The first histories of the movement were written by Chartists themselves, for example Robert Gammage’s *History of the Chartist Movement*, published in 1854. These emphasised class tensions between the working-class activists and the middle-class who had benefited from political reform but wanted to exclude those lower down the social scale.

The importance of Chartism to the development of class consciousness was echoed by twentieth-century (often Marxist) commentators. However, in the 1980s and 1990s historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce, analysing the language of Chartism, started to discount the primacy of class and argue the movement should be explained in terms of politics rather than class conflict.

Today, historians usually adopt a more nuanced view of the political, cultural and linguistic dimensions of class rather than defining it solely in economic terms. As such, most recognise class still has a part to play in understanding Chartism.

The role of women in the Chartist campaigns has offered historians early examples of female political activism. Feminist historians, such as Dorothy Thompson, writing in the 1970s, presented a relatively pessimistic view of the role of women suggesting they were marginalised by male protestors and performed auxiliary duties such as making tea, fund-raising and collecting signatures. More recent writers, for example Malcolm Chase and Anna Clark, have taken a more positive view, seeing female participation as fundamental to shaping the movement. Female Chartists took part in violent uprisings and strikes as well as acting as lecturers and running associated organisations such as Chartist temperance and religious groups.

As political and gender historians have developed a richer and more sophisticated understanding of Chartism, they have uncovered its contribution to the development of a new and dynamic form of political culture and shed light on the everyday lives of ordinary working-class men, women and children. Alongside the petitions, rallies and industrial action were concerts, Sunday schools, dances and lecture tours. Working-class homes were decorated with prints from the Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, which published poetry and short stories alongside political speeches and pamphlets.