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Cover illustration: detail from the map in Godwin’s Emigrants’ Guide to Van Diemen’s Land … (1823)

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WILLIAM CUFFAY IN TASMANIA

Mark Gregory

This paper is based on reports about William Cuffay, his activities and impact in colonial Australia, published in Australian newspapers between 1849 and 1870. There can be no doubt that the online access provided by the National Library of Australia, through its digitisation project, has made this type of research much simpler and faster. The newspaper articles cited have been located through searches using a variety of spellings, Cuffay, Cuffey and Cuffy, and combinations such as ‘William Cuffay’ and ‘master and servant’.

In the spring of 1870 the Mercury reported that a marked paupers grave in the Trinity burial-ground in Hobart held the remains of a convict who had just died in poverty, aged eighty-two. That convict was William Cuffay, born in England in 1788 the year that the First Fleet brought the first convicts to Botany Bay. That Cuffay’s grave was marked was unusual for a pauper, but then William Cuffay was a most unusual person: a man who, from the time of his arrival in the colony in 1849, played a role in Tasmania’s political life. By the time he died a number of basic democratic reforms that he had been promoting for half a century had been achieved.

Cuffay’s father was a freed slave who worked as a lumper at the Chatham Docks. In his teens William Cuffay had trained as a journeyman tailor and in his twenties he worked as a tailor in London. There he took part, with fellow union members, in the London Tailors’ Strike in 1834. The failure of that strike resulted in Cuffay losing his job, an event that started him on his radical political journey. In 1839 this black London tailor joined the Chartists, the mass movement that supported the People’s Charter for democratic reform. One of his earliest political acts was to help form the Metropolitan Tailors’ Charter Association. Cuffay’s dedication to the cause, and his organisational ability, were quickly recognised and in 1841 he was elected as the Westminster Chartists representative on the Metropolitan Delegate Council. The following year he chaired the ‘Great Public Meeting of the Tailors’, at which a national petition to the Commons was adopted. He was also elected to chair the Metropolitan Delegate Council. Cuffay was by then a leading London Chartist organiser.

The growing intensity of his political life saw him a member of the Masters and Servants Bill Demonstration Committee and a delegate at the 1845 Chartists’ National Convention, where he moved ‘that the Conference now draw up a plan to enable the people to purchase land and place the surplus labourers who subscribe thereto on such land’. In 1846 he was one of London’s three delegates to the Chartist Land Conference, and was appointed an auditor to the National Land Company. At the same time he served as one of the National Anti-Militia Association’s ten directors and was a member of the Democratic Committee for Poland’s Regeneration. Working class politics was already generating a working class response to the local privatisation of land, to national liberation movements and to the international spread of industrial capitalism.

By 1847 he was a member of the Central Registration and Election Committee and in 1848 a member of the management committee for a Metropolitan Democratic Hall. In 1848 Cuffay was also an organiser of the 12 April Chartists’ National Convention, an open-air event held on London’s Kennington Common. In August 1848 he was arrested

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1 Mercury, 4 August 1870.
2 A lumper is a labourer employed in loading and unloading cargoes. See The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.
3 The six principles of the People’s Charter were universal suffrage, no property qualification, annual parliaments, equal representation, payment of members and vote by ballot.
for conspiracy, and by October he had been convicted at the Old Bailey of ‘levying war on the Queen’. He was sentenced to be transported for life to Van Diemen’s Land, where he arrived on 29 November 1849. As a political prisoner he was given a ticket-of-leave on arrival, which allowed him to earn wages by working as a tailor. In 1857 Cuffay, along with other political prisoners (Irish and Chartist), was granted a free pardon.

What is interesting is just how much news about his involvement in the Chartist movement was reported in Australian newspapers at the time. In 2011 over fifty articles were available online that mention him by name. Sixteen of the articles had been reprinted from the British press and covered events such as the two large London meetings of Chartists in 1848, and the trial and sentencing of Chartists for treason that same year. Cuffay’s activities and his name had been well publicised to readers of the Sydney Morning Herald, the Argus, the Maitland Mercury, the Morton Bay Courier, the Hobart Town Courier and the Perth Gazette long before he was transported.

Political activism in Van Diemen’s Land

When William Cuffay landed in Van Diemen’s Land on 29 November 1849 his arrival was reported in five newspapers: the Courier on 1 December 1849, Sydney Morning Herald on 11 December 1849, Maitland Mercury on 15 December 1849, Argus on 17 December 1849 and the Moreton Bay Courier on 5 January 1850. Of all the convicts on the transport ship Adelaide, only Cuffay was mentioned by name in all five newspapers. He was variously described as ‘the Chartist ringleader’, ‘the famous Chartist’ and ‘Cuffey and ten other Chartists’. The first report to appear was an item in the Courier in Hobart Town which reveals that Cuffay had medical support from the surgeon on the Adelaide: ‘Cuffey, the Chartist ringleader, under the medical charge of Dr. Le Grand’. The official convict report book stated that Cuffay was transported for ‘Sedition convening a public meeting and speaking at the time’. It also recorded Cuffay’s height as four foot eleven inches, his age as sixty-one, his complexion dark; under ‘Marks’ is this description ‘Rather bald thin bones and spine deformed’.

One of the most extraordinary revelations about Cuffay was just how quickly he managed to continue his political activity and begin exercising leadership in Van Diemen’s Land. On 28 February 1851, after only a year in the colony, the Colonial Times reported his involvement in a ‘Public Meeting of the Free Trades Union’, called to discuss transportation and the use of convict labour for public works.

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4 Courier, 1 December 1849.
5 Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, CON37/1/5.
A public meeting of the members of this Society was held on Wednesday evening last [26 February 1851], in the Albert Theatre, Liverpool-street, for the purpose of passing resolutions appreciating the conduct of, and expressing their full confidence in the exertions of the Rev. Mr. West and W. P. Weston, Esq., the Tasmanian Delegates to the Australasian Anti-Transportation Conference; the firm determination of each individual member of the Union to use every exertion to secure the election of such persons as members of the Legislative Council as have proved themselves staunch and unflinching advocates for the cessation of transportation to these shores; and returning thanks to those gentlemen of the mercantile community who on a late occasion expressed themselves not only averse, but hostile to the scheme proposed by His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor, proffering the introduction of convict labour in the construction of the docks and other public works.

The report continued:

After some preliminary arrangements had been made, Mr. Cuffey was unanimously called to the chair, and opened the meeting with a brief address, developing the principal objects of the meeting. 6

Here it was revealed that ticket-of-leave man, William Cuffay, a convict and political prisoner transported for life and only fifteen months into his sentence, was already a respected and trusted member of the Hobart labour movement. The report also showed that organised workers in Tasmania, a large proportion of whom were ex-convicts or were related to convicts, played an important role in the anti-transportation movement. It is clear that Cuffay, as well as working as a tailor, was in contact with members of the local labour movement, political activity not normally condoned for ticket-of-leave men.

One of the Chartists who was sentenced and transported with Cuffay was Thomas Fay. In a letter published in Hobart’s Courier in 1854 he wrote as ‘Secretary of the Irish Felon Club’ about the conditional pardons granted to political convicts that year. Along with a list of Irish men, Fay (by then O’Fay) mentions Cuffay and other fellow Chartists.

I beg to offer the warm congratulations of an Irishman and a follower - even to Van Diemen’s Land - of the ‘United Irishman’, the ‘Irish Felon’, and ‘Tribune’ to Mr. O’Brien, Mr. Martin, and to Mr. O’Doherty upon their restoration to a part of the liberty they so nobly sacrificed for sake of the Old Land. The names are as follows:

Here it is implied that there is a connection between those organising for Irish liberation and Cuffay (in this letter, his name correctly spelled), an English Chartist organising for democracy and workers’ rights. William Paul Dowling, who is also mentioned in O’Fay’s letter, was already a successful portrait painter and photographer. He had been sentenced just before Cuffay and they had done time together in Newgate Gaol while waiting to be transported. British historian Malcolm Chase identified this relationship:

The prisoner found guilty in the same court immediately before him was William Dowling, a leading Irish Confederate and a portrait artist and engraver. In their Newgate cell, Dowling sketched Cuffay’s portrait, copies of which were sold by Chartist supporters to raise funds for Mary. It was four years before she

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6 ‘Public Meeting of the Free Trades Union’, Colonial Times, 28 February 1851.
7 Courier, 19 July 1854.
was permitted to join her husband in Tasmania, her passage funded by Chartist subscriptions.8

While Australian newspaper reports do not reveal whether there was a continuing relationship between Cuffay and Dowling, or among any of the other Chartists transported with them, one of Dowling’s letters home to Ireland, reported in Britain in May 1852, indicated that there was some contact.

THE REBELS OF ‘48.—The Galway Vindicator publishes a long letter from one of the misguided persons who figured in the year of turbulence, 1848. The writer is Mr. William P. Dowling, a young Irish artist, who resided in London, and took an active part in the Chartist demonstrations of ‘48. He was transported to Van Diemen’s Land, under the act which prohibited open and advised speaking. Of his companions in exile he says:—“Cuffey is working at his trade, which, until lately, was not very brisk; but the recent gold discoveries in the neighbouring continent has made every trade good now – he is much respected as a sober and industrious man. Fay has always been in constant employment, and is considered the best workman in the colony. Lacey has opened a shop in Launceston, his wife and five children have come to him, and he is in a fair way of reaping a fortune.”9

When he wrote this letter Dowling was at the start of what was to be a very successful career as a photographer and portrait painter in Hobart. He later moved his business to Launceston.

MR. W. PAUL DOWLING,
PORTRAIT PAINTER
Formerly of London,
MOVED to MACQUARIE STREET, PORTRAIT PAINTER. Opposite the Hutchins School. N.B.—A DRAWING CLASS for Young Ladies every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon.10

Six months after he landed in Hobart he married his Irish fiancée, who had sailed from Dublin to join him.

MARRIAGE. On the 3rd instant, at St. Joseph’s Chapel, by the Very Rev. W. Hall, V.G., WILLIAM P. DOWLING, of No 9, Liverpool-Street, Artist, to JULIANA DE VEAUX, youngest daughter of the late William de Veaux, Esq., of James’-street, in the City of Dublin.11

By 1854 political debate in the Legislative Council was focused on the Master and Servant Act. Workers’ organisations were particularly wary of the new version of this legislation and its onerous punishments that included imprisonment. Cuffay, as mentioned above, had been a prominent opponent of the same type of law in Britain. In Tasmania workers lobbied hard for the Act to be abolished or at least amended so it was less biased in the employers’ favour, and referred to it ironically as ‘the masters’ act’ seeing nothing in it for the servant. The tenor and language of a letter to the Courier, signed ‘A Friend of the Labourer’, has all the marks of workers’ views on the subject. Whoever wrote it, had, like Cuffay, a deep knowledge of the legislation and the way it disadvantaged the servant. The letter was published on 31 August 1854.

9 Times, 25 May 1852.
10 Courier, 17 December 1852.
11 Courier, 4 May 1850.
I consider, sir, that no employer should have the power of thrusting into the custody of the police his male or female servant, without complaint first made upon oath by such employer, except for certain gross acts of misconduct—such as getting helplessly drunk in the service, wilfully damaging the master’s property, or threatening to do any master or mistress, some bodily harm.

The term ‘misconduct’ is a cover for an almost indefinite number of the pettiest misdeeds. So that if a female servant happen in a pet to laugh at her mistress, it may be tortured into a breach of the new law, and thus she may be cast into the watch-house for a night, though only to be discharged by the presiding Justice the next day.¹²

The letter also asserted that the legislation belonged to the past and that it was not suitable for an ‘enlightened’ nineteenth century. It concluded by praising Tasmanian workers, suggesting a course of action and offering a word of caution should nothing be done.

The working classes of this colony have among their body many intelligent men, with minds capable of the highest acquisitions, and surely they can meet and petition the Legislative Council against the objectionable clauses in the Act in question. Unless, therefore, they have the moral courage, the manliness, and the determination to rise up and protest against a measure which will forge the galling fetters of tyranny and injustice upon their liberty, I say, they deserve to be enslaved.

The cautionary advice at the tail end of the letter has a markedly Chartist tone, as does the use of phrases like ‘moral courage and manliness’ and ‘the galling fetters of tyranny’. This letter heralded the start of a public campaign of meetings and petitions that in 1856 resulted in a much-amended Master and Servant Act, amended to water down the more draconian powers of employers over workers. At the end of December in 1857 an anonymous Tasmanian landowner expressed his concerns about this legislation in a letter published in the Mercury.

The Act abandons imprisonment and supplies no check in its place; but it is said, that imprisonment is of no use to those to whom it is no degradation; but it involves loss of time, and therefore loss of money, and the shearer or reaper will not like to make himself liable to a month’s loss of either shearing or harvest … I have this year 300 acres ploughed, and intend to plough 500 next year. If this Act passes, as at present proposed, I shall put the whole in, in grain, and keep one shepherd and one gardener, where I now keep 12 men, some with wives and families. That I am not a bad master may be inferred from the facts that I have only twice (during 14 years that I have been an employer of labour in this country) brought my servants WRWKHSROLFHRI¿FH%XWZK%EHFDXVHWKH\NQHZWKHUHZDVDODZLQIRUFHZKLFK would punish them if I saw occasion to avail myself of it. I will not lengthen my letter by stating numerous cases in point that occur to me, some so recent as last week, but do trust that a measure so calculated to drive Masters out of the colony will not be passed. For every 100 emigrants that have come here how many Masters have come? hardly any, not nearly so many as have gone out,—and will the House pass a measure that will make the Masters still greater slaves ?¹³

The 1856 version of the act was part of a long chain of legislation stretching back centuries in English law. ‘Legislation governing the relation of master and servant is almost as old as the relation itself’, wrote AP Davidson in a 1976 paper published in the

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¹² *Courier*, 31 August 1854.
¹³ *Mercury*, 14 December 1857.
Davidson argued that master and servant laws all shared the same class based bias. They all had two things in common however: the first was that breaches of contracts of employment were treated as criminal offences often with severe penalties and secondly, they all revealed, in varying degrees, bias in favour of employers of labour.

In Australia, all States passed similar legislation in the nineteenth century beginning with New South Wales in 1823. The first Tasmanian (Van Diemen’s Land) Act appeared in 1840 and was replaced in 1852, 1854 and 1856 … the infamous Van Diemen’s Land Act of 1854 … has been acknowledged to be a draconian enactment even for a colony with a high percentage of ex-convicts in its free labour force. Its implementation, with periods of imprisonment accompanied by hard labour and solitary confinement for employees guilty of breaches of contract, led to an organised working class movement for reform which was eventually successful in the shape of the Master and Servant Act 1856 (Tas.). This Act, with some amendment, is still in existence and although often forgotten and rarely used, it will be shown to have some significance today.\footnote{[14]}

Davidson concluded his paper with a warning that advised the need to repeal the act, just the result Tasmanian workers had advocated and attempted to achieve a century earlier.

It is submitted that it is absolutely essential for the security of employees and unionists in the State that the Master and Servant Act 1856 be repealed because of the growing likelihood that prosecutions under it will be renewed, and because of the central role it can play in civil actions against strikers simply by being on the statute book. Only then can the long and often fearful history of master and servant legislation in Tasmania be brought to a satisfactory conclusion.\footnote{[15]}

In a footnote this Davidson added ‘A Bill to amend the Industrial Relations Act 1975 and to repeal the Master and Servant Act 1856 is now before the House of Assembly’.

**Cuffay’s political activities as a free man**

Cuffay had begun working in the colony as an organiser while he was still constrained as the holder of a ticket-of-leave. He received a conditional pardon in 1854 and a free pardon, restoring full civil rights, in 1857. There appeared to have been some concern about the receipt of Cuffay’s full pardon, with the *Courier*, in February 1857, proposing that Parliament should make enquiries about its status.

The Queen has signified her pleasure that a full and free pardon should be granted, under the Great Seal of Great Britain and of Ireland respectively, to all persons suffering under the consequences of conviction for political offences. This will be of the greatest consequence to many like Mr. Smith O’Brien, O’Doherty, &c, in Ireland, and Frost, Williams, and Jones, in England … We should presume, therefore, that Mr. Cuffey and his fellow Chartists will be included. If not, we hope that some independent member of the Tasmanian Parliament will move an address to the Crown upon the subject.\footnote{[16]}

\footnote{[15] AP Davidson, p. 146.}
\footnote{[16] *Courier*, 17 February 1857.}
It took time for a pardon to arrive from London and the Tasmanian authorities also had opportunities to delay passing the message on to the convict, something that they did in 1836 with the pardon of the Tolpuddle Martyr, George Loveless. In Cuffay’s case, concern about the delay was short lived, and his official convict record gives ‘24 February 57’ as the date of his free pardon.17 Free at last, and in his early seventies, Cuffay continued to work in Hobart where he and his wife, who had joined him in 1853, had elected to stay. Mary Ann Cuffay had been a recognised activist in her own right and was reported by the Times as having been present at her husband’s trial in 1848.  

Mrs. Cuffey was among the crowd in the body of the court during part of the examination, but having ventured to express her views of the proceeding in too audible terms, she had to be put out by an officer.18

Cuffay remained politically active, in particular as an adviser on changes to the laws applying to masters and servants, legislation he probably understood better than anyone else in Tasmania because of his Chartist experience in London. This experience was noted in David Jones’s book, Chartism and the Chartists.  

Certain Chartists were prominent union leaders – Thomas Hepburn and Martin Jude in the north-east, R. J. Richardson and William Grocott in the Manchester area, William Cuffay and John Parker in London, and many others. These men encouraged trade societies to send deputations to radical associations, introduced Chartist speakers at union conferences, and called public meetings to aid strikers. In 1844 they were involved in the joint Chartist-and-trade-union campaign against the Master and Servant’s Bill.19

The Courier of 21 March 1857 revealed a distinct change in attitude towards him when he organised a meeting in Hobart to discuss the nature of newspaper reporting. An article titled, ‘The re-opening of the Albert Theatre’, began with these putdowns.

AFTER a long recess this popular place of amusement is to be re-opened on Monday next, under the management of Mr. William Cuffy, the recent Chartist agitator of Kennington Common notoriety ... The opening piece, which from a casual glance at the bill seems to be an adaptation from play of the third year of the French Revolution, viz., The Press Chained and Muzzled by the People.20

The statement that the theatre was under the management of Cuffay was most likely ironic, given the tone of the rest of the article. Three days later the Courier continued in similar vein with its report of a public meeting involving Cuffay and others who were supporters of Thomas Gregson, Premier of Tasmania since 26 February 1857.21

A meeting was holden at the Albert Theatre last night, the placard stating that it was to take “Into consideration the political demerits of certain Tasmanian journals, and to elicit an opinion that the Press should be discouraged in the disgraceful and un-English attempts to mislead the public, and deny the popular Administration the fair play to which they are justly entitled, so long as their measures are calculated to advance Tasmania.” Mr. Cuffy was appointed chairman, and after a series of vituperative aspersions and low expressions made personally against the proprietors and editors of all the papers published in the city, the cabinet conductor of the Daily News alone excepted, the following resolutions, introduced and

17 TAHO, CON37/1/5.
18 Times, 21 August 1844.
19 D Jones, Chartism and the Chartists, Allen Lane, London, 1975, p. 139.
20 Courier, 21 March 1857.
21 Gregson’s term as premier lasted only until 25 April 1857.
supported by language which it would be disgraceful to report, were passed by the motley assemblage.22

On 26 March the following short article appeared in the *Colonial Times* under the heading, ‘The press and the people’:

The freedom of the Press! Faugh! What do these men know about the freedom of the press, they will be citizens and slaves (as Mr. Cuffey called them), and because the press will not permit the consummation of their vile ambition they revile and condemn it. They echo the very sentiments of the Premier who admits no press to be moral which condemns his vices, no press to be intelligent which disputes his policy, no press to be honest which will not accept his pay and be subservient to his ends. The freedom of the Press! It is a matter of some concern to the public just now that that freedom rests on other bases than mob-laudation, and is cognizant of higher principles than the prophesies of Mahomet.23

Language like ‘mob-laudation’ and ‘the prophesies of Mahomet’ hint at an ambivalence about Cuffay. His organising ability and workers’ regard for him are noted, but he is also viewed as a potential threat. When he accuses newspapers of misleading the public by denying the Government fair play, they respond by accusing him of jeopardising the freedom of the press. There was battle going on between various political factions in the Tasmanian Parliament and newspaper proprietors were ensuring that their preferences were known. It was not a time for polite exchange. The *Courier* campaign continued with a report on the behaviour of onlookers in the parliament.

The miscellaneous assemblage in the gallery, comprehending principally such descriptions of persons as meet under the chairmanship of Mr. Cuffy, – forgetting where they were during some excited but excusable remarks of the Premier’s son, – are guilty (to quote the Cabinet organ) of ‘loud clapping of hands, kicking of feet, and thumping of sticks.’ A proceeding so derogatory to the character of the Assembly, so fatal if permitted to all independence in its proceedings, evokes the interference of the Speaker, and under his orders the Sergeant-at-Arms proceeds to clear the gallery.24

In April 1857 the *Courier* carried a lengthy letter, ‘Letter XVIII’, from an anonymous correspondent who signed himself ‘Junius Tasmaniensis’. The writer’s intent was to ridicule and belittle Cuffay and other workers who had been at the Albert Theatre meeting in March.

The outrage to which I allude is, of course, none other than the brutal and ruffianly, but impotent, display of malignity which characterised the recent meeting, convened for the purpose of condemning the principles and conduct of all the Hobart Town journals, with the exception of the Premier’s Pet. Not a person of respectability could have attended such a meeting without a stain upon his reputation; and those newspapers which have reported the proceedings deserve the disgrace which such foul-mouthed sputterings cannot fail to shed upon their columns. It was composed exclusively of the low-bred, the criminal, and the profane; the chairman was one who, like his fellow-convict Frost, no sooner receives the gracious pardon of his Sovereign, than he shows himself utterly unworthy of the boon; and the grounding ‘slaves,’ who moved and spoke to the tissue of falsehoods and follies in the shape

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22 *Courier*, 24 March 1857.
23 *Colonial Times*, 26 March 1857.
24 *Courier*, 26 March 1857.
of resolutions, were such as had either ‘left their country for their country’s good,’ or are good for nothing in any country at all.\(^{25}\)

The language of the letter clearly reveals class-based distaste and disdain: ‘the low-bred, the criminal, and the profane’, the ‘foul-mouthed sutterings’ and the ‘brutal and ruffianly, but impotent, display of malignity’. This language closely echoes British newspaper reports of Cuffay and his ‘ruffianism’ a decade earlier. This attack on Cuffay coincided with his strong opposition to the draconian features of the Masters’ and Servants’ Act and his use of public meetings to criticise the political stance of the press.

Information about the political activities of Cuffay, as reported in Tasmanian newspapers, occasionally featured in mainland papers. In July 1857 the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried this report.

Everything is now settled or unsettled, as the case may be, in Hobart Town, by a ‘monster meeting.’ If our Chancellor of the Exchequer propose ‘a new tax upon spirits’ – if a worthless female of free character in every sense induces the country police, by using profane oaths and loose conversation, to believe that she is a convict absconder, and consequently gets into custody – if an emigrant be punished for refusing to fulfil the conditions on which he received a free passage from the public funds, – if some blatant cobbler thinks he can vamp up the affairs of the colony, or of the municipality, or teach public journalists how to conduct newspapers, – if a sailor be shown that he cannot, with impunity, ‘drive a coach and six through’ his articles, – forsooth, a poster is issued – a theatre engaged – a Miller or a Cuffy cuffed into the chair, and a yell raised from an assemblage of disaffected politicians and republicans – and sinners – sea-lawyers, ‘prentice boys, and penny-satirists enough to ‘fright the isle from its impropriety.’\(^{26}\)

‘Monster Meetings’ were not new to Australia. Most famously it was ‘Monster Meetings’, organised by the Chartist-influenced Ballarat Reform League that had brought together the Eureka diggers on the goldfields three years earlier. These meetings preceded the uprising and, on 3 December 1854, the massacre at the Eureka Stockade. The Chartist meetings that Cuffay had organised in London had also been called ‘Monster Meetings’, as had meetings in Dublin organised by Daniel O’Connell. In Australia, Ireland and Britain working-class-organised ‘Monster Meetings’, with their demands for democratic rights, were a form of democracy in action, where arguments were put forward and resolutions voted on. The ridicule expressed in the press, demonstrated a fear of the democratic movement and a rejection of the notion that workers should have a say in the affairs of government. Scorn was poured on the thought that workers could teach ‘journalists how to conduct newspapers’.

Reports of Cuffay’s involvement in election activities include important information: the name and place of residence of the candidate he supported, along with his own home address. An example is this advertisement in the *Mercury* of 16 July 1858.

Names and Residences of the Citizens Nominated for Election as ALDERMAN for the City of Hobart Town on the 17th day of July, 1858, with the Names and Residences of their Proposers respectively …

CLEGHORN, John, Brisbane-place, Brisbane-street, proposed by John Elliott, of 71, Upper Warwick-street, and William Cuffey, of 42, Patrick-street.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) *Courier*, 2 April 1857.

\(^{26}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1857.

\(^{27}\) *Mercury*, 16 July 1858.
Cuffay speaks and entertains

At least two of Cuffay’s speeches at Tasmanian meetings were recorded at some length and published in newspapers. One is of Cuffay speaking at a meeting called to discuss a petition for submission to Parliament regarding ‘exorbitant expenditure entailed upon the Colony’. The meeting of ‘between 1,000 and 1,500 persons’ was reported in the Courier in September 1858:

MR. CUFFEY.- Fellow citizens and brother working slaves (laughter) – I’m determined that shall not be forgotten – I have an objection to Mr. Boys presenting our petition, and I think it would injure our cause to do so, when we can confide it to a better man. If you remarked Mr. Boys was very cold towards the end of his address, and particularly when he came to speak of State aid to religion. I remarked it, didn’t you. (Assent.) I should not wish to see the petition entrusted, to any one who requires to be spurred and pushed on, and I propose therefore that the petition shall be forwarded to our old tried, staunch, and trusty friend, Mr. Maxwell Miller. (Hear, hear.) You approve the amendment - then who objects to it? (Laughter.) I’ve another objection to that petition being entrusted to Mr. Boys. I recollect he was pledged to the abolition of the Master and Servants’ Act. How did he act when that Bill was before the House? He was not there. (Ironical cheers and slight jovial interruption.)

Cuffay’s opening address, ‘fellow slaves’, was as well known to his Tasmanian audience as it had been to his Chartist audiences in England, hence its amused reception. Undoubtedly for Cuffay, the son of a slave, the phrase was invested with personal meaning. Rhetorical use of ‘brother working slaves’ at such a meeting was deliberately inclusive. Cuffay’s reference to the campaign to abolish the Masters and Servants’ Act again shows his continued interest in the legislation. This speech also demonstrates how scathing he could be to elected representatives who failed to carry out pledges made to supporters. His insistence that elected representatives should be answerable to the electors was an important Chartist principle. The following day the Courier included these comments on the meeting.

No doubt Mr. Cuffey would rather serve his ‘fellow-slaves’ in this way than in any other. We should then have halcyon days of Government. Not a coat nor a waist-coat, nor any other male garment should be allowed to be imported? not a ‘jemmygrant’ tailor should be permitted to land on our free shores? not a labourer should be subjected to the ignominy of a reduction of wages. Liberal measures would be the order of the day. Seven halfpenny loaves should be sold for a penny, the pint pot should hold a quart? and in Elizabeth street should the Protector’s goose and palfrey ‘go to grass.’ Such would probably prove the happy state of things under the Cuffey Protectorate; yet, to do the patriotic but mistaken little tailor justice, we would a thousand to one rather live under his system of political economy, than under that of Mr. J. M. Wilson. In all poor Cuffey’s extravagant projects to serve his class, he has never proposed anything so absurd or suicidal as a tax on wool? … If Mr. Boys is to be only the representative mouth piece of Cuffey and his ‘fellow working slaves,’ we would much rather have Mr. Cuffey in the Assembly himself; who is infinitely the better speaker, and who would occasionally elicit a laugh, by his powers of repartee. The contest for the leadership of the Opposition, between Cuffey and Matthews, would be rich treat? a political game of rouge et noir? which would greatly enliven our dull, business-like, and matter-of-fact debates.

28 Courier, 3 September 1858.
29 Courier, 3 September 1858.
In the same article the *Courier* asserted that Mr Boys must ‘always vote under fear and trembling, lest he at some time find himself in the claws of some such merciless tiger as Cuffey’. Ambivalence towards Cuffay is shown again in the tone and language. There is the indirect reference to Cuffay the tailor and his lifetime agitation for workers’ rights: ‘Not a coat nor a waistcoat, nor any other male garment should be allowed to be imported? not a ‘jemmygrant’ tailor should be permitted to land on our free shores? not a labourer should be subjected to the ignominy of a reduction of wages’. There is also evidence of a backhanded admiration in ‘the patriotic but mistaken little tailor’ and ‘we would much rather have Mr. Cufféy in the Assembly himself; who is infinitely the better speaker, and who would occasionally elicit a laugh, by his powers of repartee’.

In Britain Cuffay had been known among his friends for his ability to entertain, not only as speaker at meetings, but also as a singer, especially of comic songs. The Chartists had their own counter-culture and poems, songs and music were an important part of that. In their 2009 paper, *‘Songs for the millions’: Chartist music and popular aural tradition*, Kate Bowen and Paul Pickering discuss the importance and uses of music in the Chartist movement.

If we look closely at the ‘musical behaviour’ of the Chartists, a soundscape emerges of the kinds of music they used and the functions these different kinds of music served. Formal and informal music was an integral part of their activities. Their community-based music making spanned a raft of different genres, styles, and traditions. The importance of music in two of their main political activities, the public demonstration and soirée, attest to this. As we have suggested, bands were integral to Chartist culture. They figured prominently in the majority of the public demonstrations, performing a similar symbolic function to that of the banner although in sounding form. The number of banners and bands provided a complementary visual and sounding index to the importance of the occasion. In the open air the band, drawing upon the much older tropes of fanfare and ritual, provided not only a ceremonial function – a sense of pomp and circumstance – at the head of the procession, it also delineated the different districts and institutions involved, providing an opportunity to affirm their local identity, and performed a Pied Piper-like role: ‘perambulating the city’ in large numbers summoning the Chartists to their posts.

During its twenty-year lifetime the *Northern Star*, the main Chartist newspaper in Britain, published ‘almost 1,500 poems (or excerpts of poems). These poems were the work of at least 390 Chartist poets, the vast majority of whom working men’. In a number of reviews, the *Northern Star* reported on Cuffay as singer.

**DRAMATIC ENTERTAINMENT FOR THE BENEFIT THE NATIONAL VICTIM FUND**

The members of the London Amateur Dramatic Society gave their first public performance in aid of the above fund, at the Royal Standard Theatre, High-street, Shoreditch, on Thursday evening, NOV. 16th. … The amateurs were aided by several members of the ‘Standard Company,’ and by Mr. Cuffay, whose singing was warmly encored.

**LIBERATION OF GEORGE WHITE**

A public festival, consisting of dinner, concert, and ball, was held on Monday afternoon, January the 8th, at the Political and Scientific Institution, to celebrate

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30 K Bowen and PA Pickering, ‘*Songs for the millions*: Chartist music and popular aural tradition’, *Labour History Review*, vol. 74, no. 1, April 2009, p. 50.
32 *Northern Star*, 25 November 1843.
the liberation of Mr. George White, after eight months incarceration in the Queens Prison. ... During the evening, Messrs. Cuffay, Simpson, Slater, and Allnut favoured the company with some excellent songs. The Hall being cleared of the tables, &c., dancing commenced, and was continued with good spirit. The Hall was densely thronged throughout the evening.33

In Cuffay’s obituary there is a hint that this side of him surfaced in Tasmania: ‘his company was much sought by his fellow labourers, as he was witty and full of anecdote’.

In May 1861 the Mercury revealed him, very much in his element, in a rowdy meeting of the Protection Association called to discuss the question of tariffs. Cuffay began by calming things down and then quickly switched to ‘vaudeville’.

MR. CUFFY now presented himself, and a voice having observed, ‘There’s an honest man,’ order was immediately restored

MR. CUFFY said, Mr. Chairman, I rise to order. We have met here for a public purpose, to do a public good, (hear, hear), and the meeting shall not be broken up by private squabbles. If you’ll follow me and support the chair, we’ll put them (Walker and another) out. (Cheers and laughter, and what do you think of that, Walker?) (Renewed uproar. Pay your wages. Laughter.)

MR. CUFFY -Any volunteers! and with this he rushed into the body of the meeting, and endeavoured to oust Walker and some other individuals out of the room, causing great laughter and uproar, and delaying the proceedings for about twenty minutes. The repeated shouts from late Advertiser employees of ‘Robbed,’ ‘Starved,’ and ‘Pay your wages,’ continued until Mr. Hall resumed his seat. During this last disturbance the Chairman stood up upon his chair, threatened to leave it, and was calling for Constable Dorsett, when Mr. C. Walker commenced to address the meeting and silence was again restored.

MR. C. WALKER, in proposing the third resolution, strongly advocated the imposition of a tax upon all imported articles. He read the resolution as follows:

3. That it is the opinion, and firm resolve of this meeting, that the Association pledge itself to redoubled exertions in the present critical juncture of public affairs in this colony, and it is therefore resolved, that numerous district meetings, shall be held to support the objects of this meeting.

MR. CUFFY, in responding to the call of the meeting, strongly urged upon those present to pay their shilling and join the Association as by this means alone they would be enabled to return as members whom they liked, and so secure to themselves the protection they were all so much in need of. (Loud cheering, during which Mr. Cuffy retired.).34

Two years later, in July 1863, another Cuffay speech was reported at length in the Mercury. Cuffay, now in his mid-seventies, addressed a public meeting of citizens at the Theatre Royal in Hobart ‘for the purpose of considering the new tariff’.

MR. CUFFEY said he would propose the resolution if nobody else would. He remembered that among the old radicals of England it was considered that taxation without representation was a tyranny which should be resisted, (cheers) and therefore they had headed their placard Taxation with Representation. He would now move ‘That in the opinion of this meeting, the Bills now before the legislature for imposing additional taxes on the necessaries of life are in their provisions

33 Northern Star, 13 January 1844.
34 Mercury, 16 May 1861.
oppressive and unjust; are vicious in principle, and opposed to progression and enlightened legislation.’

He firmly agreed with that resolution. He was aware that the ministry must have a revenue, but they should raise it in a way that was just and fair to all classes. It was now proposed to levy taxes by which the burden would fall heaviest upon the working-classes. He had met many great and rich men who thought they would have to pay most under the new system, because as they said they kept many servants, and had to give rations. But how did they make this up? Why they were lowering the wages (cheers), and this they all felt. It was a great blessing that they had a voice in the representation of the country. It was the working – classes had put these men in, and they should now see that they did their duty. They had heard a great deal about tea and sugar Tommy, but were they satisfied now with tea and sugar Charley? (Yes, yes, and cheers.) That was the way to find them out. He thought they were not satisfied with the present government. These men had not fulfilled their promises (a voice: give them time). They had given them time, and what sort of measures had they produced? Why they were like old eggs. They had been a long time in the process of incubation, and now they turned out rotten, and should be thrown at them (no, no, and uproar). He did not know why there was so much interruption … He had gone round the town during the last three days, and worked hard to get up that meeting, and the young men before him should be ashamed of themselves, when they left it to an old cripple to get up such a meeting. (Oh!) … The Chairman called the speaker to order, he was wandering from the question. Mr. Cuffey continued: Well the question was the tariff, and that would affect them all. It affected him for he was out of work, out of money, and in debt, and he could not afford to pay any extra taxes. He thought many of them were in the same position, only they were too proud to acknowledge it. (Uproar.) He had much pleasure in moving the resolution.35

Newspaper reports, like these, provide an invaluable picture of Cuffay the man, as vivid as could be expected from a written report. The vernacular style, the in-jokes, the liveliness and the asides show an accomplished storyteller in action amongst his equals. Here he is, a speaker at a public meeting, being cheered and jeered, dealing with hecklers and instructions from the chair. The local newspapers are drawn to Cuffay, recording his arguments and placing them before their readers. Cuffay speaks about himself, saying that he ‘was out of work, out of money, and in debt’. These words would be remembered and seven years later paraphrased in his obituary. Because of newspaper reporting, the campaigning voice of a working-class leader comes down to us loud and clear from a hundred-and-fifty-years ago. Cuffay’s twenty years in Tasmania provide the historian with a more detailed picture of the man than the one gained from the British press reports of him as a Chartist. The Tasmanian reports add considerably to the record of the fifteen or so years he was politically active in Britain. Cuffay’s success as a political activist in Tasmania also tells us something of the shift in power that was occurring in the colony at the time, a shift that meant that ordinary workers were becoming a force to be reckoned with.

Cuffay remained politically active at eighty-one years of age, as this extract from a Hobart election meeting held in June 1869 in the hall of the Mechanics Institute shows.

Mr. CUFFY in some brief remarks, and amidst occasional interruptions, moved that Mr. Cook was a fit and proper person to represent Hobart Town in the House of Assembly. He maintained that that gentleman ever since he (the speaker) had known him, had been a true friend to the working classes.36

35 Mercury, 3 July 1863.
36 Mercury, 22 June 1869.
This Hobart building, now known as Wesley Hall, was completed in 1825 and was the first purpose-built Wesleyan Chapel in Australia. The Wesleyans leased the building to the Mechanics Institute from 1841, following the opening of a larger church next door. (Mark Gregory, 2011)

The entrance to the Theatre Royal in Campbell Street, Hobart, in 2011. (Mark Gregory, 2011)

A building that was part of the Brickfields Asylum. (Mark Gregory, 2011)
An online search of the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office database revealed that Cuffay’s wife, Mary Ann, died in 1869 in Hobart. Cuffay was admitted, poor and sick, to the Brickfields asylum in October that year.

**Death of a Chartist celebrity**

William Cuffay died in Hobart on 29 July 1870. Two obituaries were published, one in Tasmania and one in New South Wales. They were in two separate editions of each newspaper, indicating that there was still thought to be interest in Cuffay, a quarter of a century after his name had first been reported in the Australian press. In Tasmania the *Mercury* published a lengthy obituary under the heading, ‘Death of a celebrity’:

> At a meeting of the Board of Management of the Brickfields Invalid Depot yesterday, four deaths were reported as having taken place since the previous meeting. One was the death of William Cuffey, aged 82, who had been an inmate since last October. He was a tailor by trade, and had been employed during his residence in the colony by one of the principal shops in Hobart Town; but ill health and advancing years prevented his earning a livelihood for some time past, and he ultimately had to succumb to the stern necessity of taking refuge at the Brickfields asylum. The deceased was known as one of the London Chartists of 1848, and he arrived here with others in the ship Adelaide about the latter end of 1850, as a victim of his prominence in the disturbances in connection with the turmoil in France, when the final effort of the Chartists to obtain those extensive political reforms, which contemplated universal suffrage, equal electoral districts, vote by ballot, annual parliaments, no property qualification for members, and payment of members of Parliament for their services, was made. The London Times of the period referred to Wm. Cuffey, as having, like Hannibal, ‘sworn his children to eternal enmity to the enemies of his country.’ Deceased availed himself, within the last sixteen or eighteen years, of many opportunities to express his strong political feelings, against which, in the extreme freedom of the Tasmanian constitution, there was no barrier. He particularly distinguished himself in the agitation for the amendment of the Masters’ and Servants’ law of the colony, and being a fluent and an effective speaker, he was always popular with the working classes. The agitation of Cuffey and other prominent advocates for the rights of the operative classes, contributed in a great degree to the settlement of the Masters’ and Servants’ question on a satisfactory basis. An amended Act was passed by the Legislature of the day, and we are not aware that the provisions of the Act have since been taken exception to. Deceased took a prominent part in election matters, and always went in strongly for the individual rights of working men. One of his last appearances on the platform was on the occasion of the meeting at the Theatre Royal, against the Whyte-Meredith ministry, when he urged his right to complain by such characteristic expressions as ‘Fellow-slaves,’ and ‘I’m old, I’m poor, I’m out of work, and I’m in debt, and therefore I have cause to complain.’ For the most part of the time he was at the Brickfields establishment Cuffey was an occupant of the sick ward. The Superintendent states that he was a quiet man, and an inveterate reader. His remains were interred in the Trinity burying-ground, and by special desire his grave has been marked, in case friendly sympathisers should hereafter desire to place a memorial stone on the spot.”

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37 TAHO, Colonial Tasmanian Family Links Detail.
38 *Mercury*, 4 August 1870.
39 *Mercury*, 4 August 1870.
The obituary in the *Maitland Mercury*, a regional New South Wales’ paper, was published as ‘Death of a Chartist celebrity’.

One of the old celebrities of the colony passed away on Friday, the 29th July, at the Brickfields depot, a Government charitable institution, near Hobart Town, at the age of eighty-five years. This man was William Cuffey, and well known as one of the Chartist leaders in the old country. Soon after his arrival in Tasmania he mixed largely in politics, and was always remarkably active at elections. He always supported the people’s side, and opposed everything that tended to cripple the rights of the people. He was a useful though a silent member of the body who, about eighteen years ago, agitated for the repeal of the Masters’ and Servants’ Act. Cuffey was a tailor by trade, but of late years fell into poverty through old age. During his better days his company was much sought by his fellow labourers, as he was witty and full of anecdote.40

These obituaries show how well Cuffay was regarded in Australia. In Britain a number of newspapers published extracts from the *Mercury* obituary, cited above: on 13 November 1870, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, on 10 December 1870, the *Birmingham Daily Post And Journal*, (which credits its report to the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*), and on 16 December 1870, the *Leeds Mercury*. This indicates that he was still remembered there twenty-one years after he landed in Van Diemen’s Land. The final words of the Tasmanian obituary – ‘By special desire his grave has been marked, in case friendly sympathisers should hereafter desire to place a memorial stone on the spot’ – are especially poignant given the largely forgotten history of this remarkable human rights activist.

In his 2010 BBC 4 Radio documentary about Cuffay, *Britain’s black revolutionary*, Bill Morris embraced Cuffay as part of his own heritage. Morris, a black union leader and former general secretary of Britain’s largest union, the Transport and General Workers Union, concluded the broadcast with this observation.

As far as I know there still isn’t a headstone or an epitaph on Cuffay’s grave in Tasmania. Maybe, just maybe those words, ‘I’m old, I’m poor, I’m out of work, and I’m in debt, and therefore I have a right to complain’, would suffice.41

There isn’t a headstone and probably there isn’t a grave. Campbell Street Primary School was built on the Trinity Burial Ground in 1926, following the 1923 removal of the remains of over 5,000 convicts and Free Settlers to the paupers’ section of the Cornelian Bay Cemetery. Just inside the fence of the school in Campbell Street stands a single stone dedicated to their memory. The Government of Tasmania erected this Brian Rieusset-designed monument in April 2000. It reads.

Trinity Burial Ground  
Prisoners Burial Ground  
Dedicated to the memory  
of over 5000  
Free Settlers and Bond Convicts  
buried in these grounds  
between 1831 & 1872

40 *Maitland Mercury*, 9 August 1870.  
41 W Morris, *Britain’s black revolutionary*, BBC Radio 4, 2010, transcribed by M Gregory. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00t4q0j.
Beneath these words is a poem by Linus W Miller, an American convict. This poem was published in 1844 in the *Colonial Times*. Miller, a twenty-two-year-old American lawyer was transported from Canada to Van Diemen’s Land as a State Prisoner after becoming involved in the 1838 Canadian rebellion. He arrived in Hobart Town on 17 January 1840. After returning to the United States following the receipt of his pardon, Miller wrote a book about his experiences, *Notes of an Exile in Van Diemen’s Land*, published in 1846. In the book, the poem is prefaced with the remark that he wrote it after searching in vain for the grave of his fellow convict and friend, Alexander McLeod. ‘When compelled to abandon all hope of finding the grave, I sat down and penned the following lines.’ Cuffay no doubt would have been pleased to know he had been commemorated on a memorial that included so many other convicts and settlers. Somewhere in Hobart he is interred in – as the last words of the Miller’s poem proclaim – ‘a Patriot’s grave.’

This memorial stone was erected in 2000 in the grounds of Campbell Street primary school, the site of Trinity Burial Ground. (Mark Gregory, 2011.)

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42 *Colonial Times*, 26 June 1844.
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