all to see.

Of course, Moore's rhetorical construction of Captain Rock was not written in isolation: it mined a rich seam of performance, theatricality and public representation that ran deep within Georgian Britain. As David Worrall notes, throughout the Romantic period 'theatricality was a mode of public being, a representation of the self, which was not confined to dramas performed in the playhouses'.¹⁷ Theatricality, in the form of a subversive popular drama, underpinned the very use of the pseudonym by protesters in Ireland in the first place; how appropriate, then, that their actions should become explicable in the public mind largely through the use of Moore's dramatic conceit in the *Memoir*. All of which is to suggest, of course, that by the time that other subversive signatory emerged on the mainland, a framework already existed within which it was possible for the public, not only to understand his actions, but to describe them, too – hence the speed with which the pseudonymous Swing took root, both in the reportage, and in the public

14 HRO, 44M69/2/1/38, J. Fitzgerald to G.P. Jervoise, 27 November 1830.

15 E. Nolan, 'Introduction' to Thomas Moore, *Memoirs of Captain Rock: the Celebrated Irish Chieftain with Some Account of his Ancestors Written by Himself*, edited by E. Nolan (Dublin, 2008), p. xi.

16 Ibid., p. xi.

17 D. Worrall, *Theatric Revolution: drama, censorship and Romantic period subcultures, 1773–1832* (Oxford, 2006), p. 2.

mind. From the earliest explicit linkage in the *Examiner* of Swing with the actions of the semi-mythical Rock, the papers worked hard to put flesh on the bones. At the end of October, the *Newcastle Courant* stated that 'the outrages of "Swing" continue with great violence' in Kent; at the beginning of November, Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian* noted with undisguised approval that "'Swing" continues his triumphant progress without check or fear' across southern England; and a month later the *Hull Packet* noted that farmers were disabling their threshing machines in Oxfordshire 'to avoid a visit from Mr. Swing'.¹⁸ Tellingly, at the end of November, the *Freeman's Journal*, in Dublin, reported the arrest of a 'person of respectable appearance' at Battle, in Sussex, who was supposed to be carrying a number of 'Swing' letters and a 'great quantity of various combustibles' under the headline, 'ARREST OF AN ENGLISH CAPTAIN ROCK'.¹⁹ This personification of Swing continued and strengthened throughout the three months that saw the most intense period of his activities. Yet one fundamental difference between Swing and Rock is of relevance here: in almost all of the reportage of events in the English countryside, Swing is identified simply as 'Mr. Swing', or just plain 'Swing'. He was as yet a civilian, whereas Captain Rock was always keen to declare his military credentials in the letters of protesters in Ireland. Here again, it is difficult not to see the influence of events over the Irish Sea on the elevation of Swing to a military career. By early November, the satirical magazine *The Age* was suggesting that 'you may hang Captain Swing and all his associates tomorrow, and on the day after, Captain Swing the second will make his appearance'; but it did so with Ireland in mind, and its remedy to this proliferation of Swings was (among other things) to 'impose the poor laws upon Ireland, and you will have all England tranquil in a month'.²⁰ Elsewhere in the same edition, 'Captain Swing' is again alluded to, this time in a skit on a parliamentary exchange between the Irish-born Tory, John Wilson Croker, and Daniel O'Connell.²¹ Once again, it was clearly of the utmost importance (or at least, the utmost expediency) for the Tory editor of *The Age*, Molloy Westmacott, to link the goings on in southern England with those in Ireland as directly as he could.

Having once been granted his commission in the press though, Captain Swing's campaign through the satirical journals of the period was swift and decisive. By 14 November, he was headlining at Poet's Corner

18 *Newcastle Courant*, 30 October 1830; *Poor Man's Guardian*, 8 November 1830; *Hull Packet*, 7 December 1830.

19 *Freeman's Journal*, 25 November 1830.

20 *The Age*, 7 November 1830.

21 *Ibid.*, 7 November 1830.

in *Bell's Life in London*; two months later he again played the lead, this time in a verse entitled 'Captain Swing and his Subalterns, or Warm Work for a Winter's Night'.²² Shortly after his debut he was the subject of a squib in *The Age* aimed at the duke of Wellington, on the occasion of his church pew having been ruined by fire:

DUKE ARTHUR

"Who dares to burn my seat of grace
In such a solemn, sacred place?
Who the devil has fired my pew?
Pray tell me, Captain Swing, was't you?
Oh! If it was you, Captain Swing,
You did a very wicked thing."

CAPTAIN SWING

"At such a time, in such a place,
I little thought 'twould infirm your Grace.
Arthur, you do deserve the birch;
You sought t'enslave the British nation;
I fought to fumigate the church,
And give you excommunication".²³

Finally, after the conflagrations in the countryside that bore his name had been largely extinguished by the Special Commissions,²⁴ Captain Swing finally achieved the recognition he deserved: a biographical account of his life very much in the vein of that accorded to Rock a few years earlier.

The Life & History of Swing, the Kent Rick Burner, written by Himself was, in fact, the work of the Radical Richard Carlile. It tells the story of Francis Swing's decline and fall, from the grammar school-educated son of a small but prosperous farmer to a labourer 'harnessed like a horse to a gravel cart'.²⁵ Again, the similarities between Swing's ghosted biography and that of Captain Rock are striking: the architects of Swing's downfall are identified as precisely those 'perennial enemies' of the poor identified in Moore's *Memoirs* by Emer Nolan: 'landlords, tithe proctors, large farmers and the like'.²⁶ But Carlile went even further in his rhetorical

22 *Bell's Life in London*, 14 November 1830, 16 January 1831

23 *The Age*, 21 November 1830.

24 Special Commissions, or Assizes, were held to try prisoners arrested during the classical period of Swing in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire. See E.J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969), pp. 308–9 Appendix 2.

25 *The Life & History of Captain Swing, the Kent Rick Burner, written by Himself* (London, 1830), p. 8.

26 Nolan, 'Introduction' to Moore, *Memoirs of Captain Rock*, p. xi.

embellishment of Swing, bankrolling and staging a successful play based on his life and written by the notorious Robert Turner, also known as the 'Devil's Chaplain'. *Swing: or, Who Are the Incendiaries?* was staged at Carlile's newly opened Rotunda, Blackfriars Road, London, in early 1831.²⁷ Though clearly an allegory for the distress of agricultural labourers and the corruption of the ruling class, the play nonetheless helped to cement, in the minds of contemporaries, the link between events in the countryside and the rhetorically ubiquitous figure of Swing himself. As Worrall notes, 'the vying for the myth of Swing ... was a site of contestation fought out in pamphlet wars for the minds of the urban, as much as the rural, populace', and Carlile's *Life and History* resulted in at least two alternative versions of Swing's life story, again echoing the literary career of Captain Rock, whose *Memoirs* quickly resulted in the publication of a rejoinder.²⁸ *The Genuine Life of Francis Swing* is a direct rebuttal of Carlile's account in which Swing blames everyone but himself, beginning with Cobbett and ending with Richard Jones, a mysterious Rotunda-frequenting poacher who has led him into evil ways. It is a cautionary tale worthy of Hannah More in its Millennarian flourishes – no coincidence, then, that it was published by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge – and in it the lunatic Swing claims still to be throwing inflammatory letters from his gig, concluding: 'I have sold myself to the devil. I am his property ... and so will you soon be if you listen to the blasphemous words of those, my countrymen, who would betray your souls'.²⁹ Carlile reacted to its publication in typically pugilistic fashion, suggesting in the *Prompter* that:

It is quite sufficient description of it to say, that the people are advised not to go to the Rotunda, and that the Parson and the rich man make the poor man happy ... This, with a Ghost Story, is the substance at this miserable effort at a trick, a cheat, and a falsehood.³⁰

In *A Short Account of the Life and Death of Swing, the Rick-Burner*, addressed directly to 'Carlile, the Fleet Street Infidel' and written by Henry Nelson Coleridge (nephew of Samuel Taylor), Swing is acknowledged as a small farmer who has fallen on hard times, but in this instance the fault is entirely his own. We are told that he invested heavily in 'Cobbett's corn' – which of course failed miserably – and as a result he

27 For a full account of the play's run at the Rotunda, and an brief account of the life of Taylor, see Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution*, pp. 340–60.

28 Rev. Mortimer O'Sullivan, *Captain Rock Detected: or, the Origin and Character of the Recent Disturbances* (London, 1824).

29 [H. Nelson Coleridge], *The Genuine Life of Mr. F. S.* (London, 1831), p. 22.

30 R. Carlile, *The Prompter*, 18 January 1831.

became a drunkard and a slovenly worker. In the final analysis, we are told that it was 'intemperance' that led him to a bad end.³¹

The rhetorical reinvention of Captain Swing continued long past his supposed execution by the Royal Commissions, and by the Spring of 1831 he had become a verb, and his name was shorthand for any incendiary activity, actual or metaphorical, that carried a radical or subversive threat. Reporting on fires in the Vendée in France in May, the *Examiner* suggested that 'for a long time past they have carried on a sort of "Swing" warfare there'; for the *North Wales Chronicle*, the second Reform Bill (which was passed in the Commons on 20 April) was promoted by 'incendiary articles in the newspapers, and "Swing" speeches in parliament'.³² The ongoing narrative of his activities was maintained, in part, by the steady stream of letters bearing his name that continued to be received long past the most intense period of his activities both by the enemies of 'the people', and those of particular individuals. A 'respectable' tavern owner in Plymouth was reported to have received one in January, and the letter is notable for its mischievous flourish, worthy of *The Age's* Westmacott himself:

Sir, having *smoked* that you have a *tobacco-box* in your house *worked by machinery*, this is to inform you, that unless a *stopper* is placed on it, we shall set *fire* to the *tobacco*, and become tobacco *stoppers* ourselves – For the people, Swing & Co.³³

Mrs. Chandler of Pusey in Wiltshire, on the other hand, was a victim of Swing's notoriety when she was on the receiving end of the attentions of an extortionist keen to cash in on his name:

Madame – I have to request that you will send me by return of post the sum of 10*l.*, or else your house will be burned to the ground very shortly, as I know you can well afford to spare that sum for a short period until I have the effects to repay it ... [signed] "SWING".³⁴

Clearly, the authors of these letters, while motivated by very different aims and hoping for quite different outcomes, were equally alive to the rhetorical strength of Swing and his hold on the public imagination; and this despite the fact that the papers had already confidently reported the arrest and incarceration of the 'real' Captain Swing.

31 H. Nelson Coleridge, *A Short Account of the Life & Death of Swing, the Rick-Burner: Written by one Well Acquainted with Him* (London, 1831), p. 25.

32 *Examiner*, 22 May 1831; *North Wales Chronicle*, 31 May 1831.

33 *Morning Chronicle*, 10 January 1831.

34 *Examiner*, 16 January 1831.

On the 23 December 1830 news broke that a man, 'aged around 60, rather under the middle size, thin face, dark eyed brows, prominent nose, and very gray-headed', was in custody having been spotted in the vicinity of Stradishall, Suffolk, throwing letters from a gig.³⁵ These letters were of an inflammatory nature, spiced with an Old Testament flourish, and all were signed 'Swing':

England! beware you do not bring Vengeance down upon your heads
by robbing the poor. "SWING"

Church of England Parsons, who strain at gnats, and swallow camels,
who, (woe), who, who, unto you – you shall one day have your reward!
"SWING"

If you do not behave better and give the Poor Man his due I will visit
you or my name is not "SWING"

Will you farmers and parishioners pay us better for our labour if you will
not we will put you in bodily fear. "SWING"³⁶

On further investigation, the man turned out to be Joseph Saville, a Methodist preacher ('or more properly, perhaps, what is called a "Ranter"')³⁷ from Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire. At his trial, he received the most glowing character references from members of his parish, including the Anglican clergyman, and this seems to have persuaded the court that he was, at heart, a harmless crank. E.P. Thompson agreed, and in 'The Crime of Anonymity' suggested that Saville was lucky 'to have had the loyal backing of his parish ... and to have been tried in a county [Suffolk] in which the disturbances were comparatively light', because despite having confessed to dropping large numbers of such letters throughout England, Saville was sentenced to a mere twelve months in prison and a £50 fine.³⁸ Yet at the time of his arrest his story caused a sensation, both in the press and beyond. The *Morning Chronicle* and the *Hull Packet* both hailed the arrest of the 'real' Captain Swing, and *The Times* reported that his apprehension had 'caused a more than ordinary

35 *Examiner*, 26 December 1830.

36 *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 1 January 1831; *Examiner*, 26 December 1830; TNA, HO52/10/91 Correspondence from John Garey, n.d.

37 *Examiner*, 26 December 1830.

38 E.P. Thompson, 'The Crime of Anonymity', in D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, J. Rule, E.P. Thompson and C. Winslow, *Albion's Fatal Tree. Crime and Society in Eighteenth-century England* (London, 1975), p. 289.

sensation in the area', and that it was rumoured that he was 'the actual and original "Swing"'.³⁹

Saville's case is of particular interest to us for a number of reasons. The details varied considerably between reports, and changed significantly over the brief period between his arrest (on the 16 December) and his trial (on the 15 January). At first, he was simply described as 'a person travelling in a gig', and 'a traveller in the straw hat line'.⁴⁰ On his arrest, he was reported as having a number of further 'Swing' letters in his possession, as well as the sum of £580. Soon after, though, he was being described as 'a man of rather gentlemanly appearance', and 'a respectable looking person' who was travelling in a 'neat, nearly new gig' which was being pulled by 'a beautiful grey horse', and that he had up to £700 and many hundreds more letters about his person.⁴¹ Crucially, *The Times* was even more specific about his mode of transport, reporting that it was 'a green gig', and it went on to remind its readers that 'it will be recollected that that there was a person, who fled in a green gig, detected in the act of setting fire to some stacks near Cambridge'.⁴² These details are important in terms of the invention, and rhetorical reinvention, of Captain Swing, and Joseph Saville's place within it, because within the general atmosphere of conspiracy and intrigue he seemed to tick all the relevant boxes. From as early as the beginning of November, reports had been circulating in the newspapers of 'strangers' who were responsible for inciting – and even igniting – the fires that lit up southern England. The *Morning Chronicle* reported that 'Two respectably dressed men, who were travelling in a barouche [near Bedfont] stopped a boy in the road, and one of them said: "Who is your Master, Boy?" The boy replied, "Master Sherwin, Sir." "Oh tell him to keep a look out" [they said] and drove on'. The report concluded darkly that 'about ten o'clock ... the same night, [Sherwin's] two barns, several outhouses, and stabling were discovered to be on fire'.⁴³ Similarly, *The Times* reported on 'a man, dressed in shabby genteel, but of manners apparently above the ordinary class', who had been spotted close to fires at Battle in Sussex; whereas the *Examiner* reported that 'previous to several of the late alarming fires in Kent ... a post chaise had arrived in the neighbourhood, and after staying a short time, had gone away again ... a fire has invariably happened the same night'.⁴⁴

39 *Morning Chronicle*, 23 December 1830; *Hull Packet*, 28 December 1830; *The Times*, 23 December 1830.

40 *North Wales Chronicle*, 25 December 1830; *Newcastle Courant*, 25 December 1830.

41 *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 1 January 1831; *Examiner*, 26 December 1830.

42 *The Times*, 23 December 1830.

43 *Morning Chronicle*, 11 November 1830.

44 *The Times*, 19 November 1830; *Examiner*, November 1830.

Moreover, as we have seen tales of 'gentleman conspirators' were not confined to the press. Correspondents to the Home Office felt it important to note that in Berkshire, Richard Jordan had seen 'two persons in a gig who were with the mob nights and mornings', and that Susan Day had been accosted by 'a man in a [green] gig' who 'was dressed in a dark brown great coat' and asked her about the barns belonging to her employer, Mr. Gibbs.⁴⁵ Once again, the green gig makes an appearance: in Essex, too, it was seen near Lambridge, the carriage of a man who had been observed 'in the act of setting fire to a stack', and who was observed to escape with a companion.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, the men in the green gig were never identified, but when Saville made his appearance on the scene, having confessed to dropping inflammatory letters the length of England, from Yorkshire to the Wash and beyond, even those in high office must have felt they had their man. Indeed, judging from the correspondence of the investigating officer Barton it becomes obvious that Melbourne, the Home Secretary, was instrumental in seeking further information with which to incriminate Saville.

Contrary to E.P. Thompson's later dismissal of Saville as a crank, Barton described him as 'a clever, specious person ... apt to assume the cloak of religion to forward his beliefs'. Again, clearly under the direction of Melbourne himself, Barton searched Saville's house in Gamlingay for evidence that he was directly connected with a fire at Blundisham where, he wrote, 'a person answering the same description [is] suspected as [being] concerned in setting fire to a straw stack'.⁴⁷ Curiously, despite the fact that no evidence was offered at his trial linking Saville to the fire at Blundisham, the self-confessed signatory of a thousand 'Swing' letters is known to have been there on the day that it occurred, and even, to an extent, incriminated himself in a letter that he sent to his wife, and that was later copied by Barton. Having arrived in the village in the early evening, Saville was roused by 'a cry of fire which made the village naturally in a bustle indeed'. He noted that the fire was in a hayrick down the street from his lodgings, 'very near many thatched Barnes', and that it might have taken 'a whole row of houses down'. He writes that he went out to watch the fire, but rather than helping to extinguish it, 'placed myself in a stable, rather seeing the straw in a blaze', whereupon he was accosted by a local gentleman who questioned his identity: 'A stranger I replied. Pray Sir says he, May I ask where you are from? Yes Sir I am at Mr

45 TNA, HO52/6/128, 131 Depositions of Richard Jordan of Langeat and Susan Day of East Lockinge, n.d.

46 TNA, HO52/7/373, Correspondence of R.G. Ward of Harlow, 8 December 1830.

47 TNA, HO52/10/94, Correspondence of J. Barton, 20 December 1830.

Paters [his lodgings] by which answer he was appeased'. He finished his account by stating ominously, '[t]his is something like Eliza's foretelling, but I am at liberty yet'.⁴⁸ Whatever the reason for Saville's light treatment, and the fact that the authorities chose not to pursue him for the Blundisham fire, his appearance at the scene and his curious activities as an acolyte of 'Swing' fed the feverish appetite of those in government, in the offices of the local and national press, and in the drawing rooms of southern England for tales of conspiracy and intrigue.

With Saville's case firmly in mind, and with the clarity of two centuries' distance, we can see that Captain Swing had a strange and symbiotic relationship with the events in the countryside in the autumn of 1830. Starting life as an anonym (first around Dover, and then countrywide) he quickly became both a synonym and a metonym for those who wrote the story of the disturbances as they took place. 'Swing' functioned both to simplify and to make a kind of narrative sense of those elements of the story that were otherwise too perplexing to understand or too concerning to contemplate, and in particular the widespread resort to arson. Amid the pre-reform fervour of 1830, radical agitation and nearby revolution seemed to be everywhere, and in many ways it made more sense to see the hidden hand of conspirators in green gigs – at least, in the offices of Whitehall and the overstuffed parlours of Kensington – than it did to recognise that long-term structural change could be the catalyst for such profoundly destructive (and, to many, fundamentally un-English) activities among ordinary agricultural labourers. For those closer to the action, though, it was a very different story: no matter how avidly they followed the melodrama of Swing as it unfolded in the press, they were under few illusions about the long-term effects of deprivation, denial and distress.

Thomas Whittet of Bourne was clear that the disturbances were due to: '[t]he poverty which compelled the farmer to use the threshing-machine [and] bore down the labourer to unprecedented distress, and drove him to desperation'; T. Baker of Whitburn near Durham was clear, even some distance from the centre of events, that 'I believe the refusal of Parliament to listen to the voice of the Poor combined with Parochial Tyranny, to have been the cause of the heartburnings and rick-burnings of 1830 and 1831'.⁴⁹ Some local commentators were even more precise in their diagnosis, such as Mr. Rolph, the Surgeon of Rochford, Essex:

48 TNA, HO52/10/100-1, Joseph Saville to Mary Saville, 13 November 1830 [copied by J. Barton].

49 *Report from the Select Committee on the Poor Laws*, 1834, Appendix B1, 'Rural Queries', Part 5, Question 8, pp. 50, 165.

The use of thrashing-machines threw many Labourers out of employment at that period of the year when they used to be employed in the barns instead of the fields. Low and insufficient wages were also the result of this machinery. They had no land or garden of their own to cultivate. They were made solely dependent for their subsistence on the wages of their daily labour, or the Poor Rates. The waste and poor grounds were entirely monopolised. Land had become so valuable that even the Commons were taken from the poor, and inclosed. They thus became entirely destitute. A general spirit of insubordination and outrage seized them. They demolished those machines which they thought superseded human labour, a separation of interests and affections took place between the rich and poor, and all the bitter hatred and revolting circumstances of a servile war ensued.⁵⁰

It took the authorities, no less than the majority of popular opinion, a considerable time to accept the Surgeon's diagnosis, but eventually even they were forced to abandon tales of Irish patriots and French revolutionaries in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Of the 1,976 men tried at the five Special Commissions (and the many hundreds more tried at the county assizes) none was found to have been a major conspirator or to have been motivated by anything more than the most basic political inclination.⁵¹ Yet this is not to say that the political ferment that saturated the press – radical and reactionary alike – was without influence. Notwithstanding the lack of evidence to suggest a *direct* connection between radical agitation and events in the countryside, contemporaries of all persuasions agreed that the general clamour for reform was nonetheless a factor in the disturbances. George Wrotham of Kent suggested that 'much harm was also done by the press, by the writings of the Cobbetts and Carlisles [sic]', whereas the Rector of Michaelmersh, Hampshire, believed it was down to 'inflammatory publications, and grievances from denial of customary indulgences and vexatious lowering of wages'.⁵² This view was articulated most succinctly by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, in his celebrated postscript on the career of Captain Swing, when he wrote that: 'The first main cause of the crime is misery ... [but] Partial instruction, and great political excitement being added to misery, the effect is produced'.⁵³

50 Ibid., p. 184.

51 See Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 253–64.

52 Ibid., pp. 268, 423.

53 E. Gibbon Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked: or the Causes of Rural Incendiarism*, cited in the *Leeds Mercury*, 4 January 1832.

As contemporaries came to terms with the true complexity that lay behind the disturbances, Captain Swing underwent a further transformation, and as the memory of the main events of October and November 1830 faded he shifted from being a useful synonym for all that was confusing and most disturbing about the work of rick-burners to something of a spokesman for those who opposed the remnants of 'Old Corruption'. In February 1832, *The Satirist* published 'The British Silk Weaver's Lament', aimed at those who continued to resist reform at any price:

While ELLIS, LAWSON, GLADSTANES, too,
Make merry with the thought,
Let them with cruel SEWELL view
The mis'ry they have brought;
To deathless fame while they aspire,
Time, on the constant wing,
Will puff such fame to endless fire,
Cooked up by CAPTAIN SWING.⁵⁴

A year later the *Morning Chronicle* reported a parliamentary debate on the Corn Laws in which Mr. Duffie was quoted as saying:

Philosopher Swing – the greatest philosopher of modern times, would give them the best reason [for repeal]. He would not destroy the peasantry. He would do all to improve them, for he has not forgotten the words of Goldsmith –

"A bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroyed can never be supplied".⁵⁵

Clearly, for those in the mainstream for whom 'reform' turned out to be more of a frustration than a triumph, 'Philosopher Swing' was a lot more than just as a pantomime figure with a fire ball and a hidden hand, and by 1834 even they could see some merit in his actions.

Unsurprisingly, Swing continued to shift and change his identity long after the events that gave him life faded to a distant memory. Within a few years, he was a 'predial Chartist'; within a few more, he was the subject of a tame Edwardian thriller based on the disturbances.⁵⁶ In more recent times, he was the subject of an agitprop play in the 1970s, appeared

54 *The Satirist*, 5 February 1832.

55 *Freeman's Journal*, 28 February 1833; *The Morning Chronicle*, 1 February 1834.

56 *The Labourers' Friend Magazine*, for Disseminating Information on the Advantages of Allotments of Land to the Labouring Classes (London, 1840), p. 54; C.H. Avery, "Captain Swing": A Tale of the 1830 Riots (London, 1907).

eponymously on a successful album in the 1980s, and is currently masquerading as a five-piece band on the folk-roots circuit.⁵⁷ But it is as the rhetorical embodiment of the fears, hopes and expectations of the public mind at a time of great excitement that he really came to life, a metonymical figure that gave shape and substance to so much that was otherwise unintelligible. Swing undoubtedly became the puppet of propagandists on both sides of the ideological divide, from Charles Molloy Westmacott to Richard Carlile, and from the Henry Hetherington to the SPCK, but in the end he had a much wider application even than that. He was a protean figure, available to newspapermen and pamphleteers, but also to ordinary members of the concerned middle classes who craved a rational explanation for the events of Autumn 1830. In other words, though peripheral to the actual mobbings and attacks of arson, he was absolutely central to how they came to be described and understood: in the final analysis Jack Swing was not only the 'greatest Reformer', he was anything the public wanted him to be.

57 P.A. Thompson, 'Captain Swing at the Penny Gaff' (unpublished, first performed at the Unity Theatre, London, 1971); Michelle Shocked, *Captain Swing* (Mercury Records, 1989); for the band Captain Swing, see <http://www.captainswing.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/> (accessed 16 November 2009).