

**TWO ORATIONS  
AGAINST TAKING  
AWAY HUMAN LIFE**

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Two Orations Against Taking Away Human Life by Thomas Cooper

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**THOMAS COOPER**

**TWO ORATIONS  
AGAINST TAKING  
AWAY HUMAN LIFE**



*Cooper's*

TWO ORATIONS

AGAINST

TAKING AWAY HUMAN LIFE,

UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES; AND IN EXPLANATION, AND  
DEFENCE, OF THE MISREPRESENTED DOCTRINE OF

NON-RESISTANCE.

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DELIVERED AT THE NATIONAL HALL, HOLBORN;  
FEBRUARY 25 AND MARCH 4, 1846.

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By THOMAS COOPER,  
THE CHARTIST,

AUTHOR OF "THE PURGATORY OF SUICIDES;" "WISE SAWS AND MODERN  
INSTANCES;" "THE BARON'S YULE FEAST."

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M.DCCC.XLVI.

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TO  
THE WORKING CLASSES,  
BEFORE WHOM THESE ORATIONS WERE DELIVERED,  
THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE INSCRIBED,  
WITH  
EVERY SENTIMENT OF DEVOTION TO THEIR TRUEST INTERESTS  
THAT CAN POSSIBLY BE FELT,  
BY ONE WHOSE HEARTFELT PRIDE IT IS TO BE,  
ONE OF THEIR ORDER.

## ORATION I.

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### MY FRIENDS AND BROTHERS,

WE live in that age when attachment to ancient usages has become a scarce quality in the national mind. We exist at that period when reverence for the Past is well-nigh superseded by doubt as to whether the Past really deserves any reverence; and when admiration for what have long been called our wise, and venerable, and time-honoured institutions, is rapidly merging into a scepticism as to whether there be aught that is truly wise and truly venerable about our "time-honoured institutions." Nor does any one assist to spread this scepticism more effectually than he who seeks to revive a custom or usage which had fallen into abeyance, or to re-establish an institution which had come to be considered, nearly, as obsolete. Thus, what is called the 'National Militia,'—though long the subject of panegyric, even by strong-minded men who were esteemed sincere reformers,—though often held up to the people as an institution they ought to support with zeal, and guard with jealousy, lest its "free manner of embodiment by ballot"—such were the terms of old—should be abandoned, and the Militia itself displaced and subverted by a standing army; this national militia, I say, so zealously preferred as a necessary means of warlike defence, from the moment that the "Trained Bands," or first elements of a standing army, were formed under the Stuarts, has grown, by desuetude, into dislike, approaching to abhorrence. And the minister of state, so far from resuscitating the expired fervour of admiration for this 'national institution' by intimating that it is to be again brought into active existence, has not only

roused into vigour the slumbering dislike of the people towards it, but has awoke into energy the hatred that has long been strengthening against all warlike and blood-shedding agencies : a hatred more intense and more widely extended among the oppressed toiling classes than, perhaps, the minister of state imagined to exist. Indeed, so volcanic is the present condition of British society, that the rod of authority can scarcely stir the very surface of the social soil, in any given spot, but a bursting forth of sparks or of flame is occasioned in other seats of smouldering combustion. Thus, at every meeting held to protest against the enrolment of a militia, there has not only been witnessed, throughout our manufacturing towns and populous cities, the most decided anti-war spirit, but a loud cry of another nature has arisen, and one that is more significative than any other that could at present be uttered, of the political and social wrong felt and endured by the toiling classes of this country : it is that emphatic cry, "NO VOTE—NO MUSKET!"

There can be no necessity for my showing how fully, in every public meeting held in London, I have sympathised with the conviction and feeling from whence arose that cry. One, whose political course, although brief, has been at least boldly defined, need not describe his sympathies with his own class—the unenfranchised toilers—avowing their resolve not to fight for the privileges and property of others, since they have themselves neither privilege nor property for which to fight. What I may, rather, be expected to do, by way of conclusion to this exordium, will be briefly to account for the fact that I stand here, to-night, for the purpose of what is deemed by many of my own political party—a peculiar and strange advocacy.

It is well known to you, that almost simultaneously with the assemblies for protestation against the enrolment of a militia, we, as Chartists, have been holding public meetings for the humane purpose of petitioning the Legislature to restore Frost and his brother exiles to their native country.



Now, the agitation of these two questions found me in a mental state much altered by three years' reflection. From the advocacy of physical force—induced by painful acquaintance with the deep daily suffering—the squalid want and raggedness—the woe and agony of starvation—experienced by what are called “the manufacturing masses,” in 1842;—from being the man of whom Sir Frederick Pollock, the Attorney-General, truly declared in Parliament, that he who was then on his trial for the alleged crime of stirring up the people to sedition and riot, in the Staffordshire Potteries, had avowed in the Manchester Convention that—“he was for fighting;” I say, from such advocacy, and from being such a man, I had come, by serious reflection during more than three years—two-thirds of that time passed in a prison—I had come, at the period in which these two questions began to be simultaneously agitated, to the conclusion—the clear and conscientious conclusion—that all wars and fightings were wrong—that all taking of human life was wrong—even the taking of human life in self-defence. For a considerable part of my period of change my views were, of course, very unfixed and uncertain: it is so with all of us, when our opinions are in a state of transition. At length, after surveying the whole question of war, aggressive and defensive, to the utmost extent of which I was able, I found no firm ground for consistent advocacy but the denial of the propriety of blood-shedding war altogether—the absolute negation of the right of life-spilling, even in self-defence.

I shall not apologise for having held opinions in favour of a resort to violence, much as I lament having ever held such opinions. When the most numerous and most toilful class suffer unto agony and despair, under the ill regulations of society,—and when governments uphold the laws whereby these faulty regulations are continued,—bad governments must take the chief blame of the violent opinions, ay, or violent courses of action, into which the suffering classes, and they whose sympathies are naturally bound up with them, may fall.

And as I cannot, under such convictions, be so mean as to apologise for old opinions, neither shall I, from a weak fear of losing a reputation for consistency, apologise for exchanging these old opinions for new ones. Every man who thinks must change his opinions : it is impossible that a thinking man can remain stagnant in opinion. And nothing ought to render us more suspicious of a private man's good sense than his assertion that he had held precisely the same opinions, on all subjects, through life ; nor ought anything, I judge, render us more jealous of a public man's honesty than a boast that his opinions had never changed on any of the great subjects of public morals or economy. My friends, every man's life-walk will be found to be, more or less, zig-zag in its direction, when closely and honestly traced : he who dares to assert that he has marched from the cradle to maturity by an invariable right line, is an impostor.

Well : these two questions, of the militia, and of the recal of Frost and his brother exiles, being anxiously discussed among my own party, I felt myself in this predicament :— When the recal of Frost was pleaded, I listened with alternate gratification and pain to the speeches made by some of my brethren : gratification at the true-heartedness with which they pleaded for putting an end to the degradation and suffering of the banished ones,—but pain at the irksomeness which it was evident they felt in dealing with the question of physical force. Fain would they have avoided all mention of it : that was manifest. But the consciousness that physical force, and the question of its propriety, must be uppermost in the minds of many in a mixed audience,—many who were accustomed to speak of the poor exiles by no other name than that of 'the Newport rioters,' utterly forbade what would certainly be termed 'shirking the question of physical force,'—and so every speaker alluded to it, more or less directly, and yet could not avoid a tendency to mystify the doctrine, and even to mystify the very facts of the outbreak in which John Frost participated. Not a shade of dishonest nature prompted

this course: the mind was ill at ease, in each speaker: it was a struggle to get through the task of dealing with what the middle classes have always affirmed to be the great stain upon Chartism—our advocacy of physical force. Some way was sought to explain facts, so as, if possible, to lessen the reprobation under which it was felt they would lie, in the minds of a mixed audience; but as that way could not be successfully found, the irksomeness of each speaker's self-allotted task became manifest.

I listened, until I said within myself, "This is a course as unwise as it is full of needless difficulty. People *know* that an insurrection took place at Newport: they *know* that Frost took part in it. It is the sheerest folly to deny any part of this, or to suggest endless mystic doubts as to what Frost's motives were. Our only consistent part is to proclaim that we believe John Frost to have been moved by a patriotic and philanthropic zeal, kindred to that which has impelled men, esteemed the noblest in past times, to end the oppression of the oppressed: that if John Frost erred, he, to compare small things with great, did but err as the Barons erred on Eunny-mede, or as Hampden erred on Chalgrove Field; but that we ourselves were become sufficiently enlightened to renounce war and fighting altogether." If I had maintained no more than this, my brother Chartists, I believe, would not have complained of me. As long as you talk in generals of a doctrine or proposition, men will go with you in crowds; but it is not the case when you so specify your opinions as to make the edge of them come home to every man's nearest interests. I proceeded to propose amendments on the general motion against war at the anti-militia meetings, and what I conceived to be amended petitions for Frost, Williams, and Jones; and in all these I broadly affirmed my own present opinion, that it was wrong to take human life, even in self-defence. This procedure was disapproved by many of my Chartist brethren; but all treated me tolerantly, courteously, as I treated them,—all save one—and that one, I have unspeakable gratification in