Report

The Peterloo Massacre and Nineteenth-Century Popular Radicalism

Evening meeting, 16 July 2019, with Robert Poole and Jacqueline Riding; chair: Liz Barker
Report by **Neil Stockley**

At its summer 2019 evening meeting, the Liberal Democrat History Group marked the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre.

Dr Robert Poole, Reader in History at the University of Central Lancashire and author of *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (2019), briefly recounted the tragic events of Monday, 16 August 1819. Henry Hunt, a well-known orator and campaigner for political reform, arrived at St Peter's Field, Manchester. He planned to address a peaceful open-air meeting of some 50,000 people who were protesting at their continued lack of parliamentary representation. But they were being observed by Lancashire and Cheshire magistrates – whom Dr Poole described as 'militant … ultra-Tories … virtually Jacobites' – who were watching from nearby, with around 300 armed special constables under their command plus regular Hussars and cavalry from the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry.

The magistrates became convinced that Hunt would not be able to address such a crowd without causing a large riot and issued a warrant for his arrest, with yeomen accompanying the civil officers. As he was being apprehended by a civil officer, Hunt appealed to the crowd for calm. The yeomen then attacked the platform, the banners and the increasingly anxious crowd with sabres. The victims included a woman who later miscarried in prison, having been detained for ten days without food or water. The yeomen were then, in the words of one eyewitness, 'stuck, like fruit in a fruitcake' near the platform. When the regular Hussars arrived, they were ordered to 'disperse the mob'. The Hussars and yeomen then turned on the crowd, often using sabres. Twenty minutes later, nearly 700 people had been injured and eighteen others lay dead or mortally wounded.

Dr Jacqueline Riding, an independent historian and author of *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (2018), discussed the role of women in the protest. She explained that even though the reformers did not demand female suffrage, they wanted all men to be able to elect Members of Parliament. Such a radical change would at least provide all households with some form of representation.

Dr Riding provided further grim details of the ways in which female reformers who attended the rally, distinctive in their white dresses, were specifically targeted for attack. As the radical journalist Robert Carlile put it, the women were 'the particular objects of the fury of the calvary assassins'. Dr Riding related one incident in which a woman holding an infant was attacked with a sabre. In other recorded incidents, women were attacked with sabres on their breasts and stabbed in the neck. Mary Fildes, president of the Manchester Female Reform Society was, according to one eyewitness account, 'much beat by constables'. A historical novel by Isabella Banks described how Mrs Fildes was suspended from the platform by a nail and 'slashed across her exposed body by one of the brave cavalry'.

Dr Riding placed this brutal treatment into context by recounting how those who formed their own reform societies in Lancashire were vilified from the outset: 'women being involved in politics – how dare they?' was the prevailing attitude. Women reformers were called 'unreformable' or 'unreclaimable females' in the press and regularly depicted in satirical images as prostitutes, with their breasts enlarged and faces flushed. In response to a meeting of the Blackburn Female Reform Society, one commentator charged that 'a woman must have pretty well unsexed herself before she could join the gangs of Blackburn Rioters [and] associate with those pests of society'. Dr Riding showed the meeting some of the 'desperately misogynistic' images and cartoons that typified the vitriolic reaction to female reformers.

Dr Poole reflected that the heinous events at Peterloo have usually been analysed as a major development in 'industrial working-class' or 'socialist' history, which undoubtedly reflects the influence of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). But Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992) recast the same period in terms of the formation of a new British national identity, part of a patriotic account of history. Dr Poole sought to articulate what he called 'some sort of synthesis' of the 'social class' and 'patriotic' approaches. He explained how, after more than twenty years of war with France, demands for political reform began to appear. The mass petitioning campaign of 1817 included some 700 petitions, most of which demanded either manhood or household taxpayer suffrage and gained nearly a million signatures– maybe one in five adult males – in total. But parliament rejected most of the petitions, citing technical reasons. More radical voices then began to be heard, with calls on the monarch to dissolve parliament, dismiss the ministry and install a new ministry that was committed to parliamentary suffrage reform. The reformers tried to use large marches and mass meetings – what we might now call 'direct action' – where the petitions had failed. Thus began the mass platform campaign, comprising around twelve open air meetings in first half of 1819, of which the meeting in Manchester was the largest.

Dr Poole described a campaign that was populist as well as radical in

nature. The radical organiser John Cartwright cited historical precedents for successful resistance, starting with the barons forcing King John to cede Magna Carta in 1215 and evoked England's 'ancient constitution' when he sought to mobilise the people to reclaim their lost rights. From the outset, Dr Poole said, the reformers had presented their demands as inherently patriotic. They used propaganda and images that portrayed Britannia as a symbol of liberty, rather than of naval power and conquest, thereby laying claim to a version of patriotism that had been dormant during the war with France.

Dr Poole was clear that, although Manchester was the epicentre of the a 'Pennines cotton bowl', only a tiny fraction of those taking part were factory workers, with around one third being domestic weavers, and more than half being artisans of some kind.

It also became evident during the discussion that, as with later forms of populism, the campaigns had powerful economic drivers. Britain suffered a double dip recession in 1817 and 1819. In addition to the Corn Laws, which pushed up grain prices, the government levied a range of taxes on essential items to meet the costs of the war with France. As a result, Dr Poole said, working people paid up to a third of their incomes in taxes, while seeing few benefits. He cited the Oldham Declaration of June 1819, which called for universal suffrage for the House of Commons, elections by ballot and annual parliaments, with the demands framed in terms of long-standing constitutional rights and linked to the need to ameliorate starvation and misery.

Dr Riding added that the economic depression and rising food prices helped to explain the involvement of women in the campaigns for reform. The collapse of the economy and its impact on the domestic sphere, for which they were responsible, left the female reformers feeling as if they had little choice but to become politically active. 'The women almost apologised for entering the political arena [and] they gave poverty – "we can't keep our homes clean, we can't feed our children" – as their excuse for "going against their sex",' she said.

Dr Riding offered some interesting insights into the making of Mike Leigh's 2018 film *Peterloo*, for which she was the historical adviser. She described her strenuous efforts to ensure that the visuals and locations were historically accurate, and recounted an 'intensive, collaborative process' in which there was 'no upfront script'; the characters, action and dialogue had gradually emerged from months of 'discussion, research and improvisation' followed by rehearsal and shooting on set. He role had been to advise on what happened in the lead-up, during and after Peterloo, with Leigh and his colleagues constructing the narrative and drama.

The anniversary inevitably saw renewed discussion about the significance of Peterloo, building on earlier debates between historians. E. P. Thompson wrote that Peterloo was 'without question a formative episode in British social and political history'. A. J. P. Taylor opined that Peterloo 'began the break-up of the old social order in England'. But in *The Peterloo Massacre* (1989), Robert Reid concluded that the episode achieved 'tragically little' for the cause of liberty.

On this question, both speakers were in no doubt. Dr Riding described Peterloo as 'a milestone in the history of democracy' and lamented how poorly the industrial revolution and the 'long eighteenth century' are now covered in the teaching of British history. As a result, she contended, our rights to vote and to equal representation in the Commons were not widely appreciated.

Dr Poole believed that Peterloo was 'now seen as an explosive episode in the development of democracy' in Britain. Whilst the mass platform campaign 'must be judged a failure', he acknowledged, Peterloo was 'a propaganda disaster' for the government and the authorities. In the press, anti-women images were replaced by images of women being literally cut down with sabres. Peterloo was quickly followed by more county and town meetings in support of reform. As for the parliamentary Whigs, then in opposition, some sought to place their party at the head of the pro-reform protest movement, but others wanted to avoid aligning it too closely with the radicals. At a county meeting in Yorkshire, Earl Fitzwilliam, described by Dr Poole as a 'conservative Whig', demanded a formal inquiry into what happened at Peterloo. His calls were ignored, but by 1832 the authorities did not dare risk another Peterloo and the House of Lords finally passed, with Whig support, the first Great Reform Act.

During the question and answer session, there was more discussion of the parliamentary Whigs' ambiguous response to Peterloo and the campaigns for reform. Dr Poole described their differences with the campaigners. 'For reforming Whigs in parliament, executive government was the real problem and parliament was the solution,' he said, 'but for radical reformers, parliament was the problem and democracy the solution.'

The Whigs, he explained, were 'an enormously broad party', very much divided between those, such as Earl Grey and Earl Fitzwilliam, who wanted to avoid any identification with the a popular radical reform movement and others, such as Lord Cochrane and Sir Francis Burdett, who strongly supported household suffrage. Dr Poole quoted a letter from Lord Holland to Earl Grey soon after the massacre. Whilst he deplored what the magistrates had done at Peterloo, Holland was not sure how the party could criticise their actions without becoming embroiled in 'unpleasant altercations with the ultra-radicals' or, worse, identifying the party with them. Still, he was concerned that leaving the expression of outrage to the 'ultra-reformers' could cause the Whigs to 'sink into insignificance'. Holland also saw the country facing a choice between 'two outrageous paths – the legitimate Tories on one side, and the violent reformers on the other, the rich and poor, the governors and governed, by our doing nothing'. 'The Whigs had this massive thing falling into their lap', Dr Poole said, 'but simply didn't know what to do.' Their calls for an inquiry into Peterloo enabled the Whigs to achieve a kind of unity,

he explained, which was built upon by the passage of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Dr Riding then posed a fascinating and possibly related challenge: why don't the Liberal Democrats claim Peterloo as an integral part of their history, rather than allowing it to remain the preserve of the Labour Party and the left? Members of the History Group committee explained that they had tended to focus on events following the formation of the Liberal Party in the 1850s, and that this meeting was the first stage of an attempt to redress the balance. This was a reasonable response, but it raised intriguing questions about Liberal Democrats' attitudes to the Whigs, as well as to historical demands for political and constitutional reform and the strategies used by the campaigners. For that matter, if anything, what do the attitudes of modern liberals to Peterloo reveal about their perceptions of historical conflicts between 'the people' and 'the powerful', the 'prosperous' and the 'left behind', and how such tensions might be resolved? Perhaps the Liberal Democrat History Group will return to these questions.

Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group's committee and a frequent contributor to the Journal of Liberal History.

'Not straight but serpentine': George Canning and the origins of nineteenth-century liberalism

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5 T. Kaye (ed.), *Speeches of the Right Hon. George Canning delivered on public occasions in Liverpool*, (Liverpool, 1825), p. 254 [hereafter *Liverpool Speeches*].
6 R. Therry (ed.), *Speeches of the Right Honourable George Canning with a memoir of his life* (London, 1828), vol. v, p. 364 [hereafter *Canning Speeches*].
7 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* (series 1) vol. 21, cols. 520, 522.
8 Ibid., col. 523.
9 Ibid., cols. 532–3.
10 Ibid., vol. 23, cols. 635–6.
11 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 334.
12 *Speeches and public addresses of the Right Honourable George Canning, during the late election in Liverpool, etc.* (Liverpool, 1812), pp. 50–1 [hereafter *Speeches and Public Addresses* (1812)].
13 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* (series 1) vol. 35, col.130.
14 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 341.
15 *The speeches and public addresses of the Right Hon. George Canning, during the election in Liverpool, etc.* (Liverpool, 1818), p. 25.
16 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 343.
17 *Liverpool Speeches*, pp. 321–2.
18 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 193–4.
19 From Morley's biography of Gladstone, cited in Lee, *George Canning*, p. 104.
20 *Canning Speeches*, vol. v, p. 129.
21 Ibid., vol. vi, p. 111.
22 Steven Schwartzberg, 'The lion and the phoenix – I: British policy toward the 'Greek question', 1821–32'; The lion and the phoenix, II', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 24 (1988), pp. 139–77, 3287–311, quotations at pp. 153–54, 292.
23 Allan Cunningham, 'The philhellenes, Canning and Greek independence', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 14 (1978), 151–81, quotation at p. 169.
24 Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British establishment resisted the abolition of slavery* (London, 2020).
25 Harold Temperley, *The Foreign Policy of Canning 1822–1827: England, the Neo-Holy Alliance, and the New World* (2nd edn., London, 1966), pp. 313–14.
26 Augustus Stapleton, *The Political Life of the Right Honourable George Canning*, (3 vols, 2nd edn., London, 1831), vol. iii, p. 3.
27 See Lee, *George Canning*, 'Part II: The outward turn', pp. 57–131 passim.
28 *Speeches and Public Addresses* (1812), p. 46.
29 *Canning Speeches*, vol. i, pp. 148–9.
30 *Speeches and Public Addresses* (1812), p. 40.
31 Cited in Lee, *George Canning*, p. 115.
32 *Liverpool Speeches*, pp. 363–5, speaking in Aug. 1822.
33 See *Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot*, vol. i, p. 275, entry for 18 Nov. 1823.
34 Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians* (Oxford, 1953).
35 Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (London, 1993), pp. 43–4.
36 *Canning Speeches*, vol. v, pp. 316–7.
37 Quoted in Stephen M. Lee, 'Palmerston and Canning' in David Brown and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Palmerston Studies* (Southampton, 2007), vol. i, p. 6.