

The Cato Street Conspiracy: Plotting, counter-intelligence and the revolutionary tradition in Britain and Ireland

Review Number: 2396

Publish date: Friday, 12 June, 2020

Editor: Jason McElligott
Martin Conboy

ISBN: 9781526144980

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £80.00

Pages: 216pp.

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Publisher url: <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526144980/>

Place of Publication: Manchester

Reviewer: Robert Poole

Last year saw the spectacular bicentenary commemorations of the 1819 ‘Peterloo massacre’ in Manchester. (1) One sequel to Peterloo was an attempt to assassinate the cabinet at dinner in Grosvenor Square: the Cato Street conspiracy of February 1820. The plot was hatched by a small group of London ultra-radicals, followers of the ideas of Thomas Spence. The cabinet dinner was a hoax and they had walked into a trap, set by the Home Office in collusion with agents in their midst. The five plotters who were executed were the last in England to suffer the traditional traitor’s death, hanged and beheaded on Tower Hill. The episode, the editors note, ‘brought to an end a violent English Jacobin tradition which stretched back to the early 1790s’ (p. 3). This volume of essays, the result of a conference held at Sheffield University in 2017, explores the wider ramifications of this fairly British coup. With outrage over Peterloo still warm, a popular rising seemed credible. The plotters’ connections ranged from elite Whig politicians at the top to London’s radical underworld at the bottom, and outward to northern England, Scotland, France, Ireland, and Jamaica. The government’s survival was, the editors suggest, ‘entirely fortuitous’ (pp. 10-11); Britain was not, after all, immune to revolution. Did the Cato Street conspiracy have revolutionary potential? This book of essays opens a series of windows on the post-Peterloo world of radical conspiracy, and is particularly strong on the Irish and Caribbean dimensions. At the same time, it opens a debate about the real strength of the English Jacobin tradition at the time of Cato Street.

The opening essay is 'When did they know? The cabinet, informers and Cato Street', by Richard Gaunt. A careful analysis of the main sources of intelligence about the plot identifies three: Thomas Hiden, a local dairyman who had been involved for about eight months before tipping off Lord Harrowby on the day of the attack; Thomas Dwyer, an unemployed labourer who had recently been recruited to bring in the Irish community living nearby, who alerted the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth; and the paid infiltrator George Edwards, who had been sending back reports to Sidmouth from inside the group for two years. (Other conspirators turned King's evidence afterwards). While Hiden and Dwyer were prominent in official accounts of events, Edwards was much the most important. The claim that the plot had been foiled by a last-minute tip-off was a cover story, designed to minimise reliance on the tainted evidence of a spy, and with it the risk of acquittal.

John Stevenson offers an exercise in 'Joining up the dots'. Rejecting the idea that the English revolutionary tradition was weak and disconnected from the majority constitutionalist movement, he sketches in the background to Cato Street by way of a series of pen portraits of leading radical figures, most of whom were not apparently implicated. His secondary sources omit the principal modern accounts by Prothero, Belchem, Chase, and McCalman(2), and there are some errors.(3) He concludes somewhat optimistically that 'Many of the dots were there, it is simply that entirely contingent circumstances meant they were never connected in an insurrectionary context.' (p. 46)

In 'The men they couldn't hang: "Sensible" radicals and the Cato Street Conspiracy', Jason McElligott presents a newly discovered note written by Thomas Wooler, editor of the *Black Dwarf*: 'I am now in arms in Bishopgate Street . . . never mind about discord. You must expect it'. The note is undated but McElligott deduces that it must have been written on 23 February 1820, the day of the Cato Street conspiracy, and that Wooler was "in arms" against the state. If so, it follows that the addressee, the radical publisher William Hone, was in on the secret. McElligott deftly traces the movements of Hone, Hobhouse and Cobbett on the 23rd as they avoided contact, interpreting it as the behaviour of nervous men looking to equip themselves with an alibi. Unfortunately the White Hart Inn where Wooler was 'in arms' was not the one in Gray's Inn Road, where the conspirators met, but another White Hart on the edge of the City, two miles from Cato Street. The detective work is intriguing, but the note is ambiguous and the case unproven.

Malcolm Chase's bold piece on 'Cato Street in International Perspective' is, sadly, his last publication before his untimely death earlier this year.(4) It brings together material from his books *1820* and *The People's Farm* to make the strongest possible case for the international significance of Cato Street. The context is certainly there: fiery speeches from Burdett and Hobhouse after Peterloo warning of armed resistance; the Six Acts, making ordinary political meetings illegal; new year revolutions in Naples, Spain, and South America; and accounts of dismay at the news from Cato Street in the radical centres of Manchester, Leeds, Carlisle, and Glasgow which indicate widespread hope, if not necessarily much collusion. 'The conspiracy', writes Chase, 'was of wider and longer maturation than the trial of the core conspiratorial group ever established' (p. 73). Afterwards, 'even more than Peterloo, it was Cato Street that became fixed in the French radical imagination' (p. 65).

Ryan Hanley describes his essay on 'Cato Street and the Caribbean' as 'a closely focused re-evaluation of a specific moment of British insurrectionary radical, in the context of race and empire' (p. 82). His sensitive and deeply researched biographies of the two black Jamaican members of the London ultras, William Davidson and Robert Wedderburn, are a significant contribution to black British history. Davidson was a high-status Scottish Jamaican who had come to Britain to study law at Edinburgh and then mathematics at Aberdeen. He then drifted downwards socially, setting up as a cabinet maker in London and joining the Spenceans as he sank into unemployment. Almost his last act as a free man was to get his old blunderbuss out of hock, and he was executed. He consistently resisted the racial prejudice which he encountered, dressing fashionably and identifying as British but not black. Robert Wedderburn by contrast was born of a slave mother. He identified the radical cause with the struggle against slavery, calling for Britons to follow the example of West Indian slave rebellions. Wedderburn survived Cato Street, for he was already in prison

for blasphemy, but in later years shifted his position considerably. His example, writes Hanley, 'suggests that metropolitan radicalism was neither parochial nor insular' (pp. 94-5).

'The scope of Spencean politics was always bigger and broader than Britain' writes Ajmal Waqif in 'Cato Street and the Spencean Politics of Insurrection'.

(p. 102). Spence himself had insisted that 'my politics are for the world at large', and believed that 'all our boasted civilization is founded upon conquest' (pp. 103, 105). Although Spence is best known for his Harringtonian ideas about the way in which politics rested fundamentally upon the ownership and distribution of land, Waqif shows that he also believed in insurrection, if it were carried out by 'a few thousands of hearty determined fellows' with a provisional government in waiting, and backed by a large popular following (p. 108). This is a stimulating essay in ideas, although it would have been interesting to see it supported (somewhere in the volume) by an assessment of how far Spence's conditions were met in 1820.

In their introduction, the editors make clear their view that the penetration of the Spencean organisation by spies and informers was an unavoidable side effect of conspiracy rather than a significant cause of what happened (p. 10). Martyn J. Powell in 'State Witnesses and Spies in Irish Political Trials, 1794-1803' points out that it was certainly significant for the authorities. The risings in Ireland had taught Castlereagh and his fellow ministers the importance of having spies planted in the inner circles of rebel groups, and the techniques of deploying (or concealing) their evidence in the witness box; the presence of spies at the trial of Thistlewood and Watson in 1817 had prompted juries to acquit. In 1820 the government kept its chief agent Edwards out of it as far as possible, going instead for a small number of rapid and exemplary convictions. The implication, which also arises from Gaunt's essay, is that the trial may have concealed as much as it revealed.

Timothy Murtagh's essay 'The shadow of the pikeman: Irish craftsmen and British radicalism, 1803-20' is the best account we have of the Irish presence in English working-class movements in a period where it has usually been overlooked. In the aftermath of the failed rebellions of 1798 and 1803, large numbers of Irish workers migrated to Britain and to Manchester in particular. Unlike their hunger-driven successors they were often skilled artisans, relatively likely to take part in organised protest. Two Irishmen were marginally involved in Cato Street, one of whom turned informer, but the overall effect of Murtagh's research is to discount claims of Irish migrant support for the plotters. 'It is possible,' he writes, 'that this army of Radical Irishmen never materialised because they never existed, except in the minds of bar-room boasters and paranoid Home Office officials' (p. 144).

In 'The fate of the transported Cato Street conspirators', Kieran Hannon expertly traces the five men more peripherally involved in the conspiracy who were transported to Australia. They turn out to have been a thoroughly ordinary bunch: four out of five were married men with children and all were afflicted by economic hardship after the Napoleonic wars. Transportation was the best break they ever got: 'In contrast to their starving condition in England, the transported conspirators thrived in Australia and became valued, productive, and successful members of the community' (p. 163). Two even became police constables.

'Theatre and the rebellions of 1820 have been associated from the outset', remarks John Gardner at the start of 'Scripted by whom? 1820 and theatres of rebellion' (p. 170). The theatrical elements of revolution were first noticed by Marx--¾ his most durable political insight. Cato Street and the two risings in the Glasgow region that followed in April all began by issuing 'a printed instruction to unknowing actors', and all relied on creating a live drama to draw people in. The state's riposte was the drama of the scaffold. Cato St has since been dramatised several times, from Byron's *Marino Faliero* in 1820, through two agitprop productions in the 1970s to Radio 4 in 2001. There have also been two plays about the Scottish risings, with another planned in this bicentenary year. The theme common to all is that of idealistic rebels betrayed by spies and informers¾an outlook perhaps not far removed from that of the rebels themselves.

An afterword is supplied by Caoimhe Nic Dhabheid and Colin W. Reid. They draw a sharp distinction between Britain, where the reform movement was overwhelmingly constitutionalist and where the legacy of Cato Street was claimed by no-one, and Ireland, where the republican tradition continued to practice and celebrate rebellion. On this model, they write, 'The [Cato Street] conspiracy, with its curious mixture of outcasts, informers, a provisional government, unrealistic expectations, and above all, a bungled execution, looks decidedly Irish' (pp. 188-9). This however is a conclusion which the authors resist, on the grounds that 'binaries are unhelpful' (p. 189). They observe that O'Connell's repeal movement and British Chartism faced the same dilemma over how far to go in threatening physical force, suggesting in that violent revolution may after all belong in the British mainstream. 'In finally treating the Cato Street conspiracy as a serious topic for historical investigation,' they conclude, 'we gain a deeper understanding of the revolutionary impulses and counter-revolutionary reactions that shaped the United Kingdom in 1820 and beyond' (pp. 190-1). It is offered as an upbeat conclusion but it feels more like a premise.

The essays in *The Cato Street Conspiracy* present valuable new work on the international context and political repercussions of the Cato Street conspiracy. The essays by Chase, Hanley, and Murtagh are further useful as readings about the wider themes of four nations history, Black history, and Irish migrant history. There is, however, something missing: the conspiracy itself. While several contributors have dug pilot tunnels into the mass of Home Office material, no-one has taken on the basic task of writing a new account of the main event; nor of the Spenceans previous history of failed insurrections; nor an appraisal of the extent of organised working-class support (except among the Irish, which draws a blank); nor of the crucial question of the role of spies and *agent provocateurs*. The book's approach, as stated by the editors, is to demonstrate how 'scholars can recreate something of the "lived context" that sometimes survives as faint echoes deep within the historical record' (pp. 11-12, 49). There is a distinctly gothic feel to this scenario. It is also somewhat pessimistic. If there is one radical group for which we don't have to rely on echo soundings it is the London Spenceans, who were followed and reported on practically every day during the long period leading up to their desperate last throw.[\(5\)](#)

The Spenceans' first serious attempt at insurrection came before the start of the second Spa Fields meeting in December 1817, when Thistlewood and the young James Watson junior led a section of the gathering crowd off to raid the nearby gun shops and storm the tower of London, in the mistaken belief that they had allies inside who would open the gates. John Castles, an agent planted in the group, accosted Hunt as he arrived to speak and tried to lure him into joining the breakaway, but Hunt was not taken in. Instead he chaired the mass meeting to launch the largest ever petitioning campaign for reform, which gathered 24,000 signatures in London and approaching a million in Britain as a whole. The Spenceans hoped that the rejection of the petitions in the spring would touch off a national rising, but when mass meetings across the country reconvened in February, just after mass arrests under emergency powers, they all decided to seek other ways forward. The Spenceans encouraged the Manchester reformers' ill-organised 'blanket' march towards the capital in March. Its failure led in turn to a disastrous attempted rising in Manchester three weeks later, apparently instigated by local *agent provocateurs*, which put Manchester's radicals permanently on their guard against such ventures. The Home Office meanwhile turned a Spencean recruit, Charles Pendrill, and used him as bait to hook the Manchester delegate Joseph Mitchell. Mitchell and Pendrill were sent off in the company of Oliver the spy on a mission to enlist northern radicals in a fictitious London-centred insurrection. The resulting Huddersfield and Pentridge risings led to three executions, the ruin of Mitchell, and the permanent discrediting of this style of insurgency in the provinces.[\(6\)](#)

Thistlewood, Watson junior (who fled), and Watson senior (who had opposed the venture) escaped conviction for treason for the attempted raid on the Tower when Castles was exposed as a spy. They attempted another rising at London's Bartholomew Fair in early September; its ignominious failure left Thomas Preston feeling like blowing his brains out. Thistlewood next proposed an attack on the privy council 'in the manner of Despard', coupled with one on the Bank of England. They mustered 80 people and the plan (writes Malcolm Chase) 'dissolved in circumstances approaching farce'.[\(7\)](#) This, in retrospect, was a dry run for Cato Street. Thistlewood then challenged the Home Secretary to a duel and in May 1818 was

imprisoned for a year, returning in 1819 thoroughly out of touch. The Spenceans meanwhile split, with Thomas Evans and his son favouring education and radical preaching and the Watsonites seeking to build networks with London's organised artisan communities, a strategy that became more credible with Thistlewood out of the way.

The mass platform movement of 1819, which has so impressed historians of protest, certainly had connections with London radical circles. Its main weight and organisation however was in the north and its strength lay in its openness and rejection of conspiracy.⁽⁸⁾ When Hunt returned to London after Peterloo the Watsonites joined in the spectacular welcome for him, but were humiliatingly rebuffed at the celebration banquet. They used their scattered contacts in the north to advocate a national wave of simultaneous meetings in November, calculated (quite accurately) to overstretch the available troops. The influential *Manchester Observer* however denounced their few agents as spies funded from Whitehall and refused to have anything to do with Thistlewood when he ventured north in October. These simultaneous meetings were far and away the last successful of the huge wave of protests over Peterloo, and most were cancelled. A second round on 13 December, intended to touch off a rebellion before the repressive Six Acts became law, was washed out completely. The Spenceans met nightly into January expecting news of armed rebellion from Glasgow and Manchester, but none came. The role of spies in these events is unclear, but the Home Office had sound information.⁽⁹⁾

Cato Street, then, was not the potential cause of insurrection in 1820 but the despairing consequence of the failure of insurrection in 1819. Thistlewood's group had by then been reduced to a rump by the defection of the Evanses (who moved to Manchester), the arrest of Watson for debts incurred supporting Hunt, and the imprisonment of Wedderburn.⁽¹⁰⁾ Until December they were deeply penetrated by four agents who sent back daily reports to the Home Office. Aware in principle that he was tracked by informers, Thistlewood occasionally broadcast to the Home Office through them, without ever identifying his own *de facto* lieutenant, George Edwards, as one. The real question is not why the rebels eventually failed but why they were allowed to carry on for so long. The contributors to this volume show that part of the explanation is the Home Office's fear of acquittals, not last because of London juries' hostility to spies. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Home Office found the Spenceans' leaky network useful in keeping tabs on all those with whom they were in contact, at a time when northern radicals were otherwise well insulated against infiltration.⁽¹¹⁾ By 1820, with the Six Acts passed, many leading reformers in gaol or awaiting trial, and most of Sidmouth's infiltrators frightened off by Thistlewood's erratic behaviour, the Home Office decided to set a trap and reel the conspirators in.

All this is perhaps unfair, for the current collection of essays is concerned with new work on connections and consequences rather than with rewriting the existing narrative, and its achievements here are real and welcome. However, its historical vision appears at times to draw upon implicit model of revolution in which the more violent or extreme a movement, the more serious a threat it is to the state, and therefore somehow the more popular. Allied to this is a sense that 'history from below' is likely to be history that is buried, to be brought to life only by the right kind of empathy. Long may historical research continue to start in this way, but this does not determine where it ends. Exhibit A here is E. P. Thompson, who set out on the trail of an elusive revolutionary underground but ended up writing that in 1819 'the policy of open constitutionalism was proving more revolutionary in its implications than the policy of conspiracy and insurrection.'⁽¹²⁾ Revolutions depend not on extremist cadres, committed to the toxic belief that they embody the will of the people, but rather on shifts in shared values which transform the centre ground.

The damage which the blundering Spencean rump did to the radical movement after Peterloo did not end at Cato Street. At the one mass meeting of the 1819 campaign that took place in London, the Watsonites bounced Hunt into moving a seditious resolution from the chair: to withdraw allegiance from the state if parliament had not been reformed by 1 January 1820. Perhaps this later encouraged Thistlewood to imagine that there was still a rebellion awaiting a signal. The resolutions, supplied to a loyalist reporter and substituted for those seized from Hunt at Manchester, formed the chief piece of evidence which convicted him at the Peterloo trial of intention to commit sedition, every other charge against him having fallen. It may

well have narrowly deprived the radical movement of a spectacular acquittal, on the eve of the Yorkshire and Scottish rebellions, and a few weeks before the government was again rocked by the Queen Caroline affair. Had the Spenceans been suppressed before 1819 it is possible that there would indeed have been a revolutionary situation in 1820. We will never know, but it would be an interesting exercise in counter-factual history.

Notes

1. Peterloo 1819 site, www.peterloo1819.co.uk [2] [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early nineteenth-century London* (1979), ch. 6; John Belchem, *Orator Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (Oxford University Press, 1985; reprinted Breviary, 2012), ch. 4; Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (1988; reprinted Breviary, 2010), ch. 4, and *1820* (Manchester University Press, 2013), chs 2-3; Ian McCalman, *Radical Underworld* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1844). Bamford was not charged with treason in 1817 but simply detained under the *Habeas corpus* suspension act; nor was he 'charged with inciting a riot arising from the Peterloo massacre'; nor was he in gaol at the time of Cato Street (p. 39). James Watson junior was not charged with treason after the second Spa Fields meeting, but rather fled to America (p. 43). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rohan McWilliam & Simon Hall, 'Obituary: Malcolm Chase', *The Guardian* online, 23 March 2020. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Some of the sources are available under 'Protest and democracy 1818 to 1820' on the Education section of the National Archives website, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/> [3] [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R. Poole, 'Petitioners and rebels: petitioning for parliamentary reform in Regency England', *Social Science History* 43, 3 (Fall, 2019); Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising* (OUP, 2019), chs 5-7; and see note 1 above. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Malcolm Chase, 'Arthur Thistlewood', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. On the relationship between the London and Manchester radicals, see R. Poole, 'The Manchester Observer: biography of a radical newspaper', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 95, 1 (Spring 2019), open access; Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising*, ch. 9. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Gordon Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union: Popular Politics in Scotland, 1815-1820*, ch. 4; Gardner, 'Scripted by Whom' in the volume under review, p. 182. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Poole, 'The Manchester Observer', pp. 75-88. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising*, pp. 182-6. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; Penguin, 1968), p. 748. [Back to \(12\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2396>

Links

- [1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/319238>
[2] <http://www.peterloo1819.co.uk>
[3] <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/>