

Peterloo 1819

Afterword to 'The Cap of Liberty' by Martin Edwards

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Robert Poole

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The Peterloo massacre was the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil. On Monday 16 August 1819 troops under the authority of the Lancashire and Cheshire magistrates attacked and dispersed a rally of some 50,000 pro-democracy reformers on St Peter's Field, Manchester. Twenty minutes later hundreds of people had been injured, many by sabres, many of them women, and some children. Eighteen people would eventually die from injuries received that day. Dozens of independent witnesses were horrified, for there had not been any disturbance to provoke such an attack. The authorities, however, insisted that a rebellion had been averted. Waterloo, the final victory of the European allies over the Emperor Napoleon, had been four years earlier; now, at 'Peterloo', British troops were turned against their own people.

These losses were deeply symbolic, for working people also felt that their interests had been sacrificed in the peace that followed twenty grueling years of European war. On top of a severe post-war economic slump, hundreds of thousands of demobilised troops came home looking for work. To compound matters, in 1816-17 and again in 1819, there were two sharp cyclical slumps in the dangerously over-stretched cotton industry whose capital was Manchester.

In these post-war years, the gap between rich and poor was at its historical extreme. The sources of this inequality were political as much as economic. In 1815, the landed classes and farmers had their 'peace dividend' in the form of the corn laws, which kept corn prices high by preventing imports of grain. The middle classes were rewarded by the ending of the wartime income tax. Working people however continued to pay taxes on essential items like malt, soap, candles and paper, as well as record prices for food.

Any struggle for economic survival had first to become a struggle for political rights, for during the war years the regulations protecting trades had been entirely abolished, and trade unions and political organisations banned – all by acts of parliament. Only just over a tenth of the adult male population had the vote, a figure which had halved over the previous century. Manchester itself, like most northern and midland industrial towns, had no MP at all. Radical reformers like Henry Hunt, the speaker at the Peterloo meeting, insisted that the solution was to give control of parliament to the people through universal suffrage (understood as adult male suffrage) and so to break the power of the 'boroughmongers' who had used the war to strengthen their grip on political power and milk the system. This was a time when the rhetoric of 'the people' against parliament, so sinister in our own more democratic age, really did seem to promise liberation.

A mass petitioning campaign for parliamentary reform in 1816-17 had mustered at least three quarters of a million signatures over seven hundred local petitions. These were brusquely rejected by parliament, the majority of them rejected as illegitimate either for 'insulting language' (complaining that the

~~Comons did not represent the people) or simply because they were printed instead of written by hand. for technical reasons~~^[1]; Among those rejected was the biggest petition of all, one of thirty thousand signatures from Manchester. The result was the attempted march of the Manchester 'blanketeers' towards London in March 1817 to present their petitions for reform in person. This had been intercepted by troops on its way through Cheshire and the north Midlands, and dozens of reformers were arrested and imprisoned without charge for months under emergency powers which suspended 'habeas corpus', the right to a fair trial. Three weeks later there were further arrests as the desperate 'Ardwick conspiracy' ~~to attack Manchester~~^[2] was foiled by the Manchester police and magistrates ~~who claimed they had detected a plan by radicals to attack Manchester.~~ ~~The affair was clearly a matter of desperation for the few radicals who took part, but there is good reason to believe that~~ spies and informers ~~were widely believed (and with good reason) to have~~ cooked up the entire affair. ~~to start with.~~

In 1819 reformers moved away from secrecy and conspiracy in favour of a mass, peaceful, constitutionalist movement which sought to assert itself forcefully, yet peacefully, in what historians have dubbed the 'mass platform movement', or the 'English uprising'. The meeting in Manchester on 16 August 1819 was part of a national movement, centred on the industrial north but extending to Birmingham and London, designed to overwhelm government by sheer weight of numbers and force democratic elections, rather as the pro-democracy movements of 1989 would overthrow communist rule in much of central Europe.

Manchester was at the centre of a great network of industrious towns and villages extending for fifteen miles in all directions well into the Pennines, whose domestic handloom weavers turned the thread spun by Manchester's cotton factories into finished cloth. Processions of weavers with their families, dressed in their Sunday best, carrying hand-woven flags and banners with messages of hope, ~~and accompanied by bands of music,~~ flooded into Manchester. ~~The most impressive, led by the weaver Samuel Bamford and accompanied by a band of music, came from Rochdale, Heywood and Middleton. As well as men~~ Its men who had practised orderly marching in the countryside surrounding ~~around Tandle Hill and White Moss,~~ proudly drilled by old soldiers like the military volunteers of wartime, there were several female reform societies whose members dressed in white and marched together bearing flags and the eponymous caps of liberty referred to in Martin's story, some of which they planned to present to Henry Hunt.

The cap of liberty, although most recently associated with the French revolutionaries, was in origin the Phrygian cap, the Roman symbol of the freed slave. Until the war with France broke out in 1793 it had been carried by Britannia, on pennies still in circulation. By displaying it radicals were not only baiting the authorities but laying claim to an older strain of patriotism which had mobilised against the threat of invasion by Napoleon only for its hopes of national reform to be dashed after Waterloo.

Manchester in 1819 was perhaps the most socially and politically divided town in Regency England. It might have been economically modern but it was governed through an archaic jumble of parish and manorial institutions, a bench of magistrates, and a police commission, all controlled by a High Tory elite who

circulated between them through an obscure network of revolving doors. Although they waved the flag and commanded troops of volunteers during the war, they had no sense that the lower orders could ever qualify as citizens. In Manchester, troops were deployed vigorously during the wars against food rioters, striking weavers, and Luddites opposed to the experimental powerlooms. The town's police force consisted of a handful of paid constables and watchmen, headed by the deputy constable Joseph Nadin, a former thieftaker who relied on a network of private agents and informants animated by a mixture of blackmail and reward. Political spies and informers fitted in easily to this network.

Publicans were important links in the loyalist network of control, for they depended upon the magistrates for their licences. They were in return expected to deny their meeting spaces to reformers and to co-operate with police operations, while a blind eye was turned to their own infringements (unless they were rivals to Nadin himself, who owned several pubs of his own). There were many publicans among the three hundred or so special constables sworn in to provide additional support at St Peter's Field, and fourteen more among the hundred members of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry who caused so much of the carnage. Visiting loyalist journalists and others were issued with special constable's staves to show to the troops for protection.

Ironically one of the accidental victims of Peterloo was Thomas Ashworth, ~~accidentally run down and killed by the Manchester Yeomanry as they pressed into the crowd to arrest Hunt. Ashworth was~~ landlord of the Bulls Head Inn in the marketplace^[3], a loyalist headquarters in the Market Place, next to the Royal Exchange, an embarrassment about which as little was said as possible. ~~accidentally run down and killed by the Manchester Yeomanry as they pressed into the crowd to arrest Hunt.~~ Special constables then joined the Yeomanry in the attack upon the hustings. A number of them were seen kicking and truncheoning an Oldham cotton spinner, John Lees; when he died three weeks later it turned out that they had murdered a Waterloo veteran. Special constables were reviled by reformers, although many of them did also assist the wounded. On the morning of 17 August one of their number, Robert Campbell, was subjected to a revenge attack. Seeking to escape from crowds besieging his house in Ancoats, he was chased, beaten and stoned to death in public on the false rumour that he had killed a child the previous day. Both the fictional Caleb Styles and his enemy Jeremiah Kidd fit well into this half-lit loyalist underworld.

Martin Edwards' story is set in the Manchester of 1839, which had finally emerged from high tory domination after gaining two MPs in 1832 (and one for Salford) and a borough council in 1838. Manchester's free-market liberals were now in control of local affairs, while the former opposition whig party was in government in Westminster with the approval of the young Queen Victoria. Engels had yet to visit Manchester to make his famous report on *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, but social investigators were already at work exposing the shocking state of housing, health, and education. Concerned middle-class men and women visited the homes of the poor to offer practical charity and spiritual consolation.

Prominent among Manchester's social visitors were members of the unitarian Cross Street Chapel, including its minister William Gaskell and his young wife Elizabeth, the protagonist in Martin's fictional account. Brought up in the Cheshire market town of Knutsford, her uncle Peter Holland was medical

officer both to the paternalist Styal Mill and to the Cheshire Yeomanry who were in action at Peterloo. She would later portray industrial Manchester in all its harshness and class alienation in her novel *Mary Barton* (1848), and the two worlds of town and countryside in *North and South* (1855). She was committed to seeking to heal the social divisions which she found, but for her this has to begin with the middle classes understanding the suffering and bitterness of the poor.

The memory of Peterloo **would have still been vivid** in the half-reformed Manchester of the 1830s. In 1835 the French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville found in Manchester's politics 'the very rich on one side, the working classes on the other' and was struck by 'the people's fear of soldiers'. Hugh Hornby Birley, the Yeomanry captain who had attempted to arrest Henry Hunt at the point of a sabre, had gone over to the Liberals. The new regime, both locally and nationally, was in turn challenged by the Chartists, the political heirs of the radicals of 1819. When they rallied in their tens of thousands on Manchester's Kersal Moor in September 1838 they re-used banners from 1819. Several pubs in the area still had signs with portraits of Henry Hunt and other radical leaders, and Wigan's chartists acclaimed **Feargus O'Connor, the Chartist, their national leader** ^[4] as Hunt's successor. In offering words of comfort about Peterloo to the aged Jeremiah Kidd – 'Now don't go upsetting yourself . . . This city will never forget' – Elizabeth Gaskell might also be concerned not to re-open harsh political memories.

Manchester's social and political divisions would prove enduring, though perhaps they were never quite so sharp-edged as in 1819. Manchester school free-market Liberalism was succeeded **towards the end of the nineteenth century in the late nineteenth** ^[5] **and by a social reforming liberalism and then in the twentieth century by Lib-Labbism, and Labourism, and punctuated by different versions of Toryism while Toryism developed its own social and imperial agenda,** ~~but~~ ^W whatever their positions on other issues **however**, no political party in Manchester has ever been able to hold power unless it was business-friendly. From 16 August 2019, Manchester **will have a** Peterloo memorial at long last, but it shares the former St Peter's Field with upmarket hotels and a conference centres while the approaching thickets of skyscrapers darken the land nearby. Meanwhile, the economically struggling boroughs of Oldham and Rochdale face the loss of much of their green belt to sprawling development as the battle of Kinder Scout, so much part of Manchester's radical heritage, is renewed closer to home. The green lanes and landscapes around Tandle Hill country park where Samuel Bamford and the other heroes of Peterloo rallied, marched, and renewed their weary souls, are **all** threatened with **destructionobliteration by sprawling development**. Let this not be Greater Manchester's memorial to the heroes of Peterloo.

Robert Poole is Professor of History at the University of Central Lancashire. **He is**, author of *Peterloo: the English Uprising* (OUP, 2019), and co-author of the graphic novel *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* (New Internationalist, 2019). ^[6]

Links:

<https://manchesterhistories.co.uk/projects/peterloo2019>

<http://www.peterloo.org/>

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