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'La politique à l'air libre' suite au massacre de Manchester

After Peterloo: Protest, Rebellion, and the Cato Street Conspiracy

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Abstracts

Français English
La Grande-Bretagne a-t-elle frôlé la révolution en 1819-20 ? Le ‘massacre de Peterloo’ le 16 août 1819, répression sanglante d’une manifestation de travailleurs exigeant le suffrage universel masculin, est un événement crucial dans l’histoire du radicalisme britannique. La vague de protestations et de troubles qui le suivit fut plus forte et plus étendue que la campagne radicale en elle-même. On y retrouva tout le spectre des opposants de l’époque, des aristocrates Whigs les plus prudents jusqu’aux ouvriers insurgés du nord et aux ultra-radicaux de Londres qui tentèrent d’assassiner les membres du gouvernement dans la conspiration de Cato Street de février 1820. Cet essai, irrigué par l’étude du très riche fonds des Archives Nationales britanniques, examine les liens entre tous ces mouvements afin d’évaluer la viabilité des divers plans d’insurrection. Il conclut que les ultra-radicaux de Londres, quoique présentés comme la force motrice de la rébellion, s’étaient retrouvés isolés et écartés du mouvement radical au cours de l’année 1819. Ce n’est pas la promesse d’un soulèvement national à venir, mais l’échec d’une manifestation déjà passée qui a mené à la conspiration de Cato Street.

How close did Britain come to revolution in 1819-20? The ‘Peterloo massacre’ of August 1819 in Manchester was a landmark event in British radicalism. The wave of protests and disturbances which followed was stronger and more widespread than the radical campaign itself. It involved the whole spectrum of opposition from cautious Whig aristocrats through insurgent northern workers to London’s ultra-radicals, who attempted to assassinate the government in the Cato Street conspiracy of February 1820. This essay uses the wealth of material in the UK National Archives to examine the connections between these movements, and to assess how viable were plans for insurrection. It concludes that the London ultra-radicals, whilst giving the appearance of leading, had become isolated from the main radical movement by late 1819. The Cato Street conspiracy happened not because a national rising was expected but because one had already failed.

Mots-clés : Peterloo, radicalisme, réforme parlementaire, pétitions, démocratie, conspiration de Cato Street, disciples de Thomas Spence, rébellion, 1820, Malcolm Chase
Keywords: Peterloo, radicalism, parliamentary reform, petitioning, democracy, Cato Street conspiracy, Spenceans, rebellion, 1820, Malcolm Chase

Full text

1 How close was Britain to revolution after Peterloo? The most sustained attempt to answer this question comes from Malcolm Chase's book *1820*, which deals with a single year in which the government was shaken by an exceptional series of challenges. The death of the King in January triggered a general election; in February there was an attempt in London to assassinate the cabinet, the Cato Street conspiracy; risings in England, Scotland, and Ireland followed around Easter, coinciding with a number of high-profile trials of the radical reformers of 1819; and the rest of the year saw a tumultuous campaign to force the new King George IV to admit his estranged wife Caroline to the office of Queen, a campaign which went even further than Peterloo in leaving the government politically isolated. The British state, Malcolm argues, only survived this year-long crisis thanks to "an untidy conjuncture of policy, policing, reform, repression, chance, and contingency."[1]

2 Behind all this lay the political shock of the Peterloo massacre of 16 August 1819. A peaceful mass rally, assembled on St. Peter's Field in Manchester to demand the vote for all adult males, was attacked by armed troops, with at least fifteen deaths and nearly 700 serious injuries. Both the Cato Street conspirators and the rebels of Easter 1820 justified their risings with reference to Peterloo. Malcolm however is clear that the crisis of 1820 was much more than an aftershock of 1819: "Peterloo has over-determined the interpretation of the period," he writes. His conclusion is that "While it may be an exaggeration to claim that a general rising was planned for the spring of 1820, or that there was a "Scottish insurrection" that Easter, the evidence for a co-ordinated campaign of insurgency across several regions (including Ireland) is compelling."[2] *1820* provides the most coherent case yet that a wider potential for revolution existed in Britain.

3 The Cato Street conspiracy of 23 February 1820 has a curious place in all this: a failed act of terrorism which destroyed only its own perpetrators, its reality veiled by a carefully-managed trial. For E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* its protagonists, along with the other rebels of 1820, represented the revolutionary wing of the English radical movement. 1820 here was essentially the last stand of the old Jacobins of the 1790s. Historians following Thompson in the 1970s and 1980s tended to see Cato Street slightly differently: as the logical culmination of the mass movement of 1819, driven to extremity by repression.[3] The conspirators themselves cited the violence of Peterloo as the justification for rebellion: "High Treason was committed against the people of Manchester" claimed their leader, Arthur Thistlewood, as he was sentenced to death for treason. In a more recent perspective, Cato Street was a deeply significant act of defiance by a metropolitan group with far-reaching political connections: with London's blasphemous "radical underworld"; with an Irish tradition of armed insurrection going back to 1798; and with the rhetoric of anti-slavery. There are suspicions of friends in high places, of undisclosed plans for a provisional government. Malcolm's later essay "Cato Street in International Perspective" concludes that "the conspiracy was of wider and longer maturation than the trial of the core conspiratorial group ever established."[4]

4 The understanding of Cato Street as deeply interconnected with wider radical movements has to contend with the fact that the conspiracy took place far from the centres of protest in the north, and during a three-month gap between waves of unrest. Between Peterloo and 1820 however lies a gap in the recent literature. My own book on Peterloo ends its narrative in August 1819, with the extensive aftermath rounded up in a hasty concluding chapter. Malcolm's book on 1820 (graciously skirting round Peterloo)

begins the following January, following the repressive Six Acts which clamped down on popular protest. Neither book covers the post-Peterloo months of September to December 1819 in any detail. This paper asks how far the attempted rebellions of 1820 were connected to the mass platform protests of 1819, and how far they had any realistic prospect of forcing political change.[5]

5 The argument falls into four main sections. The first looks at the wave of Peterloo protest meetings in the late summer and autumn of 1819, in which reforming Whigs competed for leadership with Henry Hunt and the radical movement. The second section looks at the campaign of the London ultra-radicals to convene simultaneous mass meetings in the capital and the provinces to turn protest into rebellion. The third assesses how much effective support there was for this plan in Britain's industrial north. The fourth reviews the events of 1820 in the light of all this. The conclusion returns to the place of Cato Street in the national context.

Protest

6 The Manchester meeting of 16 August 1819 was the eleventh in a series of large open-air rallies for democratic reform of parliament, known to historians as the 'mass platform' movement. After the attack in Manchester there was a pause before the sequence resumed, fuelled by outrage over the Peterloo massacre. There were at least 23 large public outdoor reform meetings between late August and early December, as well as numerous smaller ones; John Baxter has found over twenty in Yorkshire alone, concentrated in the industrial West Riding. The *Black Dwarf* wrote of Peterloo: "It was intended as a *mortal blow to reform,* but it has become its *rallying point*." [6]

7 At first there were spontaneous assemblies as crowds gathered in Halifax, Huddersfield, Leeds and Sheffield to hear the news from Manchester, their numbers swelling by the day up to 3,000 or more as speakers called for revenge. The first formally convened mass meeting after Peterloo was held outside Leeds on 24 August. It featured organised processions from a wide area with flags and bands of music, a feature recently developed in Lancashire. Only 3,000 attended in heavy rain, but another Leeds rally on 20 September attracted a crowd of 20,000 or more. In homage to Peterloo, a large contingent of female reformers, dressed mainly in white, presented their own declaration from the platform, carrying out what their Manchester sisters had been unable to do. A display of mourning dress and black crepe lent solemnity to the occasion, with black banners reading "We mourn for our murdered friends at Manchester" and "Thou shalt do no murder."[7] The autumn saw similar rallies all over the industrial north of England: at Wigan, Halifax, Carlisle (twice), and at Burnley in north Lancashire on 15 November. The Halifax meeting featured no fewer than 74 flags and banners and 16 large caps of liberty, with processions from twenty surrounding places. The meeting at Newcastle, the far northern stronghold of the Whig party, brought a crowd of up to 50,000 onto the town moor in an impressively disciplined set of processions. "The order and organization of such a body was more frightful, for the future, than violence", thought one observer.[8]

8 These meetings, and others like them, were a continuation of Henry Hunt's mass platform campaign, with the added aim of "bringing the Manchester murderers to justice" (in the words of Henry Hunt). A second aim was to assert the right to petition government. The Leeds meeting declared: "That it is the Right of the Subject to Petition the King, and either, or both Houses of Parliament; and that, the conduct of Lord Sidmouth, in intercepting the Petitions of the People to their Prince, is altogether illegal." Peterloo, it was claimed, was evidence of a wider plan "to establish a military despotism upon the ruins of the constitution."[9] The only guarantee of constitutional rights was democracy, which meant extending the vote to all male citizens, whether defined as householders (the Whig position) or as male citizens, as determined by eligibility for military service (the radical position). Radical meetings also typically

endorsed Hunt's pledge to refrain from buying any taxed articles in order to deprive government of revenue until reform was conceded. Hunt's mass platform campaign was not just about demanding the vote but about making mass pressure effective–what the Chartists would refer to as "ulterior measures" and what is today known as "direct action."

9 While Hunt was still in prison after Peterloo, reforming Whigs took the lead in protest. The MP for Westminster Sir Francis Burdett wrote an inflammatory letter to his electors, accusing the government of embarking on "a reign of terror and blood" and urging them to resist. He announced a public meeting to launch the movement: "Whether the penalty of our meeting will be death by military execution I know not; but this I know–a man can die but once, and never better than in vindicating the laws and liberties of his country." Up to 30,000 attended the outdoor meeting on 2 September organised by the Westminster Committee and led by Burdett and his fellow MP John Cam Hobhouse. One resolution read: "That the atrocious outrage on the defenceless and peaceable people, against all law, and in defiance of justice, is an attempt to destroy by sword all the yet remaining Liberties of Englishmen." The Prince Regent was accused of making himself party to an "act of blood" by congratulating the troops on their actions at Manchester. An address reminded him that the right of assembly and petitioning was part of the constitution upon which "was formed and founded the title of your Royal Highness's Illustrious House to the Throne of these realms–and upon such right only." In effect, it threatened a repeat of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-9 which had overthrown the autocratic James II and created a parliamentary monarchy founded on the Bill of Rights. This was classic Whig rhetoric, pushed to the limit. The meeting declared, ambiguously, for a franchise "so equal, so extensive, and so secure, that it shall be impossible to corrupt the electors." John Gale Jones, a veteran radical from the 1790s, was barred from speaking. Parliamentary reform in the Whig frame was about protecting the constitution and maintaining the independence of MPs rather than carrying out the will of the people.[10]

10 Three large protest meetings were organised by Whig-dominated city corporations: at Norwich on 16 September, York on 20 September, and Birmingham on 2 October. There were also at least four official county meetings: Westmorland on 13 October, Norfolk on 20 October, Cumberland on 21 October, and the biggest, 'A General Meeting of the Nobility, Gentry, Clergy, and Freeholders of the County of York' held at York Castle on 14 October. All these meetings denounced the attack on the Manchester meeting, warned of government despotism, and took an uncompromising stand on civil liberties, but little was said about the franchise, and none proposed manhood suffrage.[11] The Yorkshire meeting was arranged by the Lord Lieutenant, Earl Fitzwilliam, who became something of a martyr when he was sacked by the government for his involvement. Fitzwilliam was a conservative Whig landowner who consistently opposed Hunt and radical reform, and who had until then enjoyed the confidence of the government.[12] Of the radicals, he wrote privately, "I doubt their lead of the lower Orders, when the latter see the Higher Orders take up their cause: I have some little proof that the mass desire no better than to be directed by us." He was satisfied that, despite some fierce rhetoric, there was "nothing moved or mooted that we could disapprove." When the radical Joseph Mitchell tried to speak he was accused of being a government spy and driven from the platform. Strong rhetoric did not necessarily translate into insurgency. The main effect of Fitzwilliam's stance was to inspire the hesitant Whig party to resist the government clampdown.[13]

11 In the industrial west of Scotland by contrast the radical movement actively planned insurrection from the start. A mass meeting at Paisley on 11 September resolved to approach London reform leaders to propose simultaneous meetings across the country to demand reform. The meeting was followed by a pitched battle with special constables who attempted to seize banners which had been declared illegal, and rioting crowds clashed with cavalry over the following two days. Disturbances continued in south-west Scotland throughout the autumn, with widespread night drilling reported. On 16 December union society delegates established a central controlling committee; Walter

Scott thought Scotland was “on the verge of civil war.” The following April the area saw an attempted armed rising, intended to co-ordinate with others in England.[14] In England, too, there were plans for simultaneous meetings in late 1819, with radicals in the northern industrial districts looking to connect with plans for a rising in London. So what was happening in the capital?

London

12 The London ultra-radicals remain something of an enigma, even after a great deal of resourceful study by Malcolm Chase, Iorwerth Prothero, Iain McCalman, Vic Gatrell, and others.[15] There is no agreed name for them. ‘Spenceans’ (after their founder) and ‘Watsonites’ (after his successor) are both used but the name ‘ultras’ marks their position beyond the Huntite radical movement, with no-one to their left. Their core was the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, convened by the agrarian political writer Thomas Spence between 1801 and his death in 1814. The parliamentary constituency of Westminster in which it operated was one of the most democratic in the UK, and usually returned two reforming Whig MPs, while the neighbouring corporation of the City of London had its own large and unpredictable electorate. The popular following attached to reform politics in London meant that radical opposition started a lot further to the left than elsewhere. The Spenceans were part of what Iain McCalman calls the “radical underworld”, sharing illicit networks with prophets and pornographers, all avowedly disreputable and operating at the margins of the law. They were fluent in the language of slavery and revolt, explosively deployed by the black Jamaican radical Robert Wedderburn at his blasphemous chapel in Soho, and appealed consistently to the poor and dispossessed. Their political connections ran back to the London Corresponding Society of the 1790s and its insurgent successors the United Englishmen and United Irishmen; they looked back fondly to Despard’s conspiracy of 1802 and Emmett’s rising of 1803. They had a shifting following amongst London’s artisan and shipyard trades and its Irish community. From 1817 their views were promoted through Thomas Wooler’s weekly journal *Black Dwarf,* although Wooler would reject outright insurgency in 1819.

13 London’s radical printers and booksellers traded publications and occasionally personnel with radicals in Manchester and other industrial towns in the north and Midlands, and these networks, amplified by a temporary surge in the numbers of radical, unstamped journals, maintained a national flow of information and exhortation after Peterloo.[16] Spence and his followers rode this wave for a time, but their motivation sprang from a deeper commitment: the abolition of what they believed to be the foundation of all oppression, the private ownership of land. They envisaged this coming about through a rapid process comparable to the biblical jubilee–a time of social restitution when debts were forgiven, property was redistributed, and rights restored. This would be triggered by an armed uprising in the capital. “A few thousands of hearty determined fellows well armed and appointed with officers” was all it would take, Spence thought, provided the work of public education had been done.[17] He seems to have had in mind the show-down between “the people” and “the privileged class” in Volney’s *Ruins of Empire* which ends when the privileged are forced to give in, exclaiming: “it is over with us: the multitude are enlightened.”[18]

14 In the post-war years the London ultras moved openly towards armed insurrection. Core members more committed to campaign-building and education, such as Thomas Evans father and son, fell away, while first ‘Doctor’ James Watson and then Arthur Thistlewood took up the leadership. Their weak point was that their own organisation was wide open to spies and informers. At any given time several regular paid informers were operating, and their almost daily reports are the main source for the study of the London ultras and some of their associates. These offer plenty of scope for speculation

about the true extent of the ultras' networks, but at the same time they are also evidence of their security failure.

15 The ultras' favoured tactic of assembling the largest possible crowd in central London and rousing it to insurrection was dependent upon the strategy of mass petitioning, in which they did not believe. Once considered an ineffectual activity of little interest to the historian of radicalism, petitioning has recently been reassessed as a central tactic of the British democratic movement. Organised petitioners were collectively asserting a key civil right to address government, guaranteed by the 1689 Bill of Rights, at a time when political meetings were otherwise severely restricted by law. Petitioning mobilised large numbers of people, electors and non-electors alike. The rejection of lawfully submitted petitions damaged the legitimacy of government and provided a constitutional justification for resistance.[19] The London ultras were willing to exploit this approach but they had no faith in it. As John Gale Jones put it, "it was for courtiers, slaves, and criminals, to petition, but freemen and Englishmen should remonstrate, resolve and demand those rights which God and nature gave." The idea of a remonstrance went back to the 'Grand Remonstrance' of 1641, issued by parliament to the King on the eve of the civil wars: an open challenge to yield or suffer the consequences. In this case the challenge was issued direct to the throne in the name of the people, over the head of parliament. Failure to respond reasonably was held to legitimate insurrection, a goal towards which the ultras constantly pressed.[20]

16 The cycle of petition, remonstrate, and rebel had been played out in the autumn and winter of 1816-17. A national petitioning campaign for parliamentary reform, led by Major John Cartwright in the name of the London Hampden Club, generated three quarters of a million signatures or more on some 700 separate petitions.[21] In parallel with this, the London ultras organised three open-air mass meetings addressed by the orator Henry Hunt in November and December 1816 and February 1817 at Spa Fields, in the working-class district of Clerkenwell north of the City. At the first meeting the ultras wanted to dispense with petitioning parliament and march straight to Carlton House to remonstrate in force with the Prince Regent, but Hunt would agree only to a resolution empowering him to take an address in person. As the second meeting in December started to assemble, Thistlewood and Watson's impetuous son led a breakaway group to raid gun shops and storm the Tower of London, which they believed would be opened to them by sympathetic guards. The rioters caused mayhem but the gates of the Tower remained shut and Thistlewood and others were arrested. (They were eventually acquitted of High Treason by a jury suspicious about the role of the spy and *agent provocateur* John Castles, leaving one unfortunate sailor to hang for his lesser part in the riots). The meeting meanwhile heard from Hunt that the Prince Regent had refused to receive their address, and resolved to present a reform bill to parliament, backed by mass petitions, and to reconvene in the new year to consider the response. The third Spa Fields meeting of 10 February 1817 took place at the same time as similar meetings of petitioning bodies across the country. This scheme for simultaneous meetings was designed by the London ultras, working with provincial allies, to overstretch the capacity of the military to respond. Hunt had to report to the crowd that the Commons had refused to receive its petition of 24,000 signatures, along with hundreds of others, but he again refused to endorse physical resistance. Here and all over the country meetings ended inconclusively, ready to express outrage but reluctant to move to rebellion.[22]

17 In the months that followed, groups of rebels in Manchester, Huddersfield, and the Nottingham-Derby area all staged attempted risings, each believing that they were part of a co-ordinated set of marches which would rally in the capital in irresistible numbers. Hundreds of marchers carrying blankets left Manchester for London on 10 March, and some got as far as Derby before the march fizzled out. An attempt to repeat the exercise in secret three weeks later was easily foiled by the Manchester authorities, working through spies and informers. May and June saw preparations for similar ventures in the West Riding of Yorkshire and the neighbouring Nottingham-Derby area–the so-called Huddersfield and Pentrich risings. Assured by Oliver the spy that they would be

joined by tens of thousands in an armed descent on the capital, hundreds of reformers were lured into the open; arrests and exemplary executions followed. These salutary experiences made most of Hunt's followers in the north, in Manchester in particular, wary of conspiracy and rebellion, and of promises of support from London.[23]

18 The radical campaign when it revived in early 1819 began from the premise that petitioning had failed, and that only the prospect of mass civil unrest would induce the government to back down. A sequence of open-air meetings in the Manchester region in May and June, promoted through the radical *Manchester Observer,* launched an "Appeal to the People of England" to take back their liberties, and the campaign became national. The Birmingham meeting of 12 July took the bold step of appointing the Whig baronet Sir Charles Wolseley as a "legislatorial attorney", or unofficial MP, to represent the city in Parliament. The meeting at Smithfield in the City of London on 21 July was organised by James Watson and the ultras and addressed by Henry Hunt. This time they agreed on a set of resolutions in favour of "the first of all the Rights of Man, Universal, Civil, and Religious Liberty." The meeting appealed for support to "the Catholic people of Ireland" as well as the protestant people of England and Scotland: "They cannot withstand the united Voice of Five Millions of Irishmen and Eleven Millions of Englishmen." A final resolution declared that if parliamentary reform had not been granted by 1 January 1820, those present would renounce their allegiance to the crown. This was in line with Hunt's strategy of intensifying mass pressure to its constitutional limits, but it crossed the line into illegality and would help to convict him of sedition after Peterloo. On the other hand, it gave the London ultras the sanction they wanted for armed resistance.[24]

19 Among the summer's wave of mass platform meetings, the Manchester rally of 16 August was recognised as particularly important. Manchester was the hub of the cotton industry, a town controlled by reactionary authorities but at the centre of a region where the radical movement was exceptionally strong. A government spy among the London ultras reported: "this they look upon as the signal to begin. They will be much disappointed, if that meeting goes off quietly."[25] Two large indoor meetings in the capital were fixed for 16 August itself. At the Angel Inn on the South Bank, where many Irish were present, Thistlewood spoke of the Irish rebellion of 1798 and asserted that this time round Irish and English rebels would stand together. A spy reported that "the whole tenor of the speeches was to expel fear from the mind, to be united & firm–that there was nothing to fear from the soldiers, and to encourage the Irish in co-operation."[26] He and Watson made attempts to suborn troops in London. A catholic priest was said to be on his way to Dublin via the midlands and Manchester with 2,000 copies of an address to the people of Ireland. "Shaw the Lambeth Secretary was very conspicuous in the Irish Rebellion" reported the agent.[27]

20 Weekly public debates were held at the Hopkins Street Chapel in Soho run by Robert Wedderburn, a black Caribbean son of a slave, fluent in the language of jubilee and rebellion. On 9 August those present unanimously supported the right of a slave to kill his master and "expressed their desire of hearing another sable nation freeing itself by the dagger from the base tyranny of their Christian masters." All this was reported on the poster for the following week's debate on 16 August, the very day of the Manchester meeting, below the headline "*Vengence* Awaits the Guilty."[28] As a follow-up to the Manchester rally, the ultras advertised a meeting of "The non-represented people and all friends of Freedom, in Surrey and Southwark" to take place on Kennington Common on 23 August. The poster was similarly worded to the Manchester one, assuring supporters that government "cannot long resist the force of a people's will." Hunt was invited to act as chairman, and promised a huge crowd including up to 70,000 Irish Londoners.[29]

21 At first, the Peterloo massacre (as it was soon called) seemed like a gift to the ultra-radicals. Richard Carlile's eye-witness account in *Sherwin's Political Register* pulled no punches:

> All prospect of reconciliation must now be considered as being effectually destroyed, and the People have now no resource left but to arm themselves immediately, for the recovery of their rights, and the defence of their persons, or patiently submit to the most unconditional slavery. The Government has long been a Military Despotism in a *theoretical* point of view; it is now become so in *practice*, and the murderers at Manchester are but the first fruits of its principles. [30]

22 On receiving the news from Manchester on 18 August the ultras at first determined to go ahead with the Kennington meeting, with the proviso that "to prevent being taken by surprise they should go armed." The next day, however, the meeting was put off after contacts in the military warned that the open site was vulnerable to attack by regular troops. They resolved instead to meet at Smithfield in the City on 25th, and published a leaflet asking "Shall the MURDERS of the Reformers in the Country go unavenged in the capital?" It looked forward to a "bloodless victory" and offered "to embrace the Regulars as our Brothers."[31] Some 8,000 attended the meeting, but it was so effectively policed that Watson ended up writing to thank the Lord Mayor of London for the protection and "excellent conduct" of the civil power, by contrast with "the rash and calamitous measures" at Manchester.[32]

23 The main response to Peterloo in London was led by the reforming Whigs of Westminster. The tens of thousands at the protest meeting organised by the Westminster Committee at Covent Garden on 2 September were crowds which the ultras felt they could work on. Thistlewood led an armed group to the meeting carrying a flag calling for universal suffrage, but failed to set off any unrest; his actions were disowned by Watson.[33] Watson involved himself closely in the arrangements for the triumphal return of Henry Hunt to London on bail after Peterloo, setting out a lengthy processional route through working-class districts and taking charge of the arrangements for a public dinner to follow at the theatre-sized Crown and Anchor tavern. The triumphal procession brought an ocean of supporters onto the streets, but Watson's arrangements for the dinner were less successful. Hunt took the chair himself, elbowing out Watson's choice of John Gale Jones, and moved resolutions which emphasised that radicals now held the advantage of legality over government and intended to keep it. Violent speeches by Watson and his allies were met with hostility, and Hunt and the ultras split. Far from precipitating an armed rising, the effect of Peterloo in London was to tacitly unite reforming Whigs and Huntites. While remaining at loggerheads, they both used the language of insurgency to rally the masses behind constitutionalist strategies.[34]

24 The ultras now struck out on their own. Wedderburn organised a debate on Peterloo ("an act of murder") at Hopkins Street chapel on 15 September. According to a Home Office agent, Wedderburn declared that their aim "must be nothing short of a Revolution–& that they had now force enough to carry on their own plans independent of the Huntites & Burdettites, the greater part of whom, were ready to join them."[35] The Hopkins Street meetings were regularly followed by armed drilling, and a large stockpile of pike heads was said to have been assembled. Thistlewood declared this section his most important force. Since before Peterloo he had been coming to meetings with concealed pistols and urging others to do the same, saying "20 good men would do more good than a large mob."[36] But as the ultras tacitly renounced the mass platform in the capital in favour of a tighter network of armed activists, they lost support among the London trades and became dependent on reinforcements from the provinces.

25 Among those present at Hopkins Street on 15 September was the Manchester radical John Tetlow. He claimed to be one of three who was organising radicals there into companies of 25, each with their own leader and penny weekly subscription. He urged the Londoners do the same. A London Union Society was formed at the Crown and Anchor, divided into local sections of twelve and managed by a small secret committee, an arrangement reported to have been extended to five districts of London. Thistlewood turned up with five colleagues who were proposed as members, but "all [were] black ball'd from their being too hasty & violent." Tetlow's cell organisation does not seem to

have developed, and the various gatherings of ultras around the capital continued to meet as before. Thistlewood and Watson refused to join any branch, preferring to float around as visiting agitators.[37]

26 Tetlow returned to Manchester, planning to stop at the Potteries on the way where he expected "to get the cooperation of some thousands." Another associate visited Norwich, and there were said to be contacts with Yorkshire. Thistlewood for his part headed to his native Leicestershire "to raise some money & see what can be done in Leicester."[38] On his return (reported a spy) "Thistlewood said he had found everything more correct at Derby Nottingham & Leicester than they were in Town [London], & they were all to meet on the same day." It is unlikely that he actually visited those places as well as Leicester.[39] A meeting was fixed for 1 November at Finsbury market, on the northern edge of the city of London, following up the Smithfield meetings of July and August. It was billed as the "Third meeting of the people of the metropolis [...] to ADDRESS THE PRINCE FOR A REDRESS OF GRIEVANCES." Thistlewood and Watson planned that "the meeting was to be general on that day in every town in England." All would pass the same resolutions and all would reconvene on 15 November: "the Doctor [Watson] said that he hoped all would then go to work."[40] A printed copy of the London resolutions arrived in Manchester around 22 October, where it was promptly copied and forwarded to the surrounding districts, and further north to Carlisle and Paisley.[41]

27 The Home Office's spies in London reported much bold talk about arming. In October a debate at Hopkins Street decided that "the poor would be victorious, should a civil war commence." The next debated whether British troops would stand by and allow imported troops and Yeomanry "to massacre their afflicted brethren."[42] The Spencean Allen Davenport allegedly said: "War [...] has already been declared against us why then should we hesitate, for my own part I am ready now [...] I compare the present time to the French Revolution, we must arm ourselves as they did."[43] At a final gathering on the eve of the 1 November meeting an open call to arms by one speaker was ostensibly disowned, but Watson advised with a nod and a wink that "with respect to going armed, they might do as they pleased."[44]

28 On 1 November pikes were openly sold from a stall at the meeting place at Smithfield market. Watson and Thistlewood arrived grandly in a Hackney carriage but no organised bodies turned up. Watson read out a long list of resolutions asserting the right of the people to bear arms, denouncing their opponents as "enemies and traitors to the Commonwealth", and asserting: "the Social Compact is broken up [...] the rich are leagued against the poor." The meeting called on the Prince Regent to use the royal prerogative to call a general election and enfranchise all adult males, in order that "your father's throne be established in peace." Notwithstanding this grand gesture it was (writes Prothero) "a very tame affair", with perhaps 1,500 present: "the meeting did not make a great impact, was poorly reported, and seemed to show the group's isolation." McCalman agrees: "the meeting was clearly a failure and a crushing disappointment to Watsonite hopes." Wedderburn admitted that they did not have the forces to lead a rising. Nonetheless, the meeting adjourned to 15 November to receive the Prince Regent's answer. This would now be the crucial date, but all depended on the meetings taking place simultaneously in the provinces.[45] So what was happening further north?

The Provinces

29 For three months after Peterloo the Manchester region gave every appearance of being on the verge of rebellion. As crowds from Yorkshire poured into Oldham for the October fair, pikes were carried openly in the street and "everybody almost wore a white hat with a bunch of green ribbons in the front–everybody was talking of reform."[46] In Failsworth, between Oldham and Manchester, the local overseer found collecting the poor rates impossible: "they tell him that they will not pay any until after

the reform business is over." Virtually everyone was a radical reformer, and many had pikes or pistols: "they openly threaten to destroy Manchester & all the authorities in the neighbourhood both magistrates and constables."[47] Some 300 men were observed drilling at night in Failsworth, three miles from Manchester, as well as other places, and there were widespread reports of pike-making. Intimidation of loyalists made reliable information scarce. [48]"The Reformists beset my house in the night & terrify Mrs Ethelston into hysterics", complained the Reverend Ethelston of Manchester, one of the most prominent magistrates at Peterloo; his coachman was attacked, and his son urged him to leave the area. His Bolton colleague William Hulton had his outbuildings burned down while their fellow-magistrate Colonel Fletcher had his plantations destroyed.[49] An army captain from Yorkshire who passed through Manchester on his way to Liverpool reported: "The bold seditious language held by all with whom I entered into conversation on the roads as I passed on foot from one place to another alarms me more and more."[50] Yeomanry horses stationed in Stretford were maimed, and an arms store in Bolton was broken into, the intruders shooting one soldier in the hand.[51] In Middleton a loyalist was found dying outside his own door after a beating by three neighbouring radicals: "all that the poor man could say was 'they have done for me at last.'"[52] One evening Joseph Nadin, Manchester's hated deputy constable, received a bullet through his hat. The culprit was believed to be John Hill, a Manchester radical returned from a visit to London where he had attended ultra-radical meetings with his mistress, who openly carried a pistol.[53] Even allowing for exaggeration, there can be no doubt that the unrest in Lancashire after Peterloo was intense, widespread and prolonged. The reported attacks all targeted magistrates who had presided at Peterloo or their presumed allies, and reflected the general rhetoric of revenge.

30 Eleven delegates from Lancashire, Carlisle, Paisley, and Glasgow convened in Manchester on Sunday 3 October to plan the next steps. Colonel Fletcher's most reliable informer, "Alpha", attended as the Bolton delegate. He reported talk of a network of "Centrals" which would select a deputation to London to "act as a Provisional Government." The Centrals for Lancashire were Blackburn and Manchester but only Manchester appeared to be operating. Those present struck Alpha as "timid in the extreme" and reluctant to trust one another; his impression was that "this uniting is chiefly through the exertions of one or two individuals." A Manchester delegate confided in Alpha that "things were very unfavorable in the North, he had much ado to get any way received particularly at Carlisle and Glasgow."[54]

31 The London ultras' plan for simultaneous meetings in the provinces on 1 November divided the radical movement. James Wroe kept the *Manchester Observer* firmly behind Hunt's radical constitutionalist strategy. On 23 October the paper carried Hunt's letter to "the brave reformers of Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire, the whole of the north of England, and Scotland." Hunt reminded them of the events of 1817 and warned of spies travelling around the country at Whitehall's expense attempting to "hatch up some imaginary Treason":

> I know that some of these are about to urge you to simultaneous meetings in the early part of November; but beware, my friends, and disappoint the *Tygers* of their prey [...] No one will go to such a Meeting *unarmed* [...] and where is the man who would advise you to meet *armed?* I say, my friends of Manchester, *meet not,* till every effort has been made and failed to bring to Justice these Murderers.

32 Hunt's strategy was to rally a mass movement in overwhelming force, then to hold it back as parliament met. His stance was reinforced by the representatives of the Metropolitan Relief Committee, sent to Manchester to offer legal support to the victims of Peterloo. The representatives included the solicitor Charles Pearson, the barrister James Harmer, the radical journalist (and former United Irishman) Peter Finnerty, and the committee secretary, G. W. Service, the future publisher of the *Manchester Observer*.[55] Agent Alpha encountered Pearson and some colleagues on 26 October, and reported his impressions.

> They wish peoples attention to be kept fixed on the Manchester affair and wait and see, and promote, the convictions of those magistrates who took a leading part in the horrors of the day. They are paving a way for it to be laid before the House of Commons in all its black envenomed colors [...]. They are exerting to the utmost all they can to frustrate Watson & Thistlewood and they persuaded Manchester and Bolton to relinquish the Intended plan [...]. Sir Charles [...] wished no meetings in either towns or country except to expose the Manchester affair.[56]

33 This added up to a coherent broad strategy: while lawyers acting for the Peterloo defendants worked to expose and discredit the authorities in court, reforming Whig MPs would attempt to force an inquiry while Hunt rallied the masses outside. Notwithstanding his continued sharp differences with the Whigs, Hunt's radical constitutionalist stance required him to both threaten and restrain insurrection; in this respect his position was similar to that of the Whigs, except that they pointed to the threat from Hunt while Hunt pointed to the threat from the ultras.[57] Thistlewood secretively visited Lancashire, setting off rumours but leaving very little evidence other than the resulting suspicion. Before leaving he tried to tap Wroe for money for the return journey, prompting a furious public row which shortly afterwards split the Manchester committee, allowing immediate infiltration by spies.[58] Lang of Manchester accompanied Thistlewood southwards to Stockport: "he wished to know whether we could make sure of taking the barracks; to which I replied that I believed it could be done." Thistlewood, he believed, "died in full expectation that such a plan would yet be executed." William Tootall (or Toothill) of Bolton also had a conversation with Thistlewood, which in retrospect convinced him that "the Cato Street Conspiracy was a real & not a sham plot."[59]

34 Meetings were held in Bolton and Manchester on 25 October to decide whether to hold simultaneous meetings with London on 1 November, or whether to heed Hunt's warnings and hold back. Both decided on a compromise: to postpone the planned meetings to 15 November. "There seems to be a complete schism between Hunt, Johnson & co. and the ultra radicals the latter of whom declare that they will in future have no professed leader," reported the magistrate James Norris.[60] Local groups in the surrounding districts were divided: Royton voted in favour of meeting on 1 November, Failsworth and Ashton against.[61] The Bolton reformers had written to Preston, Carlisle and Glasgow to ask about their plans. Carlisle opted to postpone as Watson and Thistlewood appeared "so much out of popular favor at present as not to gain sufficient influence for such an important undertaking." They signed off with a cheerless flourish: "wishing you every success Bolton."[62] Similar replies were expected from Preston and Glasgow. In Nottingham, a centre of insurrection in 1817, a regional delegate meeting planned for 25 October had failed to materialise; opinions were said to be divided, with a majority for Thistlewood. On 27th however Thomas Wooler, editor of the *Black Dwarf,* visited Nottingham and denounced Thistlewood as "a spy or suspicious character" and the plan was abandoned.[63]

35 As the Manchester Union split the militants took control of the committee, with Walker as secretary. It published a notice on 29 October to insist that the plan for simultaneous meetings would go ahead across the UK on 15 November: "then it would be impossible to Murder All, as the Murderers cannot be in all places at once." Walker had to defend himself against the charge of being a spy.[64] The scheme was debated at a meeting of around a hundred reform delegates in Manchester on 4 November. Robert Bradbury (an erratic character who had turned informer in 1817) claimed that if the simultaneous meetings of 1 November had gone ahead "the business would have been done before now." Wroe in turn denounced Walker and Bradbury as "bad characters" who were leading the union to disaster. In the face of dismay from those who claimed to be ready to rise, the 15 November meeting was also put off indefinitely.[65]

36 Two big public meetings in Lancashire did go ahead in this period, but neither followed the insurgent script provided by the London ultras. The Wigan committee voted to go ahead with its meeting on 1 November, because (an informant explained),

"It is on that day because being Monday after Wigan Fair it is a great holiday amongst the Catholics which form a great part of their population. They are very spirited and intend the business of the day to emanate from the inhabitants of Wigan alone." In the event it was postponed by a week, until 8 October. Between 1,500 and 10,000 people rallied on a common outside the town with flags and banners, policed by two troops of yeomanry cavalry and a force of special constables. Walker, the Manchester secretary, was in the chair, and the fiery Stockport preacher Joseph Harrison spoke. He explained cautiously that physical force might be necessary if emergency legislation were brought in, but excused himself from future public meetings "as he was a persecuted individual." The magistrates did not intervene and "the day passed with the greatest order & tranquillity", although volleys of pistol shots were fired off at the end.[66]

37 The Burnley meeting on 15 November was larger and more challenging. Some 10,000 people rallied on the outskirts of Burnley, a cotton town thirty miles north of Manchester. Several thousand had marched in procession from other towns, including some from Yorkshire, and regular cavalry were present. Banners, their shafts wrapped in black crepe, demanded justice for "the inhuman and bloody butchery committed at Manchester on the 16th of August"; one showed a woman holding a headless child. Some of the banner poles were shaped to carry pikeheads. When the local military commander and magistrate seized one as evidence, an onlooker raised a pistol and vowed to shoot him, but was dissuaded by his friends. The meeting was chaired by John Knight, one of Wroe's *Manchester Observer* group, who made a constitutionalist speech and urged his hearers to observe order and discipline. As he was doing so there was a stir in the crowd that the cavalry were coming, and a number of people were seen taking out concealed pikeheads and attaching them to their walking sticks; when the panic subsided, they put them away again. Pikes were essentially defensive weapons to repel cavalry, not spearheads of rebellion. One of the speakers introduced himself as Walker of Manchester. A local speaker, George Dewhurst, exhorted his hearers to rise in protest if parliament moved to restrict civil liberties. The full set of London resolutions was passed and the meeting dispersed peacefully if exuberantly, firing pistols into the air.

38 The timing and the off-the-peg London resolutions suggested that the Burnley meeting was part of a planned insurrection, but the main theme was the Huntite demand for justice and civil liberties. The speaker calling himself Walker turned out to be the Manchester Huntite Nathan Broadhurst, using secretary Walker's name as cover. Eight men were arrested, and initially charged with treason on the basis of common purpose with the people in the crowd who had produced pikeheads, but the charges were reduced to sedition. Six were eventually convicted and sentenced to between one and two years in prison–a heavier toll than the York Peterloo trial.[67]

39 When the London ultras met on 10 November, reported agent 'C', "Watson informed them that the communication between himself and the country places had dropped, for that they had sided with Hunt." The meeting planned at Smithfield for 15th was put off until 24 November, the day after parliament met; it was expected that the Prince Regent's announcement from the throne of restrictions on the right to meet would provoke unrest.[68] A further plan was formed for simultaneous meetings to take place in London and the Provinces on 13 December, with the London meeting to go in a body to demand an audience with the Prince Regent. Drilling with sticks was arranged for early Sunday morning on Primrose Hill.[69] Watson, in his next letter to Walker in Manchester, admitted that the failure of the simultaneous meetings in the provinces had "intimidated, discouraged, [and] paralysed our friends here." He nonetheless went on to claim that the Finsbury meeting on 1st had been 20-40,000 strong (ten to twenty times the actual figure): "Had twenty other populous towns done the same England had this day been free. But never mind my Manchester friends, the day of delivery is at hand [...]. We are with you perfectly."[70] Walker replied to these exaggerations in kind, claiming that delegates from Glasgow and Nottingham were in Manchester, that Hunt's influence was fast declining, and that the majority of Lancashire reformers were with Watson and Thistlewood. Watson's reading of Walker's letter at a London meeting led

those present to believe that there were 200,000 “fighting radicals” organised across five large districts in the north of England and Scotland and ready to rise, with only 20,000 government troops to oppose them. More credibly, they were also informed that the main body of armed ultras at Hopkins Street Chapel had quarrelled and broken up. Thistlewood blamed the influence of Hunt: “the people in London have got no spirits [...]. Ah, says one, what could they do with twenty thousand men with good leaders divided into 25 each. Nothing could withstand them says Thistlewood.”[71]

40 Walker arrived in London from Manchester on 24 November and spoke at the Smithfield meeting. Watson and Thistlewood went armed with sabres and carried a resolution urging the King to reject parliament’s emergency measures; his expected refusal would rouse the simultaneous meetings on 13 December to rebellion. The meeting was a fiasco: only a few hundred attended and there was little press coverage. Afterwards, a dozen of the core group gathered to lament the situation. Walker tried to raise their spirits: “Our party is getting stronger & stronger. [...] I wish we could say so here says Thistlewood. [...] You have got but a few at present says Walker but they are good ones.”[72] Thistlewood then toured the London groups to assure them that hundreds of thousands of armed radicals from the north were ready to descend on London.[73] The core group however was disintegrating: Watson was arrested for debt arising from the September reception for Hunt, Wedderburn was arrested for sedition, and Waddington was arrested for blasphemy. Walker returned to Manchester where he too was arrested. This left the impulsive Thistlewood in charge, with the spy George Edwards as his right-hand man.

41 A northern delegate meeting at Nottingham in late November endorsed Thistlewood’s plan for simultaneous meetings on 13 December, in the belief that the emergency legislation going through parliament would provoke riots in the capital. Troops were brought into Nottingham in response. A follow-up public meeting on 10 December attracted a few hundred palpably nervous reformers, and another northern delegate meeting the same evening mustered only four.[74] Two Scots delegates accompanied Tootall the Bolton delegate back to Manchester. They promised strong support from Paisley and Glasgow but (reported the spy Alpha) Tootall (an ex-soldier) “could not say that Bolton had 100 men that would perform the whole of such important duty.” The rising was put off, “except our London friends sends us some contrary word.”[75] “The leaders seem very backward in this town for they are afraid of being taken” wrote another agent. Simultaneous meetings were advertised for 13 December in Manchester itself, Flixton, Eccles, and Bolton, in the expectation that risings in Nottingham, Carlisle, Glasgow, and the West Riding of Yorkshire would draw the troops from Manchester.[76] The Manchester authorities fortified key buildings with brick structures and earthworks, borrowed 1,600 cutlasses and 2,000 pistols from the armoury at Chester, and issued a notice to warn people off attending the meeting. The *Manchester Observer* group denounced the meetings and in the end all four were called off. The magistrates in Manchester were relieved to watch 13 December “pass off in the most perfect peace.”[77] In Nottingham 300 reformers met on the morning of 13 December and dispersed peacefully.[78] In Glasgow there was a heavy military presence and no meeting. In Kilsyth, 20 miles away, 300 men with pikes arrived from the surrounding districts, found no troops to challenge, and went back home.[79]

42 The last hope for a rising was on 1 January, the day appointed by the Smithfield meeting of 21 July for reformers across Britain to withdraw their allegiance to the crown. On 20 December five delegates from the north of England and Scotland met again in Nottingham to plan a two-pronged northern rising which would converge on London via Nottingham and Derby. Despite an apparently extensive system of secret messaging this came to nothing.[80] Another northern delegate meeting in Manchester as late as 23 December was raided and nine arrests were made, including Tootall; delegates from Carlisle, Yorkshire and Scotland were said to have escaped. Bolton had already abandoned its plans.[81] A small notice advertised a general fast in Manchester on 1 January to protest at the passage of the Six Acts, which had restricted the right to meet and other civil liberties. The Manchester authorities reported that the usual new

year's day's festivities "passed off without any the smallest attempts [sic] to disturb the public peace."[82]

43 The failure of the north to rise caused despair in London. At a meeting on 7 December, "the delegates from Marylebone expressed much dissatisfaction having been given to understand that delegates from all parts of England was to assemble that evening at the White Lion." Watson again blamed opposition from Hunt and Wooler.[83] The next day the Whigs held a public meeting at Covent Garden to protest at the imminent emergency legislation, attracting a reported 5,000 people, while Hunt held his own meeting at Smithfield, attracting 1,800. Thistlewood and forty supporters armed with bayonets attended both, hoping to set off a rising; they met only hostility and their flag was torn to shreds.[84] Their last regular meeting was on 12 December, when Thomas Preston admitted that "the Londoners would do nothing." They resolved to meet again in the event of favourable news from Manchester; Manchester, as we have already seen, had arranged to meet only in the event of favourable news from London. Simultaneous meetings had morphed into simultaneous cancellations.

44 From this point on Thistlewood, wounded by Hunt's charge that he was a spy, was observed to be "imbued with the opinion that he should perform some bold and daring act to wipe away the imputation." On 13 December he attempted to assemble 200 people to attack parliament; when only 47 could be found the scheme was abandoned. Now was the time to make good on his claim of the summer that "20 good men would do more good than a large mob."[85]

1820

45 The paradox of the Cato Street conspiracy of 23 February 1820 is that it was intended to set off a national rebellion, but that it took place in isolation from other attempted risings: two months after the failure of the plan for simultaneous meetings in 1819 and a month before the Easter risings in Scotland and the north. The timing of Cato Street was in fact decided by the Home Office, which sprung the trap by advertising a cabinet dinner in Grosvenor Square. Thistlewood mustered a band of followers to attack the expected dinner, kill the ministers present, and gather crowds to storm various strongholds of authority in the capital. Many of those gathered around Thistlewood had only joined his enterprise recently; most longer-standing associates had fallen away, discouraged by failure or disabled by arrest. Several regular informants had also withdrawn, worried about what they were getting into. The conspirators were successfully ambushed by the authorities, although Thistlewood killed a constable. The chief informant, Edwards, was prudently kept out of the witness box lest the trial should collapse like the 1817 one when the jury suspected the work of an *agent provocateur*. [86]The rushed trial of the conspirators and the exclusion of much evidence from public view has generated suspicion that the government was anxious to conceal a movement more far-reaching than it dared to admit. The reality was more mundane: the government, aware of northern preparations for unrest after the forthcoming Peterloo trial, was anxious for a speedy and exemplary conviction. The convenient caches of London-centred prosecution documents which were generated, and the richness of this material, have enabled historians to focus on the capital without really exploring the provincial connections.

46 While the Cato Street conspiracy can be described separately from the various northern risings and rumblings, it cannot be understood separately. The various Easter risings that followed are explored in detail by Malcolm Chase, who finds "an element of collusion between insurrectionary elements in the United Kingdom, and perhaps some pattern to their activities." This limited level of co-ordination was less than had existed in 1819. One area that can largely be discounted is the Irish connection. Chase shows that the rising of the Ribbonmen in the west of Ireland in early March 1820 was a rural movement, focused on rolling back livestock farming: "Ribbonism, *if* it was centrally co-

ordinated at all, mustered no armies but was a dynamic and shifting web of guerrilla activities."[87] By the end of March it had been brutally repressed. As to other Irish connections, the most recent investigation is by Timothy Murtagh who concludes: "It is possible 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."[88]

47 The unrest in northern Britain was real enough, and it was foreseen by the Home Office. Shortly after Cato Street, the Home Office's senior official advised: "The information from Glasgow & from Manchester clearly proves that at both those places there was more community of intention with the scoundrels who have been taken up here than we had supposed." A few days later he wrote of "an expectation of some gr[eat] blow being struck."[89] In mid-March Sidmouth wrote: "Accounts from Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, etc. are unsatisfactory. A simultaneous explosion appears to be meditated at an early period. Much will depend upon the result of the trials at York, Lancaster, Leicester and Warwick."[90] To his relief, all resulted in convictions, although York was a close run thing.

48 A series of attempted risings followed in late March and early April in the West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire, and the Glasgow region. This time there were no expectations of London to be disappointed, and several attempted rebellions did actually get off the ground. They were intended to be co-ordinated with each other, but communications were poor and most of the places expected to rise failed to do so. In the West Riding there was a plan to capture the town of Huddersfield during the night of 30/31 March, lighting a beacon on a nearby hill to rally others and stopping the mail coach to Glasgow to signal success to those further north. 2,000 armed men from Huddersfield did indeed assemble at several points, lit a beacon and briefly waylaid the mail coach, but then dispersed.[91]

49 In Glasgow and Paisley cotton strikes were in progress and crowds were in the streets for several days, creating an atmosphere of expectation. On the night of 1-2 April an *Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain* was posted all over south-west Scotland, declaring a provisional government. It was not a Scottish nationalist manifesto, but rather repeated familiar radical arguments about the British constitution, the right to hold public meetings, and the right to pursue armed resistance. Malcolm Chase has identified the author as the Yorkshire radical Joseph Brayshaw of Leeds, who had visited Carlisle and Glasgow around the time of Cato Street to co-ordinate radical preparations.[92] The co-ordination with Yorkshire however was not close, for in Glasgow 4 April was the day when the English mail coach was expected not to arrive; when it appeared as usual, disillusionment spread rapidly amongst large crowds and the planned rising was largely aborted. According to Donnelly, "those incidents of rebellion which did occur were the work of groups who either chose not to adhere to the plan or who were not properly informed about the overall situation." The next day an expedition thirty strong marched from Glasgow Green to seize Falkirk, and was routed by troops four miles short at Bonnymuir. Meanwhile, around a hundred rebels took control of Strathaven to the south, and 25 of them marched towards Glasgow, only to give up when the expected thousands of supporters failed to appear.[93]

50 While Glasgow was waiting upon England to rise, Manchester was waiting upon Glasgow–specifically, the non-arrival of the Scottish mail coach on 1 April. On the night of 31 March, strikers paraded in Bolton led by Tootall, the former contact with the London ultras. A messenger came from Carlisle to say that "in fourteen hours, the radicals there would all be in arms." 300 men from Warrington assembled near Wigan the same evening, allegedly planning to imprison magistrates, constables and soldiers in the local church; finding their numbers too few, they abandoned the venture.[94] The Manchester magistrate James Norris, in touch with Scotland, summed up the situation pithily: "in Scotland they expect the movement to commence in England & I believe that here they expect the commencement in Scotland; this state of things will I hope prevent their moving in either country."[95] On 18 April the Glasgow Central Committee sent a reproachful letter to Lancashire:

> We are so much discouraged at our brethren not coming forward in a more tumultuous form that we are at a loss which way to pursue. It was useless for us to persevere unless England would have stepped forward with a helping hand [...] till something further is executed on your part we will remain dormant.[96]

51 A second attempted rising took place in the West Riding on 11-12 April, again effectively countered by the authorities. The plan was for contingents from at least five West Riding towns to meet at Grange Moor, eight miles from Huddersfield.[97] An impressive contingent of 500 from Barnsley arrived, but retreated before a detachment of Dragoons & Yeomanry. Members of the Manchester Committee gathered anxiously along the mail coach route from Yorkshire for news, and when a messenger returned with the news from Huddersfield disappointed delegates dispersed to their different towns to call off the attempt. A post-mortem meeting a few days later decided: "the matter is concluded for the moment and until we can have one general simultaneous Rise, one universal grand stroke, and general muster, at almost one and the same hour, it is useless to attempt anything of this nature."[98]

Conclusion

52 Historians have sometimes been led by the ferocity of the London ultras' rhetoric and the scale of the national protests over Peterloo into supposing that Thistlewood and Watson's group constituted the forefront of a potential revolution, led from the capital. Peterloo had been a tactical victory for the authorities but a political disaster, generating an immense and broad-based protest movement. Its militant constitutionalism posed serious problems of containment for the government, which did not really know how to counter a mass movement which looked and sounded like a rebellion but which refused to riot. The plan of the London ultras for simultaneous meetings across the UK had the potential to outmanoeuvre the limited capacity of the military to police mass gatherings; however, their insistence on linking this with an armed rebellion in the capital was their undoing.

53 The London ultras represented a strong cultural strand of dissent and resistance in the capital, challenging the reforming Whigs in Westminster and the City from a position well to the left. Yet while they managed an impressive network of debating clubs and underground contacts, ever since the Spa Fields meetings of 1816-17 they had depended upon Henry Hunt to rally mass support. After Peterloo however Hunt pursued an essentially constitutionalist strategy focused on parliament, aligning with the reforming Whigs but adding the demand for manhood suffrage and the threat of rebellion. When the ultras joined the organisational effort to welcome Hunt in triumph to London the results were spectacular, but thereafter their attempts to rouse a rebellion on their own were disappointing. They became parasitic upon the much stronger radical movement in the north, which was overwhelmingly Huntite.

54 The London ultras and the handful of provincial delegates to the capital were members of a militant minority, each exaggerating their own prospects in order to encourage the other to take the lead. Every time the decision for rebellion seemed imminent a familiar pattern repeated itself, with the action always expected somewhere else and local radicals pursuing a wait and see policy. There was strong support for some kind of rising in parts of the north, but the northern risings of 1820 eventually took place without reference to the capital, which by then had misfired alone.

55 The Cato Street conspiracy happened not because a national rebellion was expected but because one had already failed. Their few remaining provincial contacts at the time of Cato Street were aware in a general way that something violent was afoot, but after mid-December there was no plan and no effective network. Suggestions of an Irish rising, whether in London or Dublin, were fantasy. The fact that the conspirators operated in isolation from the wider radical movement was a sign of their political failure; they had turned from politics to terrorism. The timing of the conspiracy was

determined by government, which set its trap in the relatively quiet period after the passage of the Six Acts in late 1819 and before the anticipated unrest around the post-Peterloo trials of the following spring.

56 The argument could rest there, but it is also worth asking why the government let a dangerous situation brew for so long, despite having daily evidence from multiple agents of armed preparations by Thistlewood and his associates. Partly it was because of the need to avoid a repeat of the acquittals of 1817, when the prosecution's reliance on the evidence of a spy had alienated the Spa Fields jury. Peterloo had raised the bar; it was now even more essential to gather evidence and then catch the culprits red-handed in an act of treason. But part of the answer surely lies in the intelligence value of the ultras. Until Peterloo the authorities had much less intelligence on the Lancashire radicals than in 1817. The London ultras by contrast lived symbiotically with the agents who spied on them, and these in turn monitored every provincial contact who came and went. Travelling delegates carried the virus of espionage with them. Their reports back were picked up by other agents in the provinces, allowing the Home Office to compare notes. Once radicals in Lancashire and elsewhere turned again to insurrection, the flow of local intelligence resumed. This generated not only information but also suspicion. Hunt wrongly accused Thistlewood of being a spy, Wroe wrongly accused Walker, and counter-accusations followed, all serenely noted by the real spies. Such accusations undermined trust, caused splits, and helped ensure the failure of insurrection. The London ultras and their contacts were the Home Office's main intelligence asset. With the failure of armed insurrection in 1819 and the passage of the Six Acts their value was exhausted, and the government simply reeled them in.

57 Freed of the need to collude with the dysfunctional Thistlewood group, Yorkshire, the Glasgow region, and parts of Lancashire eventually managed a semi-co-ordinated set of risings in the spring of 1820. These tested the military resources of government but came four months too late to have any political impact. There was no serious threat of revolution in Britain in either 1819 or 1820, but there was a risk of a serious political crisis in 1819. The existence of armed insurrection in late 1819 and 1820 helped to validate false government claims of armed insurrection at Peterloo, assisted the passage of the Six Acts, and ensured the conviction of Hunt and other radical defendants. The London ultras, far from being in the vanguard of the radical movement, were its weakest link.

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47 HO 42/197 fol. 351 Evidence of Benjamin Worswick, overseer of Failsworth, 18 Oct. 1819.

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59 HO 40/13 fol. 5, Fletcher, 25 May 1820.

60 HO 42/197 fol. 365-6 Norris to Sidmouth 28 Oct. 1819. See also Belchem, *Orator Hunt,* 125-30.

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62 HO 42/197 fol. 421, Alpha, 26 Oct. 1819.

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65 HO 42/198 fol. 120-7, 'W.M.', 7 Nov. 1819. Reproduced in Read, Donald, *Peterloo: The Massacre and its Background* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), Appendix B.

66 HO 42/197 fol. 537, Alpha, HO 42/198 fol. 211, Earl of Balcarres 11 Nov.

67 *State Trials*, new series, i, John McDonnell ed. (1888), 529-607; HO 42/198 fol. 102, agent, 15 Nov. 1819; HO 42/199 fols. 65 (Fletcher, 20 Nov.), 118 (William Wilson, 15 Nov.), 110 (Norris, 21 Nov.), and fols. 252-8 (various depositions).

68 HO 42/198 fol. 313, report of 'C', 10 Nov. 1819. These events are dealt with in more detail in Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, 123-8; Prothero finds the plans for rising in a December credible where I do not.

69 HO 42/198 fol. 257, John Owen, 16 Nov. 1819.

70 HO 42/199 fol. 52, Alpha, 19 Nov. 1819.

71 HO 42/199 fols. 160 & 163, 22 Nov. 1819.

72 HO 42/199 fol. 246, 24 Nov. 1819. Belchem believes Walker was probably an informer, and he, Thompson and Prothero suspect him of being Fletcher's agent Alpha. The evidence however indicates otherwise; Walker acted from conviction. The complex issue of espionage requires a separate article.

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74 HO 42/200 fol. 520, T. Cartledge, Nottingham, 11 Dec. 1819; fol. 95 L. Allsopp, Nottingham, 13 Dec. 1819.

75 HO 42/199 fol. 404, Norris 28 Nov. 1819; HO 42/200 fols. 277, 279, Alpha, Bolton, 30 Nov. & 1 Dec. 1819.

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77 HO 42/201 fols. 32-3, 44 (Norris, 13 Dec. 1819, & posters).

78 HO 42/201 fols. 94-5, Allsopp, Nottingham, 13-14 Dec. 1819.

79 Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union*, 90.

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grateful to Anthony Youngman, curator of this website, for valuable correspondence on this and other points.

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