

***Democratic Passions.***  
***The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809–48***

Matthew Roberts  
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022)  
[ISBN 9781526137043]

KATIE BARCLAY  
University of Adelaide

Politics is an emotional domain, as any observer of contemporary affairs would acknowledge. Despite this, studies of emotion in political life have been relatively slow in getting off the ground. In the Sociology of Emotion, there is now work on the emotions of protest movements and the crowd, and International Relations, particularly studies of humanitarianism, are now getting to grips with how emotion drives engagement across nations and shapes diplomatic relations. We might have expected more to be done in History, given that one of the founders of the modern field of the History of Emotions—William Reddy—brought us the concept of ‘emotional regimes’ through a study of regime change during the French Revolution. And yet, there is less that one might hope. *Democratic Passions* then brings a welcome and original contribution to the History of Emotions through a study of the uses of emotion by and in response to the writings, speeches, and political activities of a number of British radicals during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Over seven chapters and a scholarly introduction, Roberts considers eight political radicals and the emotional politics of their public personas: William Cobbett, Richard Carlile, Robert Owen, Richard Oastler, J.R. Stephens, William Lovett, and in the same chapter, Daniel O’Connell and Feargus O’Connor. The men share a common interest in political reform, notably around the expansion of suffrage and the rights of the working man, but each were known writers and campaigners with their own distinct agendas and political concerns. The volume takes a similar format in that each chapter looks at how its subject thought about the role of emotion in political life and how these beliefs shaped their political practice. It then highlights how these ideas were received by different audiences and used to configure support for or critiques of their political position.

Carlile, for example, offered an austere and dispassionate politics, but it came with a theory of emotion that located feeling in the body, not the heart or the mind. In doing so, he provided a form of emotional management to counteract the fear and awe that limited people’s access to happiness. J.R. Stephens, by contrast, was known

for his impassioned rhetoric, that led to accusations that he lacked self-control. Yet even his emotion had rules, seeking to promote a form of ‘refined sympathy’ and expecting his followers to follow a moral code. Responses to these men reflected their emotional politics. Carlyle’s philosophy was viewed as blasphemous, but he also received criticism for failing to practice what he preached. Stephens’ rhetoric inspired crowds, but alienated him from the propertied classes, who viewed such emotion as unruly. *Democratic Passions* argues that during the period of the study ‘claims to political rationality were not only paved with affective tension, but that reason itself was an affective construct’ (236). Through exploring how each of his subjects produced and performed political rationality, and how their ideas and politics flowed into larger conversations on this topic, this book provides a nuanced account of how nineteenth-century British society imagined emotions to function and their role in the governance of the self and the state.

The period of Roberts’ study is a curious one for British historians of emotion. In my own scholarship, I have argued that for Irish and Scots alike, emotion was an important tool in a sentimental toolbox, readily deployed to persuade audiences, to demonstrate manliness to a watching public, and as a framework for political life. In contrast, English historians—although again until now no one has tackled these questions head on—have tended to argue for a decline in sentimentality and emotional expression for rational debate and selves that wish to distance themselves from feeling. If national distinctions are of course a possibility, it is a divergence of emotional cultures that has been calling out for further research. Can the United Kingdom really contain such an emotional divide? One of *Democratic Passions* important interventions is to demonstrate that the English do have a place for emotion in their imagining of the political subject, and through that the man, but that there was no simple story here of a uniform emotional political culture. Different radicals and their movements thought about the role of emotion in political life in different ways and that thinking shaped their politics, their persuasive strategies, and how they were treated by others, the public, the press, and the state.

The real art of the book is its capacity to tease out these complexities in thought and practice while nonetheless mapping the shared logics and connections that crossed movements and located these men as part of a shared emotional community or regime. The case study approach often risks failing to offer more than the sum of its parts, but this book offers an exemplar on how this approach can be used to offer nuance without losing sight of the bigger picture. Similarly, this is a book informed by emotions scholarship—Reddy’s regimes and Rosenwein’s communities are deployed at particular moments to consider how particular radical movements cohered, or did not—but where theory is used with a relatively light touch. *Democratic Passions* instead offers a study of the ‘feeling rules’ that were evident in their work, and which in some cases these men sought to shape, and ‘affective politics’ as the political condition they produce. Roberts argues that attention to how feeling rules are used by particular

groups allows us to pay greater attention to place and performance in productions of emotion, than the more holistic categories offered by Rosenwein and Reddy.

One result of this is that this is a historian's book, full of rich detail and context, and offers an important contribution not just to emotions history but to our understanding of radical politics, and I would suggest too to histories of masculinity and religion, during this era. If that is the case, it is a model for how to do this sort of research and will be of interest to everyone grappling with how to tease out the role and uses of emotion in political life.