

Agrégation

ANGLAIS

**Mouvements protestataires,
contestations politiques
et luttes sociales
en Grande-Bretagne
1811-1914**



Sous la direction de
Béatrice Laurent

ellipses

“Peterloo” and the Radical Movement 1815-1832

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The “Peterloo massacre” of 1819 was the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil. On Monday 16 August troops under the authority of the local magistrates attacked and dispersed a rally of some 30-40,000 reformers on St Peter’s Field, Manchester. Twenty minutes later some 650 people had been injured, many of them women, many by sabres, and fifteen people lay dead or mortally wounded. Independent witnesses insisted there had not been any disturbance to provoke such an attack, but the authorities claimed that a rebellion had been averted. Waterloo, the final victory of the allies over imperial France, had been four years earlier; now, at “Peterloo”, British troops were turned against their own people.

Uniquely for a provincial event of this kind, the Manchester rally was national news. Several newspaper reporters were present including John Tyas of *The Times*, who submitted a hard-hitting account of the massacre. Middle-class and working-class reformers united in outrage, and for several months afterwards the state appeared to be threatened by armed rebellion from below. The government responded with legislation to ban all such gatherings and a series of trials of political radicals; in the end the will of those who sought to expand the political nation was defeated by the power of the state¹. Later in the century, once a measure of parliamentary reform had been achieved, Peterloo came to be celebrated as an early heroic adventure for the working-class movement. For twentieth-century

1. The most recent treatments of Peterloo are: Michael Bush, *The Casualties of Peterloo*, Manchester Centre for Regional History, 2005; R. Poole (ed), *Peterloo Revisited*, Manchester Region History Review 23 (2012), <http://www.hssr.mmu.ac.uk/mcrh/mrhr/peterloo/>; R. Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising*, Manchester University Press, 2019.

historians it became a symbol of the political dark side of the industrial revolution. More recently, historians have emphasised the success of the radicals in mobilising communities across the region, and the early appearance of female reform groups. How can we now assess the place of Peterloo in the history of popular protest and reform?



Illustration 1

“To Henry Hunt Esq.”: Richard Carlile’s print of Peterloo, showing Mary Fildes with her flag (detail). The New York Public Library. Digital Collections¹

Contexts: radicalism, war, and class

The traditional starting point for accounts of 19th-century popular movements in Britain is the French Revolution. Certainly, the early phase of the revolution inspired many British reformers with hope for a similar change in Britain. The country had just celebrated the centenary of its own “Glorious Revolution” of 1688-9, when the autocratic James II had been expelled and the Stuart monarchy forced to accept parliamentary government and the Bill of Rights. Crown and parliament now shared sovereignty, which was exercised by the victorious Whig party in the interests of the propertied classes. From the 1760s a new generation of reformers began to challenge the Whig monopoly on power, particularly after the disastrous loss of the American colonies in 1783. The French revolution prompted the Anglo-American radical Thomas Paine to issue *Rights of Man* (1791), a founding statement of democratic principles which sold in huge numbers in cheap editions and led to the formation of reform societies across the country. In response, the government encouraged a militant loyalist movement for the old royalist cause of “Church and King”, which appears to some historians every bit as active and numerous as the radical movement. The revolutionary terror in France and the outbreak of war between the two countries in 1793 put paid to all hopes of parliamentary reform. Wartime emergency legislation was

1. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/Peterloo_Massacre.png?uselang=fr

used to crush dissent, and British troops put down a French-supported rebellion in Ireland. By the end of this process only an isolated handful of reforming Whig MPs remained.

The first two decades of the 19th century were something of a political ice age in Britain. The prospect of invasion by the Emperor Napoleon rallied the nation, but, as the war ground on for a further decade at immense human and economic cost, both the trading classes and the working classes began to demand peace. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 after a sustained humanitarian campaign seemed only to highlight the indifference of the middle classes to the privations of their own working people, and the end of the war in 1815 seemed only to highlight this divide. While wartime taxes on property were swiftly ended, taxes on essential goods such as salt, bread and leather were continued, as well as the hated corn laws or "bread tax" which protected farmers and landowners at the expense of urban consumers. There was a prolonged post-war economic slump as demobilisation brought with it unemployment, harvest failures, and impossibly high food prices. The patriotic figure of "John Bull", once depicted in political cartoons as fat and prosperous, grew thin and ragged, exploited and oppressed. All the economic indicators of poverty and inequality available to historians bottomed out in the post-war years of 1815-19; it was the worst time in history to be working-class. The radical movement rapidly revived, prescribing democracy as the solution to the nation's woes: would the members of the supposed "House of Commons" have dared to ill-treat John Bull so cruelly if he had the vote?

This was also of course the period of the industrial revolution and the rise of the factory system. Historians on the left have treated the post-war radical movement as a product of the rise of the labour movement, and of the organised working class more generally. After all, popular radicalism, previously centred on London, was now strongest in the industrial North. Peterloo itself took place in Manchester, the capital of the mechanized cotton industry; in the Marxist model of revolution, factory workers formed the advanced guard of the working class. Edward Thompson, whose classic study *The Making of the English Working Class* has inspired generations of readers, offered a rather different story. He demonstrated that the radical movement was largely led and populated by skilled artisans and craftsmen, educated men with a proud heritage whose trades

were threatened by mechanisation—indeed, his book had very little to say about factory workers. In the Manchester region by far the largest radical grouping was the handloom weavers, mainly concentrated in the country districts for twenty kilometres around the town. The weavers had earlier petitioned Parliament for regulation and legal protection but had suffered crushing rejection as their movement coincided with the triumph of free-market ideology and economic deregulation. This period saw the rise of a now-familiar phenomenon: protection for those with property, free markets for those without. Protest is often fuelled not so much by new classes seeking a new world as by established classes defending an old one.

British radical politics was similarly characterised by an emphasis on an idealised past. In France, where there was little tradition of parliamentary government, revolutionaries looked to a complete renewal of the political system based on natural rights; in Britain, reformers looked to a revival of the supposed historic power of the House of Commons. Certainly, the French Revolution and the English civil wars were both occasionally cited as an example of the fate of autocratic monarchs. The most commonly cited episodes however were Magna Carta in 1215, when the barons had forced a constitution upon the King, and the Glorious Revolution of 1689, when the propertied classes backed by a popular movement had enforced parliamentary government. This time round, radicals proclaimed, it would be the people themselves who would take back control. It was widely believed that the medieval House of Commons had (as its name implied) originally been far more representative of the people than its successors. The ancient myth of the “Norman yoke”, in which an equal and democratic Anglo-Saxon England had been subjected in 1066 to a foreign ruler by right of conquest, enjoyed a revival.

The electoral system as it stood in the early 19th century provided some basis for this theory of democratic decline. During the period of intense party strife which had followed the Glorious Revolution, at least 20% of adult males in England could vote, and general elections took place on average every two years. Since then the proportion of voters had approximately halved to around 11% and most parliaments ran to their full term, which was extended from five years to seven. Not only that, but many voters rarely got the chance to vote at all. Most constituencies returned two members; even where there was serious

competition, the parties often agreed to split the seats between them to avoid an expensive contest. Every English county returned two MPs (and one each in Wales), with electorates running into the thousands. The majority of MPs however were returned by boroughs, scattered unevenly over the country but heavily concentrated in the South. In large parts of the North, where parliamentary boroughs were few and far between, but where population growth had been most rapid, there had been no contested election within living memory. Manufacturing towns the size of Leeds and Manchester had no MP. Scotland and Ireland, which had joined the UK later, had even less democratic arrangements. Many borough electorates were tiny and easily controlled by powerful men; it was estimated that nearly half of all MPs were effectively nominated by landowners sitting in the House of Lords. The system did however allow for more political participation than these raw figures suggest. Candidates had to make a show of consulting and treating their electors, and all had to present themselves for popular acclaim on the election hustings even if the election did not proceed to a poll. Despite the large number of “rotten boroughs” with few voters, most voters lived in the more populous constituencies which were regularly contested. These included the Lancashire seat of Preston where, by a ruling following a disputed election in 1768, every adult male had the vote. The cities of London and Westminster regularly returned reforming Whig MPs. Overall, there was enough popular participation in elections to support the belief that there was the potential for democracy to be restored.

1817: petitioners and rebels

Post-war radicalism was based on a critique of an ancient English constitution corrupted by power, and of a people economically exploited and politically oppressed under cover of twenty years of war. Far from gaining any kind of peace dividend in 1815 (as would happen after the world wars of the twentieth century), British working people appeared to have been cheated by a parliament controlled by the beneficiaries of war. A surge of patriotic disillusionment united the outraged rural loyalist William Cobbett with the radical industrial workers of the Lancashire manufacturing districts. Unemployed ex-servicemen were among the most active radicals in the post-war years. The movement

for parliamentary reform revived in the summer and autumn of 1816 as dozens of local Hampden Clubs and Union Societies were founded, including the Manchester Union Society for Reform. All this was inspired by the veteran constitutional reformer and English patriot Major John Cartwright. His plan for reform involved annual elections each June on the anniversary of Magna Carta, accompanied by a process of open local assemblies modelled on the supposed “folk moots” of Anglo-Saxon England. In the autumn of 1816 William Cobbett published his influential *Address to Journeymen and Labourers*, which was circulated as a cheap broadsheet in vast numbers by travelling pedlars. Cobbett wrote:

As to the *cause* of our present miseries, it is the *enormous amount of the taxes*, which the Government compels us to pay for the support of its army, its placement, its pensioners, &c., and for the payment of the interest of its debt... This intolerable weight has *all proceeded from the want of a Parliamentary Reform...* remedy consists wholly and solely of such a *reform* in the Commons’ or People’s House of Parliament, as shall give to every payer of *direct taxes* a vote at elections, and as shall cause the Members to be *elected annually*¹.

This argument could be taken still further: since indirect taxes on consumption were paid by all, true taxpayer suffrage implied manhood suffrage: “no taxation without representation”, to borrow the slogan of the rebel American colonists. Here was the line between reforming Whigs and radicals: reforming Whigs believed that citizenship went with owning property and paying taxation, and were willing to extend the vote to householders who paid any kind of local tax; radicals believed, with Thomas Paine, in an inherent human (or at least male) right to vote. It was citizenship versus democracy, with a blurred boundary between them.

At the same time as Cartwright and Cobbett were spreading the reforming message across the country, a more militant group in London was organising insurgent mass meetings in London. This group was known as the Spenceans after their founder, Thomas Spence, who believed that the route to democracy lay through a radical redistribution of land from its current owners to the people. They believed that this would come about through a sudden transformation of society similar to the Biblical “jubilee”, a sort of social reset where debts and feuds were forgiven and the mutual dependence of all classes recognised and celebrated—in short,

1. Cobbett’s *Political Register*, 3 November, 1816.

a revolution. They worked through London’s dense social networks and underworld tavern societies to spread radical ideas and occasionally to bring people together in large enough numbers to spark insurrection. In 1816-17 they organised three mass meetings at Spa Fields, on the edge of the city, all addressed by the powerful radical orator, Henry Hunt. Before the second of these, in December 1816, a small group had attempted to lead the gathered crowd to attack the Tower of London in a pale imitation of the storming of the Bastille¹.

Cartwright meanwhile persuaded the London Hampden Club, an elite political dining club, to prepare a bill for a parliamentary reform. It specified equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, and suffrage “co-extensive with taxation”. The Club also resolved to mount a national petitioning campaign over the winter to generate support and circulated standard printed petitions via local correspondents—an innovation that brought spectacular results. Collectively these identical local petitions accumulated something approaching a million signatures, anticipating the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 40s. The plan was to present the petitions *en masse* to Parliament on 2 March, but when this was announced to the local societies there was uproar. In the handloom weaving village of Middleton, north of Manchester, “cries of no, no, resounded from all sides... before that time we shall all be starved to Death²!” The London Hampden Club agreed to convene a national delegate meeting on 22 January in order to decide the exact details of the bill to be presented.

The London delegate meeting was, in retrospect, a political landmark, bringing provincial radicals face to face with their presumed leaders in the capital. William Cobbett supported the Hampden Club’s bill for the vote to be claimed for all who paid direct taxes. An amendment was presented by the popular orator Henry Hunt and supported by northern radicals calling for manhood suffrage. Cobbett questioned its practicability: how, he asked, could an electoral register be drawn up? The Lancashire radical Samuel Bamford pointed out that the registers of men liable for military service could serve as the electoral register. This

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1. Malcolm Chase, *The People’s Farm*, Oxford, 1988; reprinted Breviary Stuff Publications, 2010, ch. 4.
 2. R. Poole, “French revolution or peasants’ revolt?” *Labour History Review* 74, 1 (April 2009).

version of military citizenship appealed to the former loyalist Cobbett; he changed his mind, swinging the whole meeting behind the demand for manhood suffrage¹.

The radical Reform Bill approved by the delegates was presented at the opening of parliament at the end of January and, predictably, was rejected. At the same time Parliament rejected some five hundred reform petitions from towns and villages across the country, mostly on procedural grounds: because they were printed, or their signatories were not clearly identified, or because they used unparliamentary language. The local meetings convened to hear the responses to their petitions were outraged: the supposed “House of Commons” was refusing even to recognise the voice of its own people. But how could a legitimate constitutional demand be enforced? Cartwright had earlier proposed that ten members of each union society throughout the country should accompany their petition to London, cautiously observing the restrictions of the 1662 Act Against Tumultuous Petitioning designed to prevent parliament from being intimidated by crowds. In the Manchester region radicals opted for a mass march to London to remonstrate over the head of the House of Commons to the crown, in the person of the Prince Regent—a final act of constitutional protest before a rebellion. The radical newspaper the *Black Dwarf*, which was close to the London Spenceans and supported their tactic of mass meetings in the capital, insisted that petitioning alone was no use:

Our ancestors... approached their monarchs with petitions, it is true; but then they carried arms in their hands to support them... Was John *petitioned* to sign Magna Charta? Was Charles petitioned to lay down his head upon the block? Was James *petitioned* to abdicate his throne? Or was William *petitioned* to accept the Bill of Rights? No! no! the *right of petitioning* with your ancestors meant the right of laying their grievances before the *highest authority*, and demanding, or ENFORCING an attention to their wrongs².

1. Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1839-41; 1844 edn, reprinted London: Cass, 1967), ch. 6. Translated as *La Vie d'un Radical Anglais au Temps de Peterloo*, ed. Fabrice Bensimon, Paris: Les Éditions Sociales, 2019.
2. Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising*, ch. 4.