

## Preface

### **James Finlen**

This work deals with the life of a largely forgotten working-class man who played a part in bringing about the freedoms and rights which are enjoyed by people today but which were absent in his day. His origins are a little obscure but he seems to be the son of an Irish Catholic couple who had migrated to England but who had disappeared or died in his childhood. We know from his own writing that he became a French polisher by trade from the age of 15, probably as an apprentice. He lived with his sister and they appear together on the 1851 census in London lodging with a George Hoppey and his wife. Hoppey was a master French polisher and a Chartist who played an important part in Finlen's family life and who later adopted his daughter. It was almost certainly Hoppey who introduced Finlen to Chartism, which became his principal motivation in life. Finlen was an autodidact with a special talent in communicating with his working class fellows. He could sing, act, had a prodigious memory, was well-read and kept up to date with current national and world affairs, and was a great orator. He brought the message of Chartism to thousands of workers throughout the country, informing them of their rights and giving them aspirations - workers who were largely illiterate or ill-informed.

In 1851, aged 21 he would have qualified as a master French polisher and he took six months out from London to work at Butleigh Court, where I live, in Somerset. On his return he gave more and more time to his political interests which were, fortunately for this study, covered in the few newspapers that were interested in Chartism and reform. In 1852 he was elected by the National Charter Association as a lecturer at 30 shillings per week to tour the country and proselytize their message of reform. His career as a French polisher was largely abandoned as he began his exhausting lecturing tours throughout England, Scotland and Wales., often to gatherings of hundreds or even thousands.

In 1857 he attempted to expand his interests, and probably improve his uncertain income, by becoming involved in publishing, editing, and opening bookshops, one in London and two in Glasgow. Unfortunately one of the Glasgow shops burnt down and all these enterprises eventually failed, principally because he was spending too much time lecturing and attending meetings.

In 1858 he moved to Manchester and married a young girl from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, grand-daughter of a Wesleyan minister and prominent grocer. They had a son there but Finlen's political ambitions were not succeeding and in 1860 he returned, with his pregnant wife and son to London. He also returned to French polishing which indicates his inability to survive from his income lecturing and his other activity at the time, selling Assurance policies to fellow workers. From 1861 - 66 he pursued his political activities and lecturing on a smaller scale, by which time he had six children and a wife to cater for. By 1866 there was a revival as his work in the Reform League was taking off. He was attending and organising mass protests in Hyde Park and on Clerkenwell Green, and in November he was elected again as a paid lecturer, at £2 per week, for the League. He set off on another tour of the country.

At this point disaster struck. His wife, now 30, was unable to cope with their six children alone, the youngest being just 2 months old, and with no husband helping or in attendance. She was committed to an asylum and never returned to her family, dying in 1883. There was no one to care for the children and Finlen had to pay neighbours to look after them. Finlen was almost penniless - he tells us that the League didn't give him a farthing after January 1867 and in May a local warrant officer went to see the children and reported that they were practically naked and that there was little food in the house. Finlen, far from giving up his political work, became more obsessed with spreading his message and, despite receiving no pay, set off on another tour. He may have become somewhat unbalanced by all the stress and seeing that protest without action was achieving nothing, began a more positive approach. He was becoming more perturbed by other injustices, particularly to the Irish. In May he visited the minister Gathorne Hardy at the Home Office to urge respite for the condemned Fenian Burke.

In October his 2½ year old son Jonathan died and we hear nothing more of the one year old Lincoln Finlen - most likely he had been given up for adoption. Finlen was becoming notorious and this was largely because of his support for the Irish causes, though he himself was not a Fenian member. He held more mass marches and cornered Gathorne Hardy again in his office, trying this time, to save the Manchester Martyrs from being hung. He was unsuccessful, they were hung and the vilified name of Finlen became so toxic that many of the Reformers turned against him, as it seems, did employers of French polishers. Finlen personally organised a mass demonstration as a mock funeral for the Martyrs which gained him even more opprobrium in the Press. His misery was compounded when on December 13<sup>th</sup> Fenians blew up the prison wall of Clerkenwell Prison, killing several innocent people, in an attempt to free a prisoner. Clerkenwell was where Finlen had lived and despite calling for meetings to protest *against* the Fenian outrage and having absolutely nothing to do with it he was tarred with having previously supported their cause and the gutter press of the day linked him closely to it. It was all getting too difficult for Finlen and he made it known that he would like to emigrate to America, the land of the Free, though he was still arranging meetings on Clerkenwell Green and tried to carry on as before.

In May 1868 his four remaining children were again taken to the workhouse and languished there for three weeks before Finlen could release them. He had taken work in Kent as a French polisher to earn enough to keep them and paid for neighbours to supervise them. His sister had kept them some of the time but she also worked for a living and when Finlen hadn't returned or paid her she took them to the workhouse. Finlen had descended into living in a slum by this time.

Finlen lead a delegation to see Gladstone and was received by him in a friendly manner. Finlen supported Gladstone over both Reform and Irish issues - but the opposition used the meeting and Finlen's reputation as a 'Fenian' to cast aspersions on Gladstone. In July Finlen's landlord tried to get him removed from his lodgings [in view of his Fenian leanings as much as rent arrears] and the legal struggle continued until August when Finlen and his children were thrown out and taken to the workhouse again. It was at this time that Finlen wrote his 'Defence of Himself'. Still Finlen continued to try and pursue his fight for justice but in April 1869 he had reached rock bottom - living in a wretched cellar in the wretchedest locality. His children were once again taken into the workhouse. After this Finlen's daughter Mary was taken in by George Hoppey and his wife who then adopted her. In September 1869 a gathering was held to collect funds for Finlen "who has definitely arranged to sail from Liverpool for the New World, on the 12th of October." Not all the money was collected and Finlen didn't go. He appears on the 1871 census with his three sons living in London under a false name 'James James', still calling himself a French polisher.

Apart from a brief appearance in 1879 in Barnsley he disappears completely. George Howell reported meeting him in 1888 living under an assumed name in Lancashire and noting that he was ill in a Warrington Hospital in 1889 - then nothing. Without knowing his assumed name we will probably never know when he died. His son James (born 1858 Manchester) died after a drunken brawl in 1890, His son William (born 1860 Hackney) served an apprenticeship as a tailor then emigrated to Australia in 1885 and has several descendents; son Frank (born circa 1862 London) also eventually emigrated to Australia and died the week before his brother William, without issue. Daughter Mary Caroline (born 1863 Islington) after having her surname changed to Hoppey then Fagg disappears though she may also have emigrated to Australia.

The first Chartist movement ended with its proponents being transported, jailed or persecuted by the government and their ideals only survived into the 1850's due to people such as Finlen keeping them alive. Their work lead to the later creation of the Unions and political reforms. The working class reformers themselves, however, often ended their lives in obscurity, poverty or by emigrating. Finlen met Karl Marx and shared a platform with him but didn't have an Engels to support him nor leave a large written legacy, but he did physically speak to many more people than Marx did and sowed the seeds and ideas that would later flourish after his unknown demise. He deserves to be recognised.

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2023 January

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