I would like to thank the Abney Park Trust for the invitation to speak and give this year’s Bronterre O’Brien Commemorative Address.

I want to dedicate these words to a friend of mine who was murdered by the police 40 years ago – Blair Peach – Blair lived in Hackney although he too came to this country from New Zealand. He was an educationalist dedicated to the education of working class children in Tower Hamlets where we worked together and he was a passionate campaigner against racism and social injustice – a revolutionary. We were neighbours, work colleagues, friends and comrades in the National Union of Teachers. The truth about what happened and how he was murdered is known – indeed the names of the culprits are known –the truth about what happened is still being suppressed by the state even 40 years later. The state in Britain today remains as determined as ever to protect those who act in its name from any form of justice - we hear today of moves to prevent the prosecution of British soldiers for actions taken at the behest of British governments in countries like Ireland and Iraq.

In this respect there are many echoes of the times I am going to talk about in what happened to Blair and to those responsible for his murder.

I have to confess this is perhaps the most unusual venue that I have been asked to speak at and for me at least brings a whole new meaning to the term “the graveyard slot”.

Two things worry me when I am invited to speak – one is that you arrive in good time to the event - the host introduces you and then proceeds to outline what you are about to say – only for me to discover that it is something completely different from what I had prepared – the other concern is that when you are invited to speak somewhere and you ask your host “What you should speak about?” The dreaded reply comes – “You can talk about anything you like”.

As an active campaigner and trade unionist most if not all of the speeches I have made – or at least the overwhelming majority have been in attempts to persuade people to do something – to take particular courses of action – to join demonstrations, take part in strikes, give solidarity to different causes.

Well this was a “Whatever you like” moment – so I can happily transfer the blame for any shortcomings on to the hosts of today. However, I hope that what I say – however random it might appear – will be of interest.

I have to confess to knowing next to nothing about James Bronterre O’Brien and therefore to thank the organisers for making me look at who this person was and the times in which he lived.

The name James Bronterre O’Brien did capture my imagination.

It is one of those names that resonates like the names of numerous other Irish revolutionaries and radicals–Theobald Wolfe Tone, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, Constance Markievicz, James Connolly and of course further afield in Latin America Bernardo O’Higgins and Ernesto “Che” Guevara Lynch.

(I could go on but I was worried that the list was getting too long and was already beginning to sound like an imitation of W B Yeats poem “Beautiful Lofty Things” – in which he nostalgically reminisces about a range of departed acquaintances and relatives – his father, Maude Gonne, Standish O’Grady and others. But I’m not going to talk about Yeats either – that’s a minefield for another day.)

There are needless to say many more names we could add to this pantheon. My apologies if I have left out one of your favourites.

But in each case naturally there is much more to these names than their sounds and romantic associations. We know what often happens to individuals whose names cannot be fully eradicated from history or ignored – especially those of the more revolutionary characters - they are often appropriated by the establishment - stripped of their complete history or context. We only have to think of Nelson Mandela now deified by the very people who virulent opposed him – Mandela the man who went to gaol for refusing to renounce the right to armed struggle is being turned into a pacifist.

(More often than not they are then incorporated into what another great historian E H Carr, referencing the seventeenth century French mathematician Pascal ,once referred to as the “Cleopatra’s nose version of history” – in which history becomes the recounting of some individual personal characteristic to explain the origin of some major historical event. If only Cleopatra’s nose had been shorter Julius Caesar and Marc Antony would not have been influenced by her.)

I don’t think we should let this happen to O’Brien.

The more I read about O’Brien the more interesting he became on a variety of levels including for me at a personal level. On several occasions he visited my home town of Stockport and there he was elected as a delegate to the Chartist movement national Convention.

O’Brien left Ireland in 1829 - ten years later on 7th January 1837 he wrote of his experience saying -

“My friends sent me to London to study law; I took to radical reform on my own account…. While I have made no progress at all in law, I have made immense progress in radical reform. So much so, that were a professorship of radical reform to be instituted tomorrow in Kings College (no very probable event by the way), I think I would stand candidate …I feel that every drop of blood in my veins was radical blood…”

Today I think it would be quite appropriate to substitute the word “revolution” for “radical reform” and even though some things have changed I think we can remain sure that there is not going to be a professorship in revolution at Kings College today.

What is interesting is the role that Irish radicals -played in the development of politics in England – as in literature – Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, O’Casey – the outsider unconstrained by the conventions of the society of the day. Both familiar with and yet distant from what they met. The times that O’Brien found himself in London were revolutionary. They were shaped by many factors –both international and national factors were influential - the American Revolutionary War or the War of Independence which ended in 1783 and the French Revolution of 1789. The “special relationship” which many radical reformers had with America in the early nineteenth century was a consequence of revolutionary aspirations not the conservative deference of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The identification with France went much further than that of securing a Customs Union. The Red bonnet of the French Revolution was frequently hoisted in demonstrations and also ceremoniously burnt by the forces of reaction.

However, to return to Stockport - The reasons that Bronterre O’Brien, the radical reformer, found himself in the town are all too clear when we dig a little deeper. They predate his arrival in the town by some decades and indeed go back to a time before he was born in 1805 – back to events that took place in the previous century.

In 1799 rioting began in the centre of Stockport in the Market Place because of the price of corn – according to local historians these riots were themselves apparently a repetition of earlier food riots in the town. The nearby house of a Mr Braford Norbury, a prominent corn merchant was pelted with stones, carts bringing meal and corn to the town were seized and shops were attacked.

This was certainly no Extinction Rebellion type demonstration.

Again, in the town, some years later, in 1812 rioting was only held at bay because the price of corn was reduced as a result of voluntary subscriptions. No doubt Norbury and his ilk didn’t want to risk a re-run. In contrast in Bredbury just a few miles east of Stockport a crowd gathered and seized food in neighbouring Hyde and Gee Cross – quite literally the action was only stopped by the arrival of the cavalry. Seven men taking part in the actions were arrested, but not tried locally – they were sent to Chester 45 miles away where they were found guilty and then deported to Australia for seven years.

In the history taught in schools we never heard about reports of events like this – even more rarely do we hear about the organisation and preparation that preceded them. For example, the establishment in 1816 of the Stockport Union Society and the Blanketeers who intended to march to London to present a petition. The Blanketeers left Manchester on 10th March 1817 only to be attacked and stopped in Stockport.

In October 1818 in Stockport of the wonderfully named - Union for the Promotion of Human Happiness – no doubt many of them veterans of the cotton workers strike of 1817 – 1818 against cuts to their wages. In 1803 weavers had been earning 15 shillings for a six day week – by 1818 this had been cut to around 5 shillings. On more than one occasion their actions were broken up by special constables and yeomanry – on one occasion resulting in the killing of one of the demonstrators – who the magistrates determined had “Died by the Visitation of God”.

A 19th century version of the coroner’s verdict on Blair Peach – “Death by Misadventure”.

A yeoman and a special constable charged with firing at a local radical Dr Thomas Cheetham were acquitted – whilst the anti-trade union Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 were used to imprison a number of those involved. It was this account that made me recall the circumstances of Blair’s murder in Southall in 1979. A peaceful demonstration attacked by the police backed by 300 mounted officers.

If in history we hear little about the role of the early trade unions – it is even more true of the role of women - for example the Stockport Female Reform Society meeting which took place in The Windmill in Stockport on 19 July 1819 – just one month before the dramatic events that were to take place in St Peters Fields in Manchester. The report of the meeting is taken from “The Western Flyer (Sherborne and Yeovil Times)” of 9th August 1819. The paper reported that at the meeting Mrs Stewart moved and Mrs Hodgson seconded that Mrs Hallworth be made the President of the meeting – in her acceptance speech, after inviting the men to leave the meeting, Mrs Hallworth declared

“I will perform the duty as well as I am able. I assure you that I am determined to dedicate to Liberty, my heart, my body, yea my very life (*Unbounded applause with cries of “Liberty”*) “I am young, but Ladies, young as I am I can assure you that the Borough villains have furnished me with such a woeful life of wretched experience, that I can feel for myself, and equally with myself feel for my injured, plundered countrywomen. This feeling so acute that eternal war is waged betwixt us, which will never end but in the emancipation of women”.

Originally planned for 9th August a meeting in St Peters Field in Manchester was banned by magistrates and then postponed until a week later. Stockport union for the Promotion of Human Happiness invited Henry Hunt – “Orator” Hunt to speak in the town on the eve of the original date planned for the meeting in Manchester. One week later an estimated 1,400 to 1,500 people including about 40 women marched from the Stockport to join the demonstration to St Peters Field. Hunt returned to address the crowd. The crowd was estimated at between 60 – 80,000 people. The rest of Manchester according to one writer – was empty – like a ghost town. The chairman of the magistrates issued an arrest warrant for Hunt and in a letter to the military said that the magistrates “consider the Civil Power wholly inadequate to preserve the peace.” The cavalry which included some of the Stockport yeomanry that had attacked the cotton strikers in the previous year – charged. An estimated 18 people were killed and around 700 injured – the deaths of many are recorded as due to sabre wounds or being trampled to death by the cavalry. That event of course is more popularly known as the Peterloo massacre and has been commemorated in film.

This was the backdrop to Bronterre O’Brien’s visit to Stockport 20 years later.

On 11 February 1838 Bronterre O’Brien attended a dinner in Stockport at the Stanley Arms where he was elected to replace Joseph Rayner Stephens as a delegate to the Chartist National Convention – money was collected for the “National Rent” – the Chartists Central fund and a petition was collected with 13,000 names.

On 1st June 1838 he spoke in the town - again at the Stanley Arms– a previous meeting a month earlier with another Chartist speaker had been banned but still some 6 – 7,000 people gathered outside the pub to hear the speakers anyway.

What is impressive reading about this history is the scale of mobilisation and the level of organisation involved. Relative to the size of the population of the day these were mass mobilisations. But they are seldom if ever taught as part of the history – as a friend who died some years ago, Dave Finch once said – the history curriculum in schools is all about kings and queens and their bastard offspring.

We don’t hear about those risings which explicitly threaten the state – the events of the Peterloo massacre may be remembered but not those events that preceded it. Less so are the events of the Newport Rising of 4 November 1839 when 10,000 marched on the town – the state of the day recognised the significance of what was happening - the leaders were put on trial and originally sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered. This was subsequently commuted to transportation. Even fewer will have been taught about the 1842 general strike – sometimes referred to as the Plug Plot Riots when amongst other acts of repression 1,500 strikers were brought to trial in the North West of England. Mass action took place in the area of Stalybridge and Ashton.

O’Brien of course hardly appears in the formal “official” version of English history – like countless other figures of radical or revolutionary backgrounds – they only appear in passing or as victims – the defeated, footnotes to be quarried by aspiring PhD candidates – as the historian Avi Shlaim and others have said – History is written by the victors – and that is still happening today.

There are numerous examples of the re-writing of history in which the full story is suppressed beneath an authorised version – one of the most stark and gross examples of this remains the myth making around events like the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857 – in truth a major Indian anti-imperialist struggle against the British – of course made more palatable by being described as a struggle against the British East India company which might be described as the very apotheosis of the close relationship between the state and capitalism.

Or to recall another anniversary this year - the Jallianwala Bargh massacre of 13 April 1919 – when the British led army under the command of Acting Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer fired on a peaceful protest of more than 20,000 men, women and children – the firing continued until the troops ammunition ran out. The death toll has been estimated at around 1,500. Dyer said at the inquiry into the massacre that he would have used machine guns if they had been available to him. He acknowledged that the death toll would have been much higher. Even today the Prime Minister and the British government refuse to apologise for this atrocity.

At yet another level of distortion is the way in which the accounts of what is called the Second World War are presented – which was of course several wars – inter- imperialist, national liberation, anti-imperialist, wars of resistance - according to popular Hollywood history and even some notable historians German and Italian Fascism were defeated on the Western Front solely by US and British troops. The truth of course is both much more complex – almost three-quarters of the fighting in that war took place on the Eastern Front and it was the forces of the then Soviet Union which defeated the Nazi armies.

This re-writing of history of course takes place especially at the domestic level - more often than not in a deliberate attempt to set out a narrative that portrays all change in society as the product of gradual peaceful transitions – the real goals and leadership buried beneath a sanitised narrative in order that it can be re-appropriated and incorporated seamlessly into a version of British history as a peaceful linear progression occasionally besmirched by thoughtless and cruel individual members of the ruling class who were completely untypical of the class they belonged to or the age in which they lived.

Paying tribute to the memory of the men and women of his era, acknowledging the role of the organisations they built and the actions they took is a small way of preserving and reaffirming the role of the real history makers who alongside James Bronterre O’Brien thought that the Promotion of Human Happiness was something worth fighting for.