

# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## Early 19<sup>th</sup> century Liberal roots

Robert Poole

**Peterloo** The English Uprising

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John Belchem

**Henry Hunt, Peterloo, Whigs and Liberals**

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Stephen Lee

**'Not straight, but serpentine'** George Canning and the origins of Liberalism

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Ian Macgregor Morris

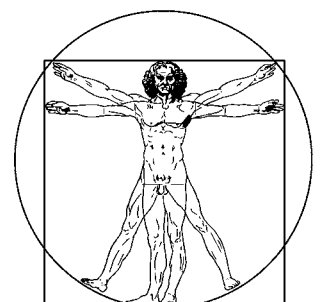
**The Pisan Triumvirate** The Libertine, the Atheist, and *The Liberal*

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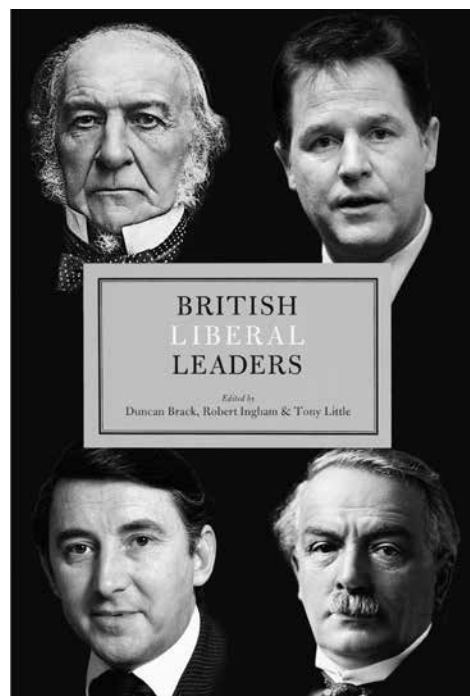
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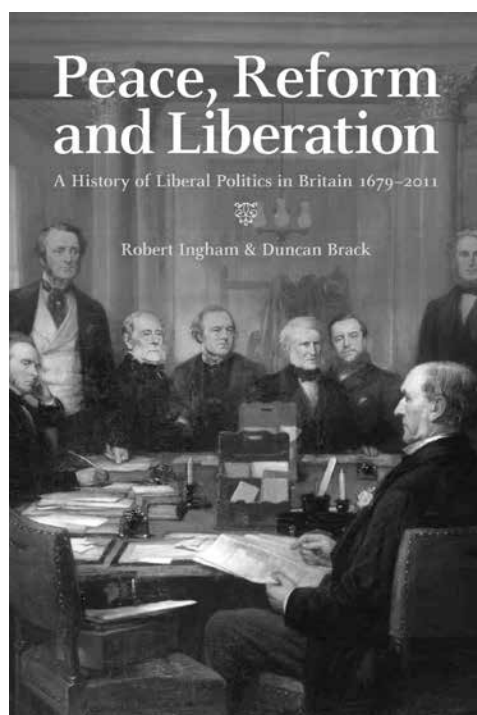
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## Liberal Democrat History Group

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## Roots of Liberalism

James Moore introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* on the early-nineteenth-century roots of Liberalism.

# Early Liberalism – 2



The first session of the House of Commons, on 5 February 1833, after the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. In the foreground, the leading statesmen from the Lords: Grey, Melbourne and the Whigs on the left, Wellington and the Tories on the right. Sir George Hayter, oil on canvas. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

ONE OF THE CURIOSITIES of Liberal history is that there is no universally agreed date for when modern Liberalism or the Liberal Party began. The party celebrated its 'official' centenary in 1977 and produced all manner of mugs, pens and plates to celebrate this auspicious event. Some of these, no doubt, still lie in the attics of older Liberal Party members. However, this was an odd date to commemorate a 'centenary'. 1877 marked the formation of the National Liberal Federation – a national network of Liberal Associations – but this was hardly the beginning of the national party. Palmerston had already been Liberal prime minister from 1859 to 1865, and Gladstone from 1868 to 1874. Many historians, therefore, look to 1859 as being the real moment that the Liberal Party was formed. On 6 June 1859, a meeting in Willis' Rooms in St James Street, London, brought together a coalition of 274 Whigs, Peelites and Radicals, under Palmerston, to oust the minority Conservative

administration. The years that followed were ones in which the Liberal Party established its modern reputation: introducing the great reforming legislation of 1868–74, including the secret ballot in 1872, and the anti-corruption legislation of 1883, which established the electoral laws that are still the basis for our modern democracy.

Yet, in truth, the Liberal Party can trace its roots back to a much earlier period in the nineteenth century. Members of Parliament could be found calling themselves Liberals in the 1830s and 1840s. Palmerston's road to Liberalism came through a faction called the Canningites or Liberal Tories in the 1820s. Palmerston's first cabinet post was as a minister in Canning's government in 1827, before he joined the Whigs in 1830. Further splits in the Tory Party provided additional strands of the future Liberal Party. Most famously, Peel's support for the abolition of the Corn Laws and support for free trade made his followers natural allies of a Whig



# a search for origins

Party committed to the principles of economic liberty, a key component of what would later be called classical liberal economics. It would be this commitment to free trade that would be one of the most important bonds that kept the Liberal parliamentary coalition together. Free trade laid the foundations for a broader belief in internationalism that became one of the strongest characteristics of the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats.

Of course, the story of Liberalism is much more than the story of parliamentarians. In this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, we stress that many of the roots of Liberalism lay outside parliament. In these pages, our authors examine aspects of Liberalism in the very early years of the nineteenth century, the days when Gladstone was still ‘the rising hope of those stern, unbending Tories’ and when the very term Liberal was often one of insult, rather than of approbation. While core Liberal beliefs – individual rights, freedom of religion, freedom of contract – predated the nineteenth century, the term Liberal only came into common parlance in the 1820s. As our authors suggest, it was a cultural as well as a political label, indicating a philosophical and artistic outlook, as much as a defined political position. It represented a tendency and a state of mind: a willingness to be open to change and a desire to challenge social and political orthodoxy.

Many historians have viewed Liberalism as a series of intellectual and cultural strands wound together – strands that occasionally came apart during particular crises. Our present writers address this metaphor in a number of ways. First, they identify some of the key moments in which individuals self-identified with specifically Liberal tendencies or attitudes and, in so doing, formed communities of similarly minded Liberals, aside and apart from an orthodox mainstream. Secondly, our writers identify specific circumstances which created opportunities for social, cultural or political collaboration between Liberals. Thirdly, they identify the specific contemporary issues on which

Liberals united and which formed the basis for future associations and collaborations.

There is an inevitable tendency to view early-nineteenth-century Liberalism through the prism of its later successes. One should, of course, guard against teleological assumptions about the ‘inevitability’ of the rise of a Liberal force in British politics. Although British forms of Liberalism and Liberal parties were replicated in the colonies and in many European countries, the emergence of what became known as a ‘Liberal interest’ was, in many respects, the product of a complex series of political and cultural struggles that arose in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and within the context of an emerging industrial society divided by class and religious denomination. While Liberal leaders offered national and civic visions that were designed to overcome these divisions and tensions, the Liberal tendency in politics was also able to benefit from the power of class and religious identity to mobilise its support, whether it be for the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act or the repeal of the Corn Laws. The rise of a new urban Dissenting middle class provided both a ready political constituency and an opportunity for Liberal forces. Yet the ‘onward march’ of Liberalism concealed a reality that many were still excluded from the franchise – that these early Liberal successes were built on an electoral system that excluded working-class Liberal supporters. Liberal working-class non-electors continued to campaign for more radical reforms and, in many areas, helped foster a division between Moderate and Radical Liberalism that continued into the late nineteenth century. It was not uncommon for a two-member Liberal borough to be ‘managed’ in a way that allowed Moderate Liberals and Radical Liberals to each nominate an MP. Whether these arrangements represented the success of pragmatism or a long-term structural weakness for the party will be debated by historians for many years to come.

Freethinking and a willingness to challenge social, cultural and political orthodoxy

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are some of the enduring characteristics of Liberalism. This can be seen at the heart of Ian Macgregor Morris's study of the 'Pisan Triumvirate' and the story of the journal *The Liberal*. The figures behind this journal were three of the most notorious and celebrated figures of the early nineteenth century: Leigh Hunt, editor of radical newspaper *The Examiner*, and the poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. Their Liberalism had its roots in the culture and practices of the eighteenth century, but it is one that, in some ways, speaks to a twenty-first-century audience more easily than the more austere, religiously influenced Liberalism of the Gladstonian era. In the pages of *The Liberal* is a world view that is cosmopolitan, individualistic, tolerant and very open-minded. Influenced by the libertinism of its day, it is a liberalism of action and performance; one willing to scandalise and shock. It expressed high cultural ideas, while revealing the absurdities of modern political life and the hypocrisy and self-interested nature of the established church and the monarchy. Perhaps most radically of all, it raised questions rather than providing answers – challenging readers to think and formulate answers from within themselves. In doing so, the journal provided an intellectual manifesto for the age and identified the term 'Liberal' with a very specific cultural and political worldview.

Each member of the 'Pisan Triumvirate' made other important contributions to the history of Liberalism. Shelley's early death in a boating accident did not prevent him from becoming an icon of Liberal romantic thought. Byron's support for the struggle for Greek national independence, and his death for the cause, made him a heroic symbol of Liberalism, not just in Greece, but in all countries seeking national liberation from a colonial oppressor. Leigh Hunt made his name back home in Britain, as a Liberal critic and parliamentary reformer. It was this latter struggle that was to become one of the defining features of early-nineteenth-century Liberalism. Robert Poole reminds us of the violence used to put down popular political protests and, in particular, the political consequences of the famous Peterloo massacre of 1819. Ian Cawood's review of books on Peterloo and the report of the 2019 meeting of the Liberal Democrat History Group reveals how contentious and controversial this incident was in modern British political history. The killing of peaceful protestors by armed mounted militia shocked a public that increasingly feared the growth of a bloated military state in the years after Waterloo. Polite opinion

was roused to raise petitions in protest, rallying behind a Whig Party who charged the Tory establishment with being complicit in the violence. Although the Whig Party failed in its immediate attempt to either change the parliamentary system or even eject Lord Liverpool's government, the popular agitation created by Peterloo laid the foundations for the creation of a new Liberal public that rejected coercion and violence and favoured at least modest political change. The Whigs returned to power a little over a decade later and the passing of their 1832 Reform Act owed much to a new Liberal sentiment within the rising middle classes – one that would continue to grow and form a core part of the electoral base of mid-Victorian Liberalism.

The political alignments of the 1820s were, however, very complex. Stephen Lee reminds us that some of the key figures of mid-Victorian Liberalism were, in the 1820s, still part of the Tory governments that resisted reform. By the latter part of that decade, there emerged a group of 'Liberal Tories' who sympathised with George Canning's foreign policy towards national independence movements in South America and his support for Catholic emancipation and the removal of the restrictions on Roman Catholics participating in public life. However, as Lee points out, Canning was also a Tory and often adopted apparently 'Liberal' positions for reasons of good politics. Canning and his followers sat somewhat pragmatically between traditional Tory positions and new Liberal ideas on freedom of conscience and support for the spread of representative political institutions. However, after Canning's death, some of his notable followers contributed to the development of Liberal positions in the Whig Party and, of course, Palmerston became the first Liberal Party prime minister. The history of the Canningites and Liberal Tories shows us how the language of Liberalism and Liberal ideas had begun to permeate mainstream political discourse, and how this helped facilitate the future political alliances of the 1830s and 1840s.

Michael Winstanley's article on Lancashire politics after 1832 reminds us of the importance of local politics if we are to understand long-term political change and how Liberal politics was consolidated in the two decades after the First Reform Act. The political responses to 1832 were complex. For some Liberals it was a political triumph that guaranteed constitutional stability, while for many Radical Liberals 1832 was not a triumph but a grave disappointment. As John Belchem reminds us, Henry Hunt, the principal speaker at the Peterloo demonstration, condemned the Whigs'

‘betrayal’ of radical reformers, as the working class were left without the vote. Many of Hunt’s supporters continued to embrace political Liberalism, but turned to Chartism – the first mass, organised, working-class political movement – to redress their immediate grievances. Mass demonstrations and direct action became the tools of the non-voter. But what of those who did have the vote? In the days before the secret ballot, poll books offer us a great opportunity to look into the minds of voters and understand the patterns of their allegiances. The individualism and freethinking culture of the rising middle classes drew them to the Liberal cause and provided the basis for much of the party’s support. Religious cleavages were also important, although religious Nonconformity’s alliance with Liberalism was not unqualified. As Winstanley notes, older Nonconformist movements – ‘Old Dissent’, such as Quakerism and Unitarianism – tended to be more closely bound to early Liberalism than newer Nonconformist denominations. It was not until later in the nineteenth century that newer denominations, such as Wesleyan Methodism, became closely associated with the Liberal movement. The Church of England – often jokingly called the ‘Conservative Party at prayer’ – remained closely associated with Toryism, not least because of Liberalism’s association with Dissent and Irish Catholic political causes. The patterns

of religious allegiances in Lancashire help explain some of the successes and failures of the Liberal Party in the county, but also highlight how denominational and sectarian differences scarred local politics to the end of the century.

Yet there is also a paradox here. For all its later associations with religious Nonconformity, the success of early-nineteenth-century Liberalism lay in its ability to create an alliance between a wide range of social groups. While it appealed to religious Dissenters in the new industrial towns, many of its parliamentary leaders were Anglican men of the shires. ‘Liberal’ was a label that could be adopted by aristocrats, bankers, mill-owners and working men. It represented not a doctrine, but a tendency, perhaps even a frame of mind. It became the language of those who valued freethinking, individualism, cosmopolitanism, tolerance and the determination to modernise. For these reasons, it soon came to represent the spirit of the mid-Victorian age and produced the intellectual and cultural legacies that we still enjoy today.

*Dr James Moore is a lecturer in modern history at the University of Leicester. He is author of The Transformation of Urban Liberalism and editor of Corruption in Urban Politics and Society. He is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and parliamentary candidate and a member of the committee of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

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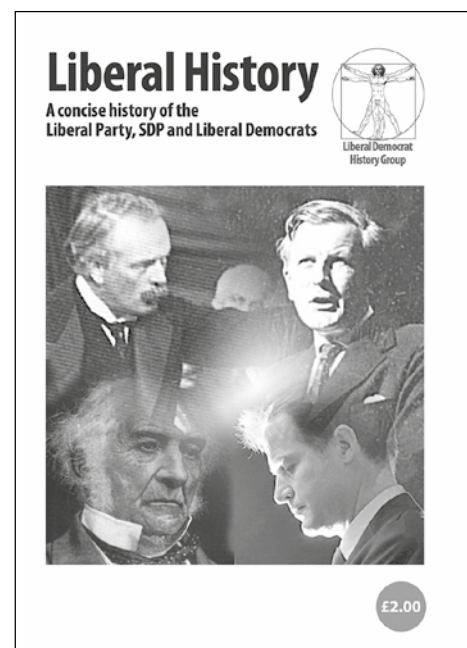
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## Peterloo

Robert Poole examines the massacre at St Peter's Fields' Manchester, in 1819 – a formative episode in the history of democracy in Britain.

# Peterloo: the E



**O**N MONDAY 16 August 1819, troops under the authority of the Lancashire and Cheshire magistrates attacked and dispersed a rally of some 40,000 radical reformers on St Peter's Field, Manchester.<sup>1</sup> Twenty minutes later some 650 people had been injured, many by sabres, many of them women, and between fifteen and eighteen people lay dead or mortally wounded. Independent witnesses were horrified, for there had not been any disturbance to provoke such an attack, but the authorities insisted that a rebellion

had been averted. Waterloo, the final victory of the European allies over Napoleon and imperial France, had been four years earlier; now, at 'Peterloo', British troops were turned against their own people. There were Waterloo veterans on both sides. How could such a thing have happened, and what is its historical significance?

'Peterloo' has long been acknowledged as a formative episode in the history of democracy in Britain. It has also been seen as an early episode of class war: a historic clash of factory



# English Uprising

workers and their exploiters in the heartland of the industrial revolution. On the conservative side, it has been explained as an unintended ‘incident’, a ‘tragedy’, or as a local convulsion for which the government bore no direct responsibility. Its legacy was claimed in the nineteenth century by liberalism and in the twentieth by socialism. My own argument, based on a thorough examination of the extensive local correspondence in the Home Office papers in the National Archives, is different again. I emphasise the leading role of Lancashire’s radical movement in English popular politics; the uniquely conservative character of Regency Manchester, notwithstanding its economic advancement; the responsibility of central government; national politics as the principal context for the events of 1819; and the significance of the attack on female reformers. I also suggest that we can now recognise in the radical movement the origins of a political phenomenon that was not apparent a generation ago: an us-and-them English populism. The acuteness of economic distress and social division, and the severity of what happened in Manchester, are not in doubt; there was never a worse time to be working class than in Regency England.

## 1817: the failure of petitioning

Because it took place in Manchester, the ‘capital of cotton’, the Peterloo massacre has been seen as an episode of northern industrial protest. ‘There is no term for this but class war’ wrote E. P. Thompson in his classic 1963 work *The Making of the English Working Class*, and with reason. The commander of the volunteer Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry was a leading cotton master, Hugh Hornby Birley, and although few

factory workers were present, some 40 per cent were handloom weavers, the most conspicuous economic casualties of the industrial revolution. It was, however, a class war levied from above as much as from below, and although it was fuelled by economic collapse it was waged on political rather than economic territory.

Waterloo marked the end of twenty-two gruelling years of war between the allied powers and revolutionary and imperial France. A massive economic slump ensued as hundreds of thousands of troops returned home seeking work just as wartime industries ground to a halt and government spending was cut back. The Lancashire cotton industry underwent a decline, just as the ‘lost summer’ of 1816, caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora, brought near-famine conditions the following winter. The world wars of the twentieth century would be followed by peace dividends for those who had fought and suffered: in 1918 the Representation of the People Act and homes fit for heroes, and in 1945 the welfare state and national parks. In 1815 there were hopes that the business of political reform, halted in 1793, would be resumed; however (to adapt a phrase of Margaret Thatcher), a Tory government that had just won a war against revolutionary change at European level was not about to let it in by the back door at home.

The landed classes received their ‘peace dividend’ in the form of the Corn Laws, which kept grain prices high by preventing imports. The middle classes welcomed the end of the wartime income tax. Working people, however, continued to pay taxes on essential items like malt, soap, candles and paper, as well as record prices for bread thanks to the Corn Laws. Yet, during the war, the regulations protecting their trades had been abolished and their trade unions

Left: ‘To Henry Hunt, Esq., as chairman of the meeting assembled in St. Peter’s Field, Manchester, sixteenth day of August, 1819, and to the female Reformers of Manchester and the adjacent towns who were exposed to and suffered from the wanton and fiendish attack made on them by that brutal armed force, the Manchester and Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry, this plate is dedicated by their fellow labourer, Richard Carlile’ (Manchester Libraries, public domain)

## Peterloo: the English Uprising

banned, all by act of parliament. Britain's long history of tax breaks for the rich and free market discipline for the poor was first cemented in these years of war.<sup>2</sup>

The pain was economic, but for radical reformers the diagnosis was political. Wealthy financiers lived comfortably off the interest on the national debt while a host of parasitic officeholders gorged conspicuously on the revenues of the state. Parliamentary power had effectively been bought up by the propertied classes, grown fat on the profits of war. Peers in the House of Lords controlled more than half the seats in the Commons, which in turn obediently voted to keep the whole system in place. Radicals had a name for this system: 'old corruption'. Their solution was to give control of parliament back to the people through universal suffrage (by which they meant male suffrage), using the power of the people to break the power of the 'boroughmongers'.

The veteran writer John Cartwright argued that such a revolution was no more than the restoration of England's 'ancient constitution' which had existed before Anglo-Saxon England fell under the 'Norman Yoke' in 1066. In this narrative, which in the Regency period of 1810–20 was as influential as Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man' manifesto, the long push-back against royal power had begun with the revolt of the barons and the Magna Carta in 1215. The current regime dated from the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, when parliament had forcefully but bloodlessly ejected an autocratic monarch and instituted a parliamentary monarchy based on the rights of property. But, since then, the executive had hijacked the powers of the Crown to regain control over parliament, the ruling Whigs had gradually turned into ruling Tories, and the rights of the people had been over-ridden in the name of war against French-backed revolution. It was time for another bloodless revolution: what the barons had done in 1215 and the propertied classes in 1688–89, the people would do after 1815. But which people?

For the rump of the Whig party that had gone into opposition, the solution to executive dominance was parliamentary reform: some combination of rolling back the power of the Crown over the Commons with an extension of the franchise. Proposals ranged from minor tinkering with the distribution of seats to giving all male householders the vote but, although Whigs liked to talk expansively of 'the people', such schemes were based on property ownership or occupation. A small group of reforming Whigs in the Commons who favoured

householder suffrage were called 'radicals', and in parliamentary terms they were. The term 'radical' however is best reserved for reformers outside parliament who claimed the vote for all adult males on the basis of citizenship alone. It was this dividing line between a property franchise and a democratic one that distinguished Whig reformers from radicals.

In the post-war years, then, radical reformers committed to manhood suffrage as a matter of survival were met by a Tory elite determined to repel the nightmare threat of democracy and revolution. The radicals' first recourse was the thoroughly constitutionalist strategy of petitioning parliament. In his mass-circulation *Address to Journeymen and Labourers* in November 1816, the populist writer William Cobbett urged his readers, 'Petition is the channel for your sentiments, and there is no village so small that its petition would not have some weight. You ought to attend at every public meeting within your reach.' By the spring of 1817 this campaign had mustered close to a million signatures on seven hundred local petitions to parliament – almost one in five adult males, and at least twice the size of the entire electorate. In relative terms it was as successful as the first Chartist petition of 1839, which gathered 1.3 million signatures.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the petitions were brusquely disallowed by parliament on technical grounds, either because they were found insulting or simply because they were printed. This last was a simple innovation that greatly magnified the social reach of petitioning. The government responded with emergency legislation: habeas corpus, the right to be tried by law, was suspended and dozens of radical activists imprisoned without trial. This rejection of petitioning, a constitutional right of last resort guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, was shattering. It led to several abortive risings of the spring of 1817: the attempted march of the Manchester 'blanketeers' to London, and the attempted armed risings which followed in Manchester, Huddersfield and Nottingham. All were easily foiled, not least because spies and government agents were deeply involved at their core; this kind of open unrest was easier to deal with than the awkward issues posed by popular constitutionalism.

### 1819: London and Manchester

The reformers of 1819 had to learn from the failures of 1817. Petitioning alone lacked teeth, but conspiracy and violence had also failed. Henry Hunt, the acknowledged figurehead of

**In the post-war years, then, radical reformers committed to manhood suffrage as a matter of survival were met by a Tory elite determined to repel the nightmare threat of democracy and revolution. The radicals' first recourse was the thoroughly constitutionalist strategy of petitioning parliament.**

the radicals, understood that if government had violated the constitution, resistance became legitimate. Building on Cartwright's work, he devised the 'mass platform' strategy of militant citizenship so well described by John Belchem.<sup>4</sup> The constitutionalist strategy was also an insurgent strategy. At this point the leadership of the radical movement passed from London, where Hunt had agitated, to Lancashire, which had the numbers. More specifically, it passed to the group around the *Manchester Observer*, founded in 1818 and already the country's leading radical newspaper.<sup>5</sup> The political situation in Manchester enacted, in extreme form, the struggle between popular Radicalism and 'old corruption' in the country as a whole.

Manchester might have been economically progressive, but its High Tory authorities were as reactionary as any in the country. In 1819 the town was governed by a secretive and corrupt oligarchy operating through an archaic jumble of local institutions: manor, parish, and improvement commission. A tacit revolving door system ensured that the handful of opposition figures were excluded from office, and so they occupied themselves with chipping away at corruption and mismanagement from within the ranks of the police commission and the parish vestry. The famous 'Manchester School' of liberalism had yet to establish a significant political presence, and the corporation of Manchester still lay nearly twenty years in the future. The *Manchester Observer* effectively harried the local authorities at the same time as pursuing a national campaign for reform.

As the economy recovered in 1818, a series of successful wage strikes in cotton and other trades gave the region's workers practical experience in mobilisation for a cause: there were mass meetings, processions from town to town, and resourceful confrontations with employers, troops, and overstretched magistrates. As a double-dip economic recession took hold in 1819 and unemployment spread, attention turned again to political reform. In June, the *Manchester Observer* group promoted mass meetings in Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham, and then broadcast their appeal 'to the people of England' to rise and reclaim their lost rights. A series of mass meetings in the industrial north, but also in Birmingham, London, and other cities, called again for reform of parliament. But when parliament was no longer recognising mass petitions, how to translate boots on the ground into political change?

In 1819, several plans were floated. In Birmingham a mass meeting of would-be citizens appointed a 'legislatorial attorney', or unofficial

MP, to represent them in parliament; the Manchester meeting was first advertised to consider this option before it was changed on legal advice. A group of such representatives denied entry to the Commons might have formed a Convention, or alternative parliament, on the model of the Chartist convention. A mass meeting in London's Smithfield on 21 July (originally planned for Bastille day, 14 July) resolved that without parliamentary reform the people's allegiance to the Crown would be dissolved from 1 January 1820. The resolutions to be put to the Manchester meeting have been lost, seized by the authorities as evidence and then destroyed when they proved unhelpful, but they included a boycott of all taxed goods, beer included, to starve the state of revenue.

Hunt also hoped to win the support of the millions of the catholic population of Ireland to shift the democratic balance in the UK in favour of reform, as well as to raise the spectre of another Irish rebellion which might spread to England. On this issue he aligned himself with the London ultra-radicals, who had no inhibitions about promoting rebellion. This also allowed him to play a radical version of the patriotic card, rallying the peoples of England, Scotland and Ireland in claiming their historic rights of free speech and democracy against an oppressive British warfare state. Hunt's aim was to present the radical movement as unstoppable, while positioning himself as the only person who could control it until the government decided to back down. As he put it in a letter to Manchester, 'We have nothing to do but concentrate public opinion, and if our enemies will not listen to the voice of a whole people they will listen to nothing, and may the effects of their folly and wickedness be upon their own heads.'

In the weeks before Peterloo, the radical movement acquired one further reinforcement: women. Women had been active in the support and campaign networks for radical prisoners in 1817, in the cotton strikes of 1818 (for significant numbers of young women worked in factories), and in the radical Sunday schools of Stockport. In the summer of 1819, several female reform societies were formed in Lancashire and Cheshire. They did not claim votes for themselves but rather supported the claim for male household suffrage, which they saw as a vote on behalf of the whole family. The Ashton female reformers described their role as 'aiding the men in their laudable endeavours' and declared: 'let us prove that we are true born English women, and that we are determined to bear this illegal oppression no longer.'

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The editor of the radical newspaper *Black Dwarf* was converted to female suffrage on more pragmatic grounds: 'soldiers and police officers, they cannot be arrayed against WOMEN!!! THAT would be despicable in the extreme ... This array of women against the system my friend, I deem the most fatal omen of its fall.' Tory commentators were not impressed, attacking Stockport's female reformers as 'Mothers instructed to train their infants to the hatred of every thing that is orderly and decent, and to rear up rebels against God and the State ... the most degraded of the sex.' Such statements (and they were many) were a clear enough warning that female reformers who strayed onto the male political platform could not expect chivalric treatment. The Bolton magistrate and spymaster Colonel Fletcher, after reading of a demonstration of female reformers at Blackburn, wrote that such meetings, 'under whatever pretext they may be called, they ought to be suppressed, even though in such suppression, a vigour beyond the strict letter of the law may be used in so doing'.

### The Manchester massacre

The meeting that assembled at Manchester on Monday 16 August 1819 was nationally recognised as the climax of the summer's 'mass platform' campaign. Processions of handloom weavers dressed in their Sunday best, carrying hand-woven flags and banners with messages of hope, and accompanied by family members, banners, and bands of music, flooded into Manchester. They did not protest as ragged victims of the factory system but as citizens-in-waiting. These well-conducted processions of disciplined communities proclaimed their fitness for citizenship and the vote: democracy on the move, citizenship made flesh.

What made the Manchester meeting national news was the fact that there were at least ten press reporters on the field, from Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, and London. The representatives from the capital were Charles Wright of the Tory *Courier* (also gathering information to relay to the authorities), Richard Carlile of the radical *Sherwin's Political Register* (shortly to become *The Republican*), and John Tyas of *The Times*, who was a critic of Hunt but whose hard-hitting account was a landmark of political journalism. The *Manchester Guardian* would not be founded until 1821, when it bought up the presses of the bankrupt *Manchester Observer*, but its first editor John Edward Taylor was present and sent an impromptu

account to the London press after Tyas was arrested, to ensure that official accounts did not go uncontested in the capital.

Three months after the event the Home Office published a selection of documents designed to incriminate the radicals, vindicate its own conduct, and back up the case for repressive legislation. The documents included its own last-minute advice that the radicals were not planning any disturbance on the day, and that intervention would probably not be necessary. A private note however qualified that advice:

This advice will of course not be understood to apply to an extreme case, where a magistrate may feel it incumbent upon him to act even without evidence, and to rely on Parliament for an indemnity.

The Home Office had earlier told the local magistrates:

Your Country will not be tranquillized, until Blood shall have been shed either by the Law or the sword. Lord Sidmouth [the home secretary] will not fail to be prepared for either alternative, and is confident that he will be adequately supported by the Magistracy of Lancashire.

When the magistrates went in hard to pre-empt the rebellion which they believed was imminent, they did so in the confidence that they would be backed up by government no matter what. That was indeed what happened.

The Manchester meeting of 16 August was initially attacked by two forces of loyalist volunteers: nearly 300 special constables with truncheons, and the ninety-strong Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, an official vigilante force formed in the aftermath of the 1817 disturbances. The older-established Cheshire Yeomanry came up in support alongside the regular cavalry of the 15<sup>th</sup> Hussars. As Hunt's procession entered the field to tremendous cheers the watching magistrates panicked and called in the cavalry to support the town constables in arresting him. The Manchester Yeomanry, taking the order as authority to attack, arrived first and, pausing briefly to regroup, galloped into the crowd. They accidentally ran down and killed a small child and (even more embarrassingly) a special constable, the landlord of the loyalist Bull's Head Inn. Hunt steadied the crowd and submitted quietly to arrest but the Yeomanry then attacked the hustings, smashing poles, slashing flags, and carrying off the

When the magistrates went in hard to pre-empt the rebellion which they believed was imminent, they did so in the confidence that they would be backed up by government no matter what. That was indeed what happened.





remains as trophies. Special constables joined in, beating and chasing reformers. In the middle of all this mayhem the regular cavalry of the 15<sup>th</sup> Hussars, arrived and were ordered to disperse the crowd. They did so by charging in line across a field whose exits were already blocked by infantry with bayonets, and by the sheer weight of the crowd as it fled in panic.

A recently rediscovered set of seventy petitions submitted to the Commons in May 1821 asking for an inquiry into Peterloo shows a quite breathtaking level of individual violence. Women reported being cut at with sabres, trampled by horses, and then beaten with truncheons as they got up to escape. These multiple injuries and repeated attacks by known members of the Yeomanry on the defenceless, continued after the field was cleared, and show a worse picture even than the official relief committee's lists of hundreds of individuals 'sabred', 'beaten' and 'trampled'. Women were twice as likely as men to be injured, including sabre wounds as well as trampling and crushing. All the evidence indicates that they were deliberately targeted. Cruikshank's famous graphic images of troops attacking defenceless women and children forever formed the image of Peterloo in the public mind, as the exhibition in Westminster Hall in the summer of 2019 demonstrated once more.

In the summer of 1819 the 'Manchester massacre' generated a national wave of protest meetings, continuing late into the autumn, even bigger than the wave of reform meetings which preceded it. The radical analysis of a repressive state determined to squeeze all trace of popular rights out of the system seemed to have been borne out, especially when the repressive Six Acts at the end of the year choked off most avenues for effective radical mobilisation. In the end, notwithstanding a tide of incendiary rhetoric, the radicals pulled back from physical confrontation. The London ultra-radicals vigorously promoted waves of simultaneous mass meetings in November and December designed to overstretch the military and provoke an armed rising. Hunt and his supporters opposed them, determined to retain possession of the moral and constitutional high ground in order to use the demand for a parliamentary inquiry into a battering ram for reform. Talk of rebellion was part of the political discourse of the age, but when push came to shove few English radicals were actually prepared to mount one, and fewer still to lead it.

In political terms it was the Whig party which gained most from Peterloo, particularly its reforming wing. In the West Riding

'The Massacre of Peterloo or Britons Strike Home', by George Cruikshank, 1819. The speech balloon reads: 'Down with 'em! Chop em down my brave boys: give them no quarter they want to take our Beef & Pudding from us! – & remember the more you kill the less poor rates you'll have to pay so go at it Lads show your courage & your Loyalty. (Public domain)

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## Peterloo

The role played by Henry 'Orator' Hunt in the Peterloo massacre, and its impact on the parliamentary Whigs and Whig politics; by John Belchem.

# Henry Hunt, Peterloo

**From the onset of distress after Waterloo, Hunt insisted – where others equivocated – on full democratic radicalism and mass mobilisation, a programme he took to the north during a triumphant earlier visit to Manchester in January 1819.**

AS THE 200TH anniversary of the Peterloo massacre passes, it is timely to reconsider and reassess the role of Henry 'Orator' Hunt, the star attraction at the ill-fated meeting on St Peter's Fields, Manchester, on 16 August 1819. E. P. Thompson's judgement was harsh in his magisterial study *The Making of the English Working Class*, categorising Hunt as a vain demagogue who 'voiced, not principle nor even well-formulated Radical strategy, but the emotions of the movement. Striving always to say whatever would provoke the loudest cheer, he was not the leader but the captive of the least stable portion of the crowd.'<sup>1</sup> As depicted in Mike Leigh's recent epic film of the massacre, the white-hatted Hunt appears as a conceited, gentlemanly figure, far removed from the north, its poverty and distress, swanning into Manchester in August 1819 for a one-off headline appearance before adoring large crowds. Such portrayals fail to do justice either to Hunt or the people who flocked to hear him. From the onset of distress after Waterloo, Hunt insisted – where others equivocated – on full democratic radicalism and mass mobilisation, a programme he took to the north during a triumphant earlier visit to Manchester in January 1819. Hailed by northern workers as the 'intrepid champion of the people's rights', Hunt was tireless and unbending in the escalating extra-parliamentary campaign for universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot. Undeterred by government repression, the spy system, or the cost to his own finances, it was the fearless Hunt, with his stentorian voice and showman's headgear, who mobilised workers in the north and across the country to demand their rights in the build-up to Peterloo. Amidst the demobilisation, deflation and distress of the post-war years after Waterloo – never a worse time to be working class, according to Robert Poole<sup>2</sup> – Hunt was the central figure in the creation of a popular movement

for parliamentary reform that surpassed anything seen in the 1790s.<sup>3</sup>

Hunt's rural upbringing in Wiltshire – he was born on 6 November 1773 at Widdington Farm, Upavon – gave no indication of his subsequent notorious political career. Educated at indifferent boarding and grammar schools in preparation for Oxford and the Church, the headstrong young Hunt insisted on following his father into full-time farming. An innovative gentleman farmer, he enjoyed considerable prosperity in the wartime agricultural boom. On his father's death, he came into ownership or occupancy of 3,000 acres in Wiltshire, including the old family estate at Enford, and property in Bath and Somerset, including the manor and estate of Glastonbury. A hasty and unfortunate mésalliance, his marriage to the daughter of the landlord of the Bear Inn, Devizes, came under strain on their removal to Chisenbury Priory, an elegant mansion where Hunt flaunted his prosperity in 'uninterrupted gaiety and dissipation'. During this 'giddy round of mirth and folly' he fell in love with Mrs Vince, the unhappily married wife of a friend. Unable to conceal their emotions, the couple eloped. Hunt duly arranged a formal separation from his wife in September 1802 with provision for their children. Thenceforth, extravagance was curtailed. Hunt spent the rest of his life in devoted fidelity to Mrs Vince. Having flouted social convention, however, Hunt found himself ostracised by the Wiltshire establishment, a contributory factor in his conversion to radicalism. His relationship with Mrs Vince and his prowess as a farmer were later the subject of heated dispute with William Cobbett, issues which cut deeper than any political differences in their tempestuous collaboration in the radical cause.<sup>4</sup>

Like Cobbett, Hunt had initially been a fervent loyalist until outrage at the mounting corruption and incompetence in the war against

# o, Whigs and Liberals



Henry 'Orator'  
Hunt (1773–1835);  
watercolour by  
Adam Buck, circa  
1810 (© National  
Portrait Gallery,  
London)

## Henry Hunt, Peterloo, Whigs and Liberals

Napoleonic France took them both over into the reform camp as supporters of Sir Francis Burdett. Much in line with the programme and ideology of the old country party, the patriotic Burdett stood forward as an independent gentleman seeking to purge corruption and oligarchy by restoring 'purity' to the Commons. Hunt's maiden speech on the platform, at the Wiltshire meeting called to protest at the financial misconduct of Pitt's close friend, Lord Melville, the First Lord of the Admiralty and Treasurer of the Navy, concluded with a string of resolutions expressing 'general condemnation of all peculations and peculators'. His proposals, he later came to understand, were 'too sweeping, as they cut at the Whigs as well as the Ministers': at the time, he allowed himself to be wheedled out of the 'main jet' of his proposals by the more experienced Whigs on the platform. Although inhibited by the Grenville alliance, the Whigs, as Hunt acknowledged, gained considerable party advantage from the Melville affair, enjoying 'the confidence of the thinking and honourable portion of the people.' By the time the Foxite–Grenville coalition took office in 1806, Hunt was 'one of Mr. Fox's most enthusiastic admirers ... I own I indulged the most confident hope that he would now realise all his former professions.' These fond expectations were soon blasted. The first act of the new ministry, the bill enabling Grenville to hold the post of First Lord of the Treasury at £6,000 a year and at the same time the office of Auditor of the Exchequer at £4,000 a year 'to audit his own accounts' constituted 'a death-blow to the fondly-cherished hopes of every patriotic mind in the kingdom'. In their later actions, Hunt fulminated, the new ministers 'not only trod in Mr. Pitt's steps, by adopting all his measures, but they greatly outdid him in insulting the feelings of the people'. The Ministry of All the Talents revealed the Whigs in their true colours as 'a despicable, a hypocritical, and a tyrannical faction': throughout the rest of his long political life, Hunt constantly reminded the people of this damning record of apostasy, betrayal, profligacy and corruption.<sup>5</sup>

For those disappointed and disillusioned by Whig politics, Burdett pointed the way forward. He secured a sensational election victory in 1807 in Foxite Westminster, achieved not through his purse (exhausted by early contests in Middlesex) but by 'purity of election' or rather the organisational efficiency of the new Westminster Committee, composed of small shopkeepers and tradesmen, several of whom were former members of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) from the Jacobin 1790s.

Burdett's gentlemanly lifestyle, however, precluded close attention to parliamentary duties, frustrating hopes that he would galvanise and lead a radical group in the Commons. He preserved his credentials as 'Westminster's Pride and England's Glory', however, by identifying his name with the most advanced programme discussed in 'legitimate' political circles: direct taxation (or household) suffrage, equal electoral districts and annual parliaments.<sup>6</sup>

Encouraged by Burdett's success, Hunt threw himself into electoral politics in freeman Bristol where he had business interests. It was a rumbustious but formative experience, taking him towards a more democratic view of reform in which the economic well-being of the common people – the real victims of wartime taxation, inflation and dislocation – was the first consideration. The champion of the crowd, he gained few votes but his bustling intervention in the elections of 1812 was sufficient to discomfit the local 'progressive Whigs', middle-class moderate reformers who sought to return Sir Samuel Romilly against the wishes of the local oligarchs.

Having gained some notoriety, 'Bristol' Hunt was encouraged by Burdett to enter the Common Hall in the City of London, to advocate 'general not partial liberty', and expose the factionalism of Robert Waithman, the 'City Cock'. Waithman, the patriotic linen-draper, had fought long and hard to transform the city from a bastion of Pittite loyalty into a stronghold of peace, retrenchment and reform, but he retained close connection with the Whigs.<sup>7</sup> Hunt's stormy exchanges with Waithman in this arena of ratepayers' democracy brought him to wider attention, not least amidst the tavern world of metropolitan ultra-radicalism where the political underground merged with the underworld. Hard-line ideologues, committed to Thomas Spence's programme to transform the land into the people's farm, mixed with ultra-radical physical-force activists, itching for a putsch. Amidst deepening distress, compounded by adverse climatic factors – the spring and summer of 1816 were the worst in recorded history, the result of unprecedented volcanic eruptions in the Pacific obscuring the sky for months on end – these militant radicals looked to a well-attended public meeting as the best springboard for insurrection. All reform celebrities of the day (Hunt included) were invited to address a meeting of 'Distressed Manufacturers, Mariners, Artisans, and others' at Spa Fields on 15 November 1816.<sup>8</sup> Hunt alone accepted, having satisfied himself that he was not being drawn into a revolutionary plan

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to abolish private property in land. In a private interview with Dr Watson, the impecunious apothecary and leading ultra-radical strategist, Hunt insisted there must be no reference to Spencean principles and no incitement to riot. The meeting would be strictly constitutional, a legitimate extension of political activity enabling the distressed masses to enrol in a campaign of petitions and memorials to 'save the wreck of the constitution' by the instauration of universal (manhood) suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot.

On the day, Hunt upstaged the absent moderates and confounded the insurrectionists. Worthy of his newly acquired sobriquet, 'Orator' Hunt displayed a remarkable ability to control vast crowds and prevent disorder. When diehards led by Watson's son, tried to implement their original insurrectionary plan at a second meeting on 2 December 1816, their disastrous failure underlined the utility of Hunt's 'mass platform' of constitutional ways and means to which Watson senior was now firmly wedded. Militant ultra-radicals put insurrectionary ways and means on hold to support escalating mass platform activity, cumulative pressure from without to mobilise the people – and maximise numbers – before decisive confrontation. Provincial radicals quickly fell in line. When delegates from the north arrived in London with their reform petitions to attend the Hampden Club Convention in early 1817, they rejected the direct taxation proposals favoured by Cobbett, the veteran Major Cartwright and Burdett (who absented himself) in favour of Hunt's Spa Fields programme of universal manhood suffrage.

Open to all, the Spa Fields meetings of 1816–17 broke through the constraints of extra-parliamentary protest, a development which frightened the Whigs just as it compelled the government towards repression. When Waithman and his associates formed themselves into a dining group known as the Friends of Economy, Public Order and Reform, to promote cooperation with the parliamentary opposition, they failed to attract any Whig support. Henry Brougham, once the great hope of the Westminster reformers, was delighted to regain party favour by leading the attack on the radical extremists when the reform petitions were presented in the Commons.

The radical mass platform was crushed by the 'dungeon parliament' of 1817. The spectre of Spencean revolution haunted the 'green bags' – the 'evidence' presented to the parliamentary committees of secrecy in the wake of Spa Fields – providing ample pretext for the

suspension of habeas corpus, a new Seditious Meeting Prevention Act, and a general clamp-down on radical societies and the radical press, which prompted Cobbett, a belated convert to universal suffrage, to flee the country (much to Hunt's consternation). 'Alarm' proved self-fulfilling, forcing radicals underground into the milieu of the agent provocateur: the committees of secrecy were soon set to work again to investigate the provincial risings of 1817. Believing that radicals had a duty to do all they could to assist those entrapped by the likes of the infamous Oliver and other spies, Hunt called upon Burdett's Westminster Committee (or the Rump as it was known, having shed its LCS members) to arrange a meeting to promote a subscription to defray the legal expenses of Jeremiah Brandreth and others captured in the Pentrich rising. He was appalled by the reply he received. 'We Reformers, are far from wishing to countenance or identify ourselves with any man guilty of murder, robbery or riot', Thomas Cleary expostulated: 'I COULD ALMOST HANG THEM MYSELF for playing the game of the tyrants so well'. Hunt set off to the trials at Derby and attended the whole proceedings, duly confirmed in his initial belief that the rising was 'a horrible plot, to entrap a few distressed, poor creatures to commit some acts of violence and riot, in order that the Government might hang a few of them for high treason'.<sup>9</sup> After his dutiful attendance at Derby, Hunt could rely on the gratitude and support of militant elements in the provinces for the next stage of unsullied constitutional agitation.

As repressive legislation remained in place, Hunt sought to promote the democratic radical message through legitimate political channels. Having long since despaired of Burdett's indolence in parliament, he decided to stand against him and his running mate, Kinnaird, at the general election of 1818. He grasped the opportunity to debunk the temporising Burdett and his electoral committee, the caucus of 'petty shop-keepers, and little tradesmen, who under the denomination of *tax-paying housekeepers*, enlisted themselves under the banner of Sir Francis Burdett, in order to set themselves up as a sort of privileged class, above the *operative* manufacturer, the artisan, the mechanic and the labourer'.<sup>10</sup> In true radical fashion, he insisted on keeping the poll open for as long as possible to promote 'Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments, and an opposition to all laws that have a tendency to curtail the Liberties of the People, and oppress and starve the Poor.' The Rump, anxious not to offend the respectable householders who dominated the constituency,

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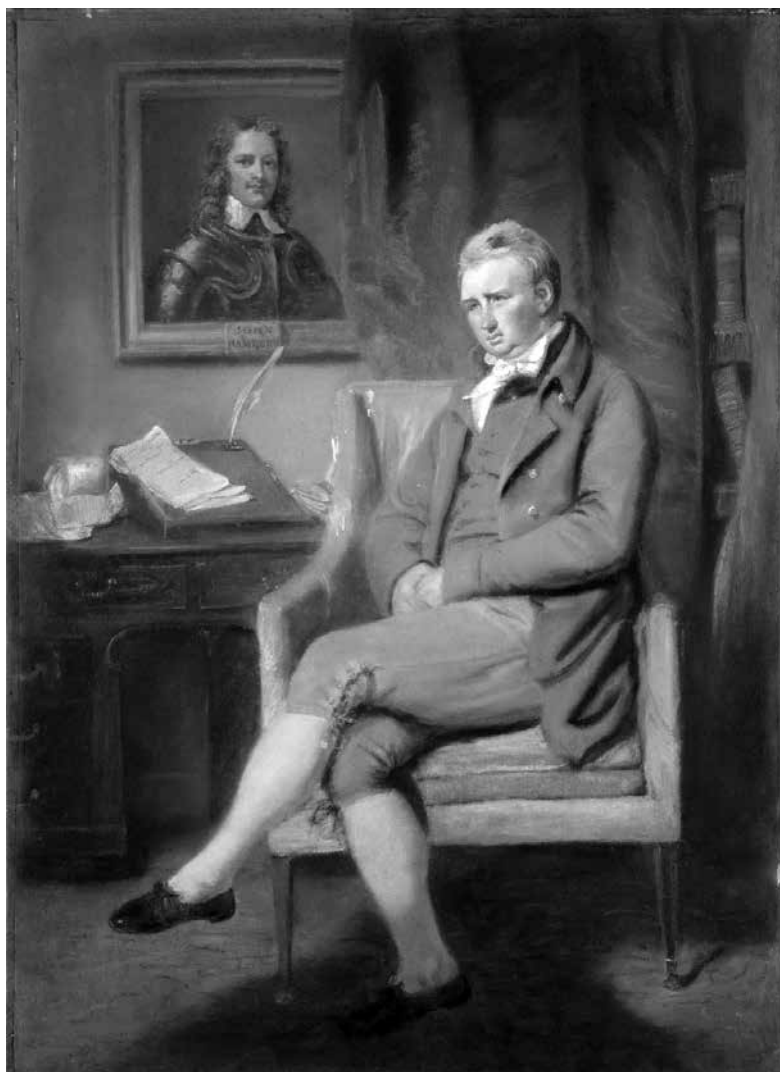
## Henry Hunt, Peterloo, Whigs and Liberals

tried every form of contumely and innuendo to silence and discredit him. Hunt was the undisputed choice of the crowd but not of the restricted electorate. He won the show of hands on nomination day but finished well at the bottom of the poll with a derisory eighty-four votes. Even so, as at Bristol, the election demonstrated his ability to disconcert moderate reformers. The final result was not without irony: Burdett was forced to jettison Kinnaid, but still finished a sorry second to Romilly, the fractures and dissension among the reformers enabling the popular Whigs to recapture the former Foxite stronghold.

During the election campaign, Hunt gained the support of a new generation of militant radicals, most notably the publicists who came to the fore in Cobbett's absence: William Sherwin, whose *Political Register* was the paper of choice of Dr Watson and his group; Sherwin's associate, Richard Carlile, who published Hunt's campaign material and furnished the famous red flag (later proudly displayed at Peterloo) with 'UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE as a motto, surmounted by a Cap of Liberty, surrounded with the inscription of Hunt and Liberty'; and Thomas Dolby, the leading radical bookseller and distributor, who brought out a pamphlet extolling Hunt's virtues and campaigned industriously on his behalf. Up in Lancashire, Samuel Bamford arranged a subscription to help with the expenses, and wrote to the Westminster electors enjoining them to vote for Hunt, the 'People's Man'.<sup>11</sup>

Once the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act had run its course, Hunt, encouraged by the new radical paper, the *Manchester Observer*, set off for industrial Lancashire in January 1819 to enlist northern workers in the next stage of the radical campaign. At a mass meeting on St Peter's Field and other gatherings, he confirmed and legitimised his leadership, deploying characteristic rhetorical tropes, unattractive to present-day audiences, but fully in pitch with Regency political convention. In the absence of any formal mechanism of accountability, Hunt felt the need to assure his audiences he was not 'trading' in politics, hence the repeated declarations of his uncompromising allegiance to the cause and recitation of his sufferings (financial and otherwise) on the people's behalf:

I am, as you see me, a plain man: I have a little landed property by inheritance. Of the income which I derive from it, I live upon one half, and the other I devote to your service, in endeavouring to recover your rights. If ever I desert the principles which



William Cobbett (1763–1835), chalk drawing by John Raphael Smith, 1812, believed to have been produced while Cobbett was in Newgate prison. (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

I have professed, may that colour (*pointing to one of the flags*) be my winding sheet. (*Loud applause*).

His gentlemanly status was the very earnest proof of his probity, independence and ability to confront their oppressors. From the days of John Wilkes through to the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor, it was widely believed that only the gentleman knew the forms and language of high politics, could cut a brave figure on the hustings, or belabour the ministers in their own tongue. 'They have represented me as a most infamous and rascally fellow', Hunt protested at his treatment in the Manchester loyalist press: 'I am an humble country Gentleman, and when I have been before the public I have dared to advocate the cause of truth'.<sup>12</sup> The image delighted the northern radicals. 'The good old character of an independent country Gentleman was surely there in him,' a correspondent wrote to the *Manchester Observer*. 'I had almost compared him to an English Baron in the time of Magna Charta, but that Mr Hunt's motives were so much more

praiseworthy; he was not there as they met that worthless King at Runnymede, to advocate the rights of a few, but of all'.<sup>13</sup>

From then on radicals worked through an escalating repertoire of open platform agitation towards decisive confrontation, exploiting constructive ambiguities in contested understandings of the law, constitution and history. Marshalled by Hunt, the people stood forward in heroic guise as the true loyalists, upholding the constitution which had been 'won by the valour and cemented with the blood of our ancestors'. By legitimising protest activity in this way, the radicals put the authorities on the defensive while embarrassing the apostate Whigs – the ultimate constitutional right of resistance remained a fundamental principle of Whig political thought. In Hunt's brand of populism, appeals to the constitution and the memory of glorious past struggles were combined with a compelling sense of a hitherto latent popular will, now transforming itself into something both purposeful and irresistible. 'By great public meetings being peaceably but firmly conducted', Hunt instructed, 'the Public Feeling of the whole country may be so concentrated as to cause the consummation of all our wishes'.<sup>14</sup>

Undaunted by the rejection of petitions and remonstrances, he sanctioned a major escalation of open-ended platform activity in the summer of 1819 to mobilise a 'national union', a 'Political Union in the cause of Universal Civil and Religious Liberty'. To this end, the Manchester meeting, announced for 9 August, was to be the greatest display of radical strength in the provinces, the regional climax of an unprecedented series of local mass meetings – great outings for whole families, trades and communities – prior to a monster assembly in London on his return. Hunt stipulated that the demonstration should be 'very publick ... rather a meeting of the *County of Lancashire* etc. than of Manchester alone'. In his intercepted correspondence with Joseph Johnson, brushmaker and secretary of the Manchester Patriotic Union Society, he gave detailed instructions of the kind of 'management' required to ensure the meeting would be the largest ever, attracting people 'from almost all parts within 20 miles round'. 'We have nothing to do but concentrate public opinion', Hunt wrote as he prepared to leave for the north, 'and if our Enemies will not listen to the voice of a whole People, they will listen to nothing, and may the effects of their Folly and Wickedness be upon their own Heads'.<sup>15</sup>

By this time, a tense mood of confrontation had developed in which each side hoped the other would be the first to overstep the mark,

transgress the constitution and lose public sanction. The authorities were quite confounded by the nature of the radical challenge of summer 1819. The Home Office grappled to find a means of prosecuting the radicals who stayed within the law but who organised meetings which evidently terrified magistrates. After the mass meeting at Halifax on 2 August, Horton, the local magistrate, wrote to Whitehall that he did not consider the 'peaceable Conduct observed by these Meetings is so very favourable a circumstance'. The Home Office agreed, noting that it was 'not the mode in which the English character usually exhibits Discontent'.<sup>16</sup> Despite repeated pleas from magistrates in the north, Sidmouth, the home secretary, refused to introduce special legislation to counter what he described as the 'unprecedented Artifice with which the Demagogues of the present day contrive without transgressing the Law, to produce on the Public Mind the same effect which used only to be created by means unquestionably unlawful'.<sup>17</sup>

Well versed in the law, Hunt was determined not to be cowed by the magistrates when they banned the 9 August meeting, advising the people to 'Abstain at their peril' from the meeting, a grammatical solecism which Hunt relished. Determined to maintain the legal high ground, he issued his own 'Proclamation' asserting the legal and constitutional right of public meeting; insisted that radicals abandon arming and drilling on the Lancashire moors: they were to come to the rearranged Manchester meeting on 16 August '*armed with no other weapon* but that of a self-approving conscience; determined not to suffer yourselves to be irritated or excited, by any means whatsoever, to commit any breach of the public peace'. Having heard a rumour that the magistrates had issued a warrant against him, he offered himself up to the authorities on the Saturday before the meeting to leave them no pretext for breaking up the proceedings.<sup>18</sup> The Manchester magistrates, however, decided to 'bring the matter to issue'. 'If the agitators of the country determine to persevere in their meeting', the stipendiary magistrate announced, 'it will necessarily prove a trial of strength and there must be a conflict'.<sup>19</sup> On 16 August, the magistrates gained their bloody victory. At least eighteen people were killed and many hundreds injured when the magistrates sent in the inebriated publicans, butchers and shopkeepers of the local yeomanry to arrest Hunt and other leaders on the platform, and then ordered in the 15th Hussars to disperse the peaceable crowd.

The Peterloo massacre inflamed radical spirits, aroused middle-class public opinion and

**Undaunted by the rejection of petitions and remonstrances, he sanctioned a major escalation of open-ended platform activity in the summer of 1819 to mobilise a 'national union', a 'Political Union in the cause of Universal Civil and Religious Liberty'.**

## Henry Hunt, Peterloo, Whigs and Liberals

unnerved the government – but it also fractured the unity previously displayed on the mass platform. For militant ultra-radicals, the outrage of Peterloo – ‘high treason committed against the people’ – meant that the time had surely come for the oppressed people to exercise their sovereign right of physical resistance as sanctioned by history, Blackstone and other authorities. His frequent evocation of the glorious ancestors notwithstanding, Hunt chose to interpret the outrage in different manner, as a moral propaganda coup that could be used not only to bring the murderous perpetrators to justice but also to shape public opinion and shame the authorities into reform. Seen in this light, the priority was to maintain the moral high ground, to abstain from agitation and mobilisation that might sully their aggrieved, righteous and superior stance.

While cautioning against any further platform activity, Hunt revelled in his own enhanced celebrity. Huge crowds flocked to see him as he travelled back and forth from the New Bailey to Lancaster Gaol and the Assize Court, and then on his return in triumph to London. The undisputed hero of the hour, Hunt let his vanity get the better of him, altering the route of the London procession and taking the chair at the dinner. Watson had never thought that ‘the hero of the piece would ever wish to become the master of ceremonies’.<sup>20</sup> To make matters worse, Hunt left Watson holding the bill: three months later he was gaoled for its non-payment. In the interim, the working alliance forged at Spa Fields, collapsed in acrimony.

While the radicals split in their response to events at Manchester, the government regained confidence. In the courts, the authorities – already thanked by the prince regent – were exonerated without question, Hunt’s unremitting efforts to bring them to justice notwithstanding. Back in control, the government asserted its power. Parliament was specially convened in late 1819 to pass the Six Acts, an attempt to return to the narrow political participation of the eighteenth century: ‘taxes on knowledge’ were imposed on the press, and the right of public meeting was limited by a series of measures prohibiting banners and flags, and restricting attendance to those actually resident in the parish. Reinforced by its new repressive powers the government was able to launch a sustained campaign of prosecution: by summer 1820 all the leading radical orators, organisers, journalists, publishers, and distributors were confined in prison.

To confound Hunt’s discomfiture, public outrage over Peterloo benefited the established

opposition, not the radicals. ‘Who would have speculated on the Manchester affair or on its approval’, George Ensor, the Benthamite intellectual, wrote to Francis Place, ‘the profit of these two capital blunders is incalculable ... they were victories gained to us by the enemy over themselves.’<sup>21</sup> But while the government and the authorities were roundly condemned, Hunt and the working-class radicals received little praise. The Westminster reformers agonised over the problem of how to exploit the massacre without giving some credit to Hunt, ‘a man who had vilified and abused them so outrageously’.<sup>22</sup> Burdett avoided any reference to Hunt in his famous letter condemning the massacre and the ‘bloody Neroses’, for which he was later prosecuted.<sup>23</sup> Byron wrote to his friend John Cam Hobhouse, the unsuccessful Rump candidate at the 1819 by-election, to advise the Westminster reformers against any reconciliation with the likes of Hunt:

If the Manchester yeomanry had cut down Hunt only, they would have done their duty ... our classical education alone should teach us to trample on such unredeemed dirt ... if to praise such fellows be the price of popularity, I spit upon it as I would in their faces.<sup>24</sup>

Despite strong lobbying by popular Whigs, party leaders were reluctant to stand forward over Peterloo, dreading some intervention by Hunt and the radicals. ‘If matters are left to themselves’, Brougham tried to convince Grey, ‘we shall have a green bag, which is worse than Hunt. And really the tendency of things at present – to end in a total separation of the upper and middling from the lower classes, the property from the population – is sufficiently apparent and rather alarming.’<sup>25</sup> It was not until Fitzwilliam forced the issue by agreeing to a Yorkshire meeting on the strict issue of an inquiry, that the party decided to take to the county platform. The county meetings produced some grandiloquent rhetoric about the rights of the freeborn Englishman, but not a word was said about reform. Joseph Mitchell, Hunt’s lieutenant in the north was manhandled off the platform at York when he tried to raise the issue.<sup>26</sup>

Viewed with historical hindsight, outrage at Peterloo served to foster a new middle-class political consciousness, an important step towards the Reform Act of 1832. Robert Poole notes how middle-class liberals deplored radicalism (and of course Hunt) but were no less critical of the political partisanship of the

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state and the erosion of civil rights. Over time, this stance, Poole maintains, helped 'to create a political centre ground in an otherwise polarised society, nourishing a new language of principled opposition and a new and powerful sense of middle-class political identity ... as the responsible class, bringing about essential but limited reform by holding the ring between the nobility and the mobility – the nobs and the mobs'.<sup>27</sup> On release from Ilchester 'Bastille' (where he served a sentence of two and a half years, having been convicted on just one of six charges over Peterloo, that of intention to foster sedition), Hunt was soon embroiled in the contentious politics of 'Corn, Cash and Catholics' throughout the 1820s, clashing in the process with Whigs, moderate reformers and those who now described themselves as 'liberals'.

Hunt left prison hoping to recapture popular support and to recoup the personal fortune lost through agitation and persecution. He enjoyed considerable business success with an extraordinary range of products, including his tax-free 'Breakfast Powder' and his 'matchless' shoe-blackening, bottles of which were embossed with the slogan 'Equal Laws, Equal Rights, annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage and the Ballot'. Despite his concentration on business, he maintained a special interest in agricultural matters and county politics. The persistence of distress in the early 1820s produced a strong demand for reform at a time when high taxes and a deflationary currency policy cut into consumer spending and stifled demand.<sup>28</sup> Agriculturalists were joined on the county platform by William Cobbett, now an advocate of currency reform, and by Whigs promoting a programme of moderate reform and retrenchment. In the vain and forlorn hope of reviving the post-war national union, Hunt too took to the county platform, *faute de mieux*, to raise the people's banner of universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot, trusting to isolate the landowning establishment and radicalise the farmers and labourers, prior to their joining the workers and manufacturing interest in an overwhelming challenge from without.

Given his business interests, most of Hunt's political energies were centred on London. He re-entered city politics to champion the commonalty, the rate-paying livery, against the establishment, the corrupt corporation, notorious for their 'guzzlings and gormandizing'. A popular choice as auditor, he became well placed to expose corrupt malpractice in which Waithman, 'their worthy Alderman, the ultra Whig' was allegedly implicated.<sup>29</sup> Any further political advance was thwarted by tacit

cooperation between Waithman and the Tories: unrestrained scurrilous attack on his private life and political principles ensured heavy defeat whenever he tried to gain election to the Common Council, the 'Little House of Commons'.

At the same time as struggles for reform in the city (and also in his local vestry in the Borough), Hunt was engaged in furious contention with the leading metropolitan reformers, the now fashionable Westminster 'liberals'. The division was perhaps most stark over Catholic emancipation and the plight of the Irish. Liberals were concerned with civil rights, or more specifically, the removal of those civil disabilities which hindered the professional careers of middle-class Catholics. Hunt, now briefly reconciled with Cobbett, drew attention to the dire distress of the Irish poor, and campaigned for economic and social amelioration as well as the recognition of the political rights of all, Protestant and Catholic, rich and poor. To Hunt and Cobbett, Catholic emancipation was merely the starting point, a necessary preliminary to the really important Irish reforms: disestablishment of the Church, abolition of tithes, and the introduction of a proper poor law system financed by the landowners. By itself, the elimination of civil disabilities would benefit only the middle classes, not the starving Irish poor, whose desperate plight was overlooked by liberals who preferred to sympathise with affluent Spaniards, Neapolitans and Greeks.<sup>30</sup> Hunt and Cobbett were scandalised by the Emancipation Bill which Burdett presented in 1825, notably the infamous 'wings': state payment of the Catholic clergy, and the disfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholders. Relations deteriorated drastically when Burdett decided to stick his knees into Canning's back on the treasury benches and support Liberal Toryism. Thenceforth there were pitched battles at the annual anniversary 'purity of election' dinners to celebrate Burdett's victory in 1807: on one occasion, Hunt had to protect himself by forming 'a *chevaux de frize* [sic] with the chairs turned upside down'.<sup>31</sup> As the 1829 dinner approached, both sides prepared for all-out conflict. Catholic emancipation was at the centre of the dispute, as the Westminster reformers openly approved of the recent settlement which sacrificed the rights of the forty-shilling freeholders. But there were several other issues which divided radicals from liberals, the most important of which was Warburton's 'Dead-Body' Bill.

Amidst the furore caused by the Burke and Hare murders, the Benthamite Henry Warburton brought forward a bill which sought to remedy the deficiency of cadavers for dissection

## Henry Hunt, Peterloo, Whigs and Liberals

and teaching purposes, by sending surgeons the bodies of paupers dying unclaimed in workhouses and hospitals. Such a utilitarian solution to the pressing needs of science was much applauded by the liberals and 'advanced' radicals like Richard Carlile, but it horrified popular radicals like Hunt and Cobbett who were joined in opposition by many old Tories. Here was an issue which adumbrated the divisions over the new Poor Law in the 1830s when class resentment was reinforced by Tory paternalism. For all its efficiency and rationality, Warburton's bill was a blatant piece of discrimination against the poor, offending deeply held popular attitudes towards death, burial and the human body: it condemned the poor, Hunt and Cobbett protested, 'to undergo the degradation which our forefathers allotted as part of the sentence of the murderer'.<sup>32</sup>

Hunt arrived at the 1829 dinner with a long list of questions on the 'Dead-Body' Bill, the disfranchisement of the Irish freeholders and various other issues. But it was Hobhouse who took command of the proceedings. In a powerful and witty speech, he defended the Irish disfranchisement 'for the sake of the good which accompanied it', and looked forward to the day when Hunt and Cobbett would 'do credit to a scientific dissection, and afford us an example calculated to enlighten and illustrate us in a physical, if not in a moral, point of view. (Cheers and laughter)'. At this point, Hunt and Cobbett beat a hasty retreat, a wise decision since the Rump had packed the Crown and Anchor with 'hired ruffians'.<sup>33</sup> It was the final parting of the ways. Radicals and liberals took their separate paths at the very time when parliamentary reform was placed on the agenda of 'high politics'.

In the early stages of the Reform Bill crisis, after Wellington resigned and the Whigs came into office, Hunt emerged triumphant at the Preston by-election in December 1830 caused by Stanley's elevation to government office. Dismayed by Stanley's answers to questions about the reform intentions of the Whigs, the local radicals decided to nominate Hunt. Stanley, Hunt noted on arrival in the town, had 'let the cat out of the bag': his answers confirmed that the ministers 'intended to do nothing ... He, Henry Hunt, believed, all that could be done, without the vote by ballot, and a repeal of the corn laws, to be a mere nothing – all trash ... Reform, indeed! he was old enough to recollect the jockeys when they were in office before, in 1806 and 1807.' The 3,730 electors who voted for him received a celebratory medal, but Hunt, the archetypal independent gentlemanly

leader, considered himself accountable to a much broader but otherwise unrepresented constituency. The great champion of popular constitutionalism, he entered parliament as the self-proclaimed 'representative of the great mass of the industrious population of this country, to advocate their interests, and to regain and maintain for them their rights'. As 'John Bull's Watchman' and 'the Poor Man's Protector', he cast a critical eye over the Reform Bill proposals introduced by the Whigs. While recognising that the bill went further than expected, he refused to participate in the euphoria with which it was greeted, not least because its propertied franchise would disenfranchise his poor potwalloper constituents. As a democratic radical, he 'opposed, or rather exposed the Bill, because it did not come up to any of the points he had advocated'. His adoring Preston constituents apart, Hunt was attacked on all sides, having to battle against liberal propaganda, reformist sentiment and popular prejudice. Even so, he was undaunted in fulfilling his parliamentary duties – he spoke over a thousand times during his brief parliamentary career and kept to his pledge to present every petition sent to him, including a pioneer petition for female suffrage. No longer an ally, Cobbett subjected every aspect of the Preston Cock's parliamentary conduct to critical scrutiny, censure and ridicule. Among 'the hackerings, the stammerings, the boggings, the blunderings, and the cowering down of this famous Cock', it was Hunt's refusal to give unqualified support to the Whig Reform Bill which angered Cobbett, fearing that such inexplicable behaviour would 'cause one of two things, the *rejection of all reform*, or the *producing of a convulsive revolution*'.<sup>34</sup>

Hunt's democratic opposition to the Whig Reform Bill cost him his health, his business and, at the first elections under the reformed system in December 1832, his parliamentary seat.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter he was rarely in good health. He suffered a severe stroke on a business trip to Hampshire and died soon afterwards at Alresford on 13 February 1835. Hunt died before he could recapture the popular support he had once enjoyed, but shortly thereafter he was accorded pride of place in the Chartist pantheon by penitent working-class radicals facing the horrors of the new Poor Law, the defeat of the short-time movement and the attack on trade unionism. Sent to an early grave, broken in heart and spirit by the folly and ingratitude of the people during the Reform Bill crisis, 'ever-to-be-loved' Hunt was honoured by the Chartists not only for his part in 'never-to-be forgotten' Peterloo but also for his foresight,

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the great prophet who had tried to warn the non-represented people of the deleterious consequences of middle-class 'liberal' reform. First proposed in 1835, a monument to Hunt was unveiled in Ancoats in 1842. The dedication ceremony, planned to coincide with the anniversary of Peterloo, played a crucial role in Chartist history itself: it brought all the major leaders together in Manchester at the time of the 'plug plot' or 'general strike', a high point of working-class political and industrial militancy in early Victorian England. But after the demise of Chartism, Hunt's reputation went into steady decline and the Ancoats monument fell into disrepair. Planned by the radicals, built by the Chartists, it was demolished in the name of civic pride by the Open Spaces Committee in 1888, the stones being sold to a builder for £3.<sup>36</sup>

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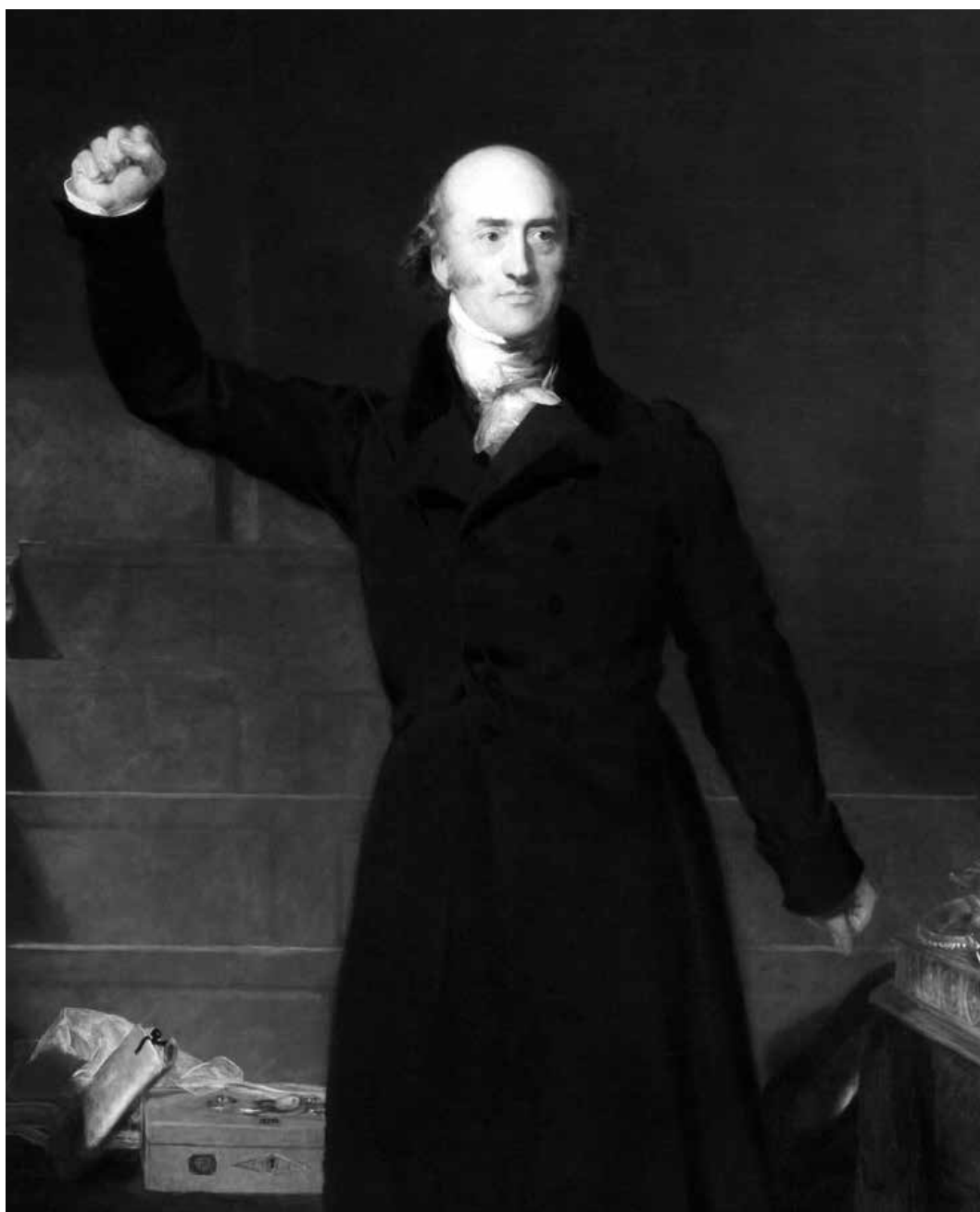
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## Liberal Toryism

Stephen Lee analyses the impact of the 'Liberal Tory' George Canning on early nineteenth-century politics and the party system.

# 'Not straight b

## George Canning and the origins o



George Canning (1770–1827); oil on canvas, by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1825 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



# Out serpentine' of nineteenth-century liberalism

**I**N JANUARY 1827, George Canning, at the time foreign secretary, attended the funeral of the Duke of York, held in a freezing cold St George's Chapel, Windsor. Although he escaped the fate of the Bishop of Lincoln, who died as a result of the experience, Canning and a number of mourners were seriously ill afterwards. For Canning, it was the beginning of a period of ill health that would culminate in his death on 8 August 1827, after the shortest premiership in British history, a mere 119 days.

George Canning's impact on early nineteenth-century politics and the party system, however, was much greater than his truncated premiership might appear to suggest. He was central to the emergence of the distinct approach to politics known as Liberal Toryism;<sup>1</sup> he helped define the parameters of the early nineteenth-century two-party system, yet kicked against its constraints; and his followers played a part in the emergence of the Liberal Party in the mid-nineteenth century. One curious coincidence associated with his death can be seen as a metaphor for the way his life intertwined with the Whig-Liberal tradition yet remained distinct from it.

By June 1827, the diarist Greville described Canning as 'dreadfully ill', and in late July Canning moved, for what he saw as a period of convalescence, into Chiswick House, lent to him for that purpose by the Duke of Devonshire. For those with long political memories, this was an ominous move. In September 1806, the Whig leader Charles James Fox had died in the same house, where he had gone for the same convalescent purpose as Canning, brought down not least by the 'seven pints of transparent fluid' and 'thirty five gallstones' found at his post mortem.<sup>2</sup> People at the time were aware

of the similarity of circumstances. The Duke of Devonshire himself wrote later: 'Canning died in a room upstairs. I had a great foreboding when he came here, and would not allow of his being in the room below where Fox had died.'<sup>3</sup> This anecdote illustrates how Canning had been, by the time of his ministry, increasingly absorbed into the Whig tradition, but also that he was never quite, even in death, in the same room. It is necessary to keep this in mind and to appreciate that Canning remained at his death a *Liberal Tory*, in order to understand his role in the origins of nineteenth-century liberalism.

## George Canning's Liberal Toryism

Canning's Liberal Toryism is often remarked upon but equally as often misunderstood. Typically, it is seen as a form of proto-liberalism, which, via what I have referred to as 'the half-way house of Peelism',<sup>4</sup> provides one of the strands that is woven into Victorian liberalism and the mid-nineteenth century Liberal Party. The risk inherent in such an approach is that it emphasises the liberal aspects of Canning's career and neglects his Toryism. To begin to understand this, we need to look more closely at three aspects of Canning's political ideas and practice: his support for Catholic emancipation; his opposition to parliamentary reform; and, his allegedly 'liberal' approach to foreign policy.

In the summer of 1822, Canning spoke in Liverpool, the city for which he was an MP between 1812 and 1822, and referred to the 'two great national questions' of Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform, noting that he differed 'almost as widely' with his supporters on the former as he did with their opponents on

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

latter.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the issue of Catholic emancipation was to be so divisive that it would, in the end, destroy the early-nineteenth-century Tory Party and propel Canning, at the time of his premiership, into coalition with elements of the Whig Party.

Canning would emerge in the early decades of the nineteenth century as one of the most vocal supporters of Catholic emancipation, the name given to the process of removing the legislation that prevented Catholics from participating fully in public life by, for example, denying them the vote or prohibiting them from sitting in parliament. During the lifetime of his political lodestar, William Pitt the Younger, Canning followed his lead on the Catholic question. After the union with Ireland in 1801, Pitt appears to have promised not to raise the issue of Catholic emancipation again in George III's lifetime. Pitt's death in 1806 did not change Canning's approach immediately, but he did not feel bound by the promise any longer and he gradually emerged as a vocal proponent of emancipation, especially after George III's final relapse into illness in 1810 and the subsequent institution of a regency. He considered the regency as 'tantamount to a new reign'<sup>6</sup> and he quickly became the most prominent 'Catholic' on the Tory side of the House of Commons.

In February 1812, speaking in the Commons, he stated what could be seen as a key underlying principle of his Liberal Toryism when he noted of the Catholic question that it 'cannot ... be considered without reference to times and circumstances. It is not to be decided on abstract principles alone.' This Burkean approach led Canning to argue that emancipation was not 'solely a religious question' but a political one.<sup>7</sup> Catholics were not excluded from political and civic life because of their religion, he reasoned, but because their beliefs were 'signs of political opinion', namely an adherence to a 'banished dynasty'.<sup>8</sup> In short, Catholics were excluded from public life because they were regarded as actual or potential Jacobites – opponents of the Hanoverian state and Protestant establishment created after 1714. This danger had passed, he argued, and to maintain the exclusion of Catholics was actually dangerous, as it stoked up unnecessary resentment. He pointed to the dreadful events of the French revolution as an example of what can happen when 'fanciful and arbitrary barriers'<sup>9</sup> exclude one part of the community from active participation in public life. He felt that, far from weakening Britain, Catholic emancipation would strengthen it, giving the country a wider store of wealth and talent to draw upon.

It would also promote unity in the war against France that was raging at the time.

From this point on, Canning argued consistently for Catholic emancipation on these pragmatic grounds, rejecting what he referred to later in 1812 as 'wild theories of abstract right, of rights of man, and rights of citizens'. He did argue, however, 'that citizens of the same state, subjects living under the same government, are entitled, *prima facie*, to equal political rights and privileges'. Crucially, however, he linked this to the pragmatic goal of removing 'a cause of political discontent which agitates the minds of men' and weakens the state.<sup>10</sup> This would not least be the case in Ireland (although the Catholics who made up 80 per cent of the Irish population had more political rights than their co-religionists in Britain), which was as much a perennial problem in British politics in Canning's time as it would remain for many years to come.

Pausing to look at his attitude to the Catholic question, one could emphasise Canning's rejection of the abstract notion of 'rights of man' and, thus, question how someone who did this can even be seen as a proto-liberal, never mind as a liberal. Or, one could emphasise his commitment to 'equal political rights' and see this as a key 'liberal' political commitment. Either approach, however, would be one-sided and, as we shall see, one needs to give equal weight to both words in the description 'Liberal Toryism' if one is to understand the nature of Canning's thought and its relation to later liberalism.

Canning would go on to make important contributions to the national debate on the Catholic question, not least in key speeches in parliament in 1813, 1816, 1821, 1822 and 1825. All of which, of course, were unsuccessful but demonstrate the centrality of his 'Catholic' views to the version of Liberal Toryism he created and espoused. It is not without irony that Catholic emancipation came as a result of it being pushed through parliament in 1829 by the High Tory Duke of Wellington and the anti-Catholic Robert 'Orange' Peel in the face of the kind of widespread agitation that Canning had been trying to prevent.

Turning to the other 'national issue' of the day, parliamentary reform, we see that Canning is much more closely united with his colleagues in government. If his views on the Catholic question can be seen, at least in some senses, as liberal, his opposition to parliamentary reform is decidedly Tory. Once again, his Burkean approach would be to the fore. For Canning, as for most opponents of parliamentary reform, the key point was that it was

**Canning would emerge in the early decades of the nineteenth century as one of the most vocal supporters of Catholic emancipation, the name given to the process of removing the legislation that prevented Catholics from participating fully in public life by, for example, denying them the vote or prohibiting them from sitting in parliament.**

unnecessary and dangerous. The British constitution and, specifically, the House of Commons had an ability to adapt over time that made wide-ranging, organic reform unneeded and potentially risky. Speaking in April 1822, when he opposed Lord John Russell's motion 'that the present state of the representation of the people in Parliament requires the most serious consideration of the House', Canning stated that the Commons has, 'without any forcible alteration, gradually, but faithfully, accommodated itself to the progressive spirit of the country'.<sup>11</sup>

This approach was consistent throughout Canning's political career. In 1812, he had rejected 'showy theories and fanciful schemes of arithmetical or geographical proportion'.<sup>12</sup> The evils complained of by the pro-reformers simply did not exist. As he noted in 1817, 'our system ... has grown up with our freedom and with our power, and ... it satisfies the wants, the opinions and the feelings of the great bulk and body of the nation'.<sup>13</sup> Canning was also sceptical that any concessions on reform made by the House of Commons would satisfy the 'cravings'<sup>14</sup> of radical reformers and risked sacrificing the constitution. In 1818, he asked:

If these silly doctrines of annual parliaments and universal suffrage could be inculcated into the people by their demagogues, is there any doubt, that the effect of them would be to derange and destroy the orderly regulated play of the British constitution?<sup>15</sup>

Thus, reform measures, however, minor were the thin end of a very thick wedge. Canning also argued for the positive qualities of the Hanoverian electoral system. He stated in 1822, for example, that he felt its 'want of uniformity' and 'variety of rights of election' were strengths, not weaknesses as the reformers argued.<sup>16</sup> When he did allow for some changes, for example in 1820 when he supported the removal of MPs from the Cornish borough of Grampound, he did it not 'on the principle of speculative improvement' but as punishment for corruption. This showed that the British constitution could respond to specific problems without the need for wholesale reform: 'Disfranchising Grampound, ... I mean to save Old Sarum', he stated, referring to one of the most rotten of rotten boroughs.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, then, Canning regarded parliamentary reform as unnecessary, impractical and dangerous. By contrast, Catholic emancipation was necessary, and it would be dangerous not to do so. Underlying both these attitudes

are the lessons he drew from the French revolution. Namely, 'that proper changes ought not to be delayed too long' (e.g. Catholic emancipation) but 'that precipitate changes are subversive of the peace and order and happiness of nations' (e.g. parliamentary reform).<sup>18</sup> If one wished to sum up the essence of Canning's Liberal Toryism, it would be the combination of these two Burkean principles. It would be these two figures, 'Mr. Burke and Mr. Canning', that William Gladstone would later claim that he had 'for teachers or idols or both in politics', although he did state that, as a young man, on the matter of reform 'Burke and Canning misled many on the subject, and they misled me'.<sup>19</sup> This is another example of why we must be highly cautious in drawing a direct line from Canning to later Victorian liberalism.

Similarly, we must also be cautious with descriptions of Canning's foreign policy as 'liberal', especially during his second period as foreign secretary, 1822–27. Superficially, his foreign policy looks 'liberal' in that he set himself in opposition to the forces of legitimist reaction and their expression in the Holy Alliance after the fall of Napoleon. Nonetheless, we should not push the pendulum too far the other way. Canning's espousal of independence for Spain's Latin American colonies was not a consequence of some developed ideological position that favoured national self-determination, republicanism or constitutionalism, but flowed from his desire to preserve the balance of power that served British interests so well. To that extent, his views on foreign policy are similar in kind to his approach to domestic issues such as Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform in that they sought to find a balance between opposing extremes. That is, 'between the spirit of unlimited monarchy, and the spirit of unlimited democracy'.<sup>20</sup> So, when he boasted in 1826 that, by recognising the independence of Spain's former colonies, he had 'called the New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old',<sup>21</sup> he meant precisely that. Canning was, in fact, sceptical of claims that the spread of liberal institutions, whether in the old or new world, were inevitably accompanied by the spread of peace. Moreover, the contrast often made between Canning's foreign policy and that of his immediate predecessor, Castlereagh, is overdone. What differences there are in their approaches are largely a consequence of changing circumstances and Canning would specifically state that he was carrying out the general principles of foreign policy laid out by Castlereagh in the latter's famous state paper of May 1820.

**In summary, then, Canning regarded parliamentary reform as unnecessary, impractical and dangerous. By contrast, Catholic emancipation was necessary, and it would be dangerous not to do so. Underlying both these attitudes are the lessons he drew from the French revolution.**

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

Canning's approach to Greek independence in the 1820s is a useful illustration of these points. Canning was, like virtually all British statesmen of the time, raised to be a philhellene. His education at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, made him a formidable classical scholar, a reputation which followed him through life. Nonetheless, his approach to the issue of Greek independence from the Ottoman empire was always tempered by wider concerns for the balance of power. For example, the Greek question was a major bone of contention between the Ottoman and Russian empires and one might have expected, at first glance, that Canning would have fought shy of promoting the independence of Greece, for fear of undermining the Turks as a bulwark against Russian expansion. However, Canning saw war between Russia and the Ottomans as a possible alternative to Russian intervention in Spain, which he wished to avoid at all cost. Hostilities between the two eastern empires were not necessarily a bad thing, he thought, as 'in the prurient and tantalized state of the Russian army some vent must be found'. Even those historians who argue that the 'central motive' in Canning's approach to the issue was his 'sympathy for the Greek nationalist cause', recognise that this was part of a 'larger outlook' and that he was 'not an extreme philhellene'.<sup>22</sup> Allan Cunningham has summed up Canning's attitude well:

Like his countrymen in general, the foreign secretary was slow to respond to the Greek cause, inconstant in the attention he gave it, frequently chagrined by the behaviour of the revolutionaries themselves, and only led forward on their behalf when larger interests than those of the Greeks seemed to be involved.<sup>23</sup>

One area that has attracted recent attention is Canning's attitude to slavery, where one study has seen him as a political mainstay of the West India interest and an active barrier to the abolition of slavery. Canning's ameliorationist position, in which he advocated the betterment of the conditions of slaves as a necessary precursor to emancipation, has been characterised as, in practice, a cynical means of avoiding the immediate abolition of slavery.<sup>24</sup> It is certainly true that Canning did not regard the ending of slavery as his main priority, preoccupied as he was in the 1820s with Catholic emancipation and foreign policy. He was also closely associated with key figures of the West India interest, such as Charles Rose Ellis and John Gladstone.

His time as MP for Liverpool also meant he developed strong connections with the West Indian shipping interests that were prominent there. To describe his ameliorationist outlook as simply a cynical reflection of the slaveholders' pro-slavery position, however, lacks nuance. To expect someone whose whole political outlook was developed in the wake of the French revolution to advocate immediate emancipation of the slaves fails to understand Canning's typical search for a balance between what he saw as two extremes (namely, slavery and immediate abolition). Looking back from the twenty-first century, we might regard this as morally lacking, but it is entirely consistent with his approach to the other major questions of his day. Also, it is not insignificant, for example, that as foreign secretary he is estimated to have written more than a thousand despatches on the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in any account of Canning's Liberal Toryism, it is worth noting one area where he was not at the centre of policy-making or debate. Canning had relatively little influence on, and frankly less interest in, Liberal Tory ideas on economic policy relating to matters such as tariffs and trade. To the extent that there was a Canningite legacy in later liberalism, it was a Huskissonite one, as Canning tended to defer to the economic expertise of his most prominent follower William Huskisson. In the crucial decade, the 1820s, as noted, Canning was busy with foreign policy and the Catholic question. Also, as his private secretary Augustus Stapleton wrote after Canning's death, speaking of commercial reform, this was 'a branch of politicks ... the least suited to his taste'.<sup>26</sup>

**One area where Canning does appear to resemble later Victorian politicians, and not just liberal ones, is his consciousness of the emerging importance of public opinion and his use of the press.**

### Public opinion and the press

One area where Canning does appear to resemble later Victorian politicians, and not just liberal ones, is his consciousness of the emerging importance of public opinion and his use of the press. In his willingness to speak outside parliament, to address the national public directly, he foreshadows the likes of Gladstone's Midlothian campaign or, perhaps, even Lord Randolph Churchill's attempts to create a 'Tory Democracy'.

Among the Pittites-cum-Tories of the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Canning was one of the first to recognise the growing power of public opinion in national politics. While politics would remain heavily influenced by local issues, as it can be even today, he also saw that there was value in turning his gaze



outward, from the closed political 'game' in Westminster, to the wider country. The crucial year in this 'outward turn', as I have called it, is 1812.<sup>27</sup> Having overplayed his hand in the aftermath of the assassination of Spencer Perceval, and finding himself out of the cabinet, Canning took, for him, the momentous decision to stand for the contested election in Liverpool. Invited to stand by a group of wealthy Liverpool merchants, including John Gladstone, the statesman William's father, Canning was plunged into a strange new world. Liverpool had an electorate of around 3,000 freemen (about 8–10 per cent of the adult male population), and Canning found himself for the first time having to campaign publicly to be elected. His correspondence is full of statements that indicate his surprise (shock, even) at the nature of campaigning in a populous borough. He claimed that his ceremonial procession into the town was of 'nearer 30,000 than 20,000 people ... It is just impossible to conceive the enthusiasm with which I am received. It makes me stare, & wonder what the devil I can have done to deserve it.' Canning was to give many speeches and to spend several hours a night canvassing in the political clubs during the campaign. He also had to curry favour with the press, not least Liverpool's five weekly newspapers. In addition, the constituency was flooded with printed addresses, broadsides, songs, poems and other so-called squibs. Much of this activity is familiar to historians of elections in large constituencies throughout the long eighteenth century. What is noteworthy here is the extent to which the presence of Canning as a candidate for the Tory side transformed this into a national spectacle and the way Canning used it to reassert his national prominence after the disappointments of earlier in the year. He saw the election, as he said in one of his speeches, as:

the arena on which ... the battle was to be fought between those principles both of external and domestic policy which have made Great Britain what she is [i.e. Pittite Toryism], and those which it has been the business of my life to oppose [i.e. the supposedly revolutionary ideas of Foxite Whiggism]...<sup>28</sup>

The parallels with Gladstone's Midlothian campaign of 1878–80 are obvious but worth spelling out: both Canning and Gladstone were out of office; both were trying to make some form of 'comeback'; both campaigns spent at least as much time on national issues

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as local ones; and both campaigns garnered significant interest beyond the local electorate and their particular constituency boundaries. Gladstone's campaign is often regarded as the first 'modern' electoral campaign, but it is clear that it had substantial precedents, not least Canning's campaign in Gladstone's own hometown of Liverpool. Canning was the first major Tory figure to sit for a populous borough and this would bring him into close contact with a socio-economic group that is regarded as the archetypal support base for Victorian liberalism, the urban middle class.

Canning is often seen, by virtue of his own background and his experiences in Liverpool, as having a close relationship with the emerging middle classes. He certainly used the language of class and he, like others, saw the middle classes as important generators and bearers of public opinion. As early as 1799, Canning had referred approvingly in the Commons to 'those classes of men, who connect the upper and lower orders of society, and who thereby blend together and harmonise the whole'.<sup>29</sup> In 1812 at Liverpool, he spoke of 'those ... who by their commercial enterprise [sic] and honest industry' multiply 'a hundred-fold' the wealth created by land.<sup>30</sup> Analysis of poll books from the Liverpool elections of 1812 and 1818 shows that Canning did have disproportionate support from among the middle classes of Liverpool, who had asked him to stand in the first place, of course. Both locally and nationally, Canning paid close attention to what he clearly saw as a middle-class audience. Moreover, it was becoming a commonplace that the middle classes were the location of what was seen as emerging public opinion. Harold Temperley, in his seminal study of Canning's foreign policy, went so far as to argue that 'there is nothing in which Canning's attitude was so peculiar and unique in his own day, as in his policy towards the Press and the public in his own and other countries'.<sup>31</sup> For Canning, public opinion embodied in a free press increasingly controlled public life, with a power he compared to 'the power of STEAM'.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, we should not be carried away by this rhetoric, as Canning always saw public opinion as something that, while being recognised, had to be channelled, moulded and controlled. This can be seen in his career as a writer for journals, such as the ones he founded: *The Anti-Jacobin* and, particularly, the *Quarterly Review*. It is also seen in his habit of regularly speaking 'out-of-doors', as speeches outside parliament were described at the time. He was much criticised on the

High Tory side for going around the country 'speechifying',<sup>33</sup> something that was more associated with Whig politicians than Tories. In this, Canning has been seen to 'foreshadow the middle-class prima donna in politics, with his thin skin and his obligations to "his" public',<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Parry has gone so far as to argue that Canning's focus on the middle class and public opinion contribute to the development of a 'liberal' style in politics.<sup>35</sup>

We can see, then, that there are elements of Canning's political ideas and his approach to politics generally, that can be seen as 'liberal', at least in so far as they were in contrast to the ideas and practice of his High Tory colleagues in government in the 1820s. Even here, however, as Canning himself stated, 'the line that is fancifully drawn between the liberals and illiberals in the Cabinet, is not straight but serpentine'.<sup>36</sup> Also, there are clearly aspects of Canning's ideas that resemble later Burkean Conservatism. Moreover, we must be wary of the dangers inherent in ascribing influence to one person over others. That is, just because some of Canning's ideas look a bit like some aspects of later liberalism, we must be cautious in assuming that he must have influenced these later developments. Why, then, is Canning so often brought up in discussions of the origins of Victorian liberalism? If the evidence is so equivocal, why do people still consider Canning as one of the origin points of later liberalism? To understand why, we need to turn to aspects of political organisation and to the trajectories of the political careers of those who called themselves Canningites, for these would be the means by which Canning's ideas and practice would be handed down to later liberalism.

### **Political influence**

The Canningite faction, what he called his 'little Senate', emerged during the period of Canning's opposition to the ministry of Henry Addington, 1801–04, and the Ministry of All the Talents, 1806–07. It would persist in something like the same form until he disbanded it in 1813. Thenceforth, there would be a looser formation of MPs that regarded themselves as Canningites up to and beyond Canning's death in 1827. Key members of this group, not least Viscount Palmerston, would switch their allegiance to the Whig Party during the Reform Crisis of 1827–32. In so doing, they would become an important strand in the emergence of the mid-Victorian Liberal Party. In addition, upon the formation of Canning's ministry, a number of Whig politicians would join

Canning's ministry, allowing him to form a viable coalition ministry in the face of High and Ultra Tory opposition.

In early 1827, Lord Liverpool, prime minister continuously since 1812, suffered an incapacitating stroke, bringing an end to his premiership (and his life the following year). Liverpool had been the keystone of the early-nineteenth-century Tory Party, and without him it fell apart. His removal from office allowed barely concealed ideological and personal rivalries to emerge into the harsh light of day. The most explosive issue was Catholic emancipation, which for many years had been deemed an 'open' question in the cabinet, precisely to avoid the divisions which would now emerge. Canning was the leading 'Catholic' and also the leading contender to succeed Liverpool. When he became prime minister in April 1827, six High Tory 'Protestants' resigned from the cabinet, including the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel. Most resigned because of their opposition to Canning's views on the Catholic question. Thirty-five other more junior officeholders also resigned for the same reasons. From this point onwards, Canning and his supporters would largely cease to be referred to as Tories. Canning needed to reinforce his ministry, and three prominent Whigs – the Marquess of Lansdowne, the Earl of Carlisle and George Tierney – joined the government in May 1827, giving it an overwhelmingly 'Catholic' character. The junction of Canning with elements of the Whig Party had been a standard topic of political gossip throughout the 1820s, especially among Canning's High Tory opponents. This coalition would induce a temporary split in the Whig Party, but it was reunited relatively quickly under Earl Grey by 1830, whereas for the Tories this was a decisive schism. The majority of Canningites never returned to the Tory Party and the split between Canning and Peel brought to an end the first phase of Liberal Toryism.

The question of whether Canningism could have emerged as a third force or party in British politics (analogous to Peelism later) was rendered moot by the early loss of its key leaders. As we have seen, Canning died in August 1827 and his obvious successor William Huskisson perished from injuries inflicted under the wheels of Stephenson's Rocket at the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester railway in September 1830. Third parties tended not to fare well or last long in the nineteenth century anyway, but without their two obvious leaders, it was inevitable that a Canningite party did not emerge. The majority of Canningites made their way over to the Whig

**Even here, however, as Canning himself stated, 'the line that is fancifully drawn between the liberals and illiberals in the Cabinet, is not straight but serpentine'.**

Party during the Reform Crisis by a variety of more or less convoluted routes. They took Canning's ideas and approach with them, and in many ways, this is the most significant mechanism by which his political legacy influenced the emerging Liberal Party. While some Canningites did revert to the Conservative Party, key Canningite/Huskissonite figures would vote in the Commons against Wellington in November 1830 (precipitating his fall and Grey's premiership) and, significantly, for the Great Reform Bill later. These MPs included Charles and Robert Grant, E. J. Littleton, Dudley Ryder (Viscount Sandon, later 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Harrowby), Robert Vernon Smith, Viscount Morpeth and Viscount Palmerston. A similar group of Canningite/Huskissonite peers was to make the same journey into Whiggism, not least Lord Melbourne, who would go on to be prime minister in 1834 and 1835–41. Viscount Palmerston is perhaps the most interesting example of a Canningite after Canning, due to the centrality of foreign policy to his career both before and during his two periods as prime minister (1855–8, 1859–65).

Palmerston was foreign secretary during the periods 1830–34, 1835–41 and 1846–51 and was commonly seen as Canning's successor, although he emerged as a Canningite only late in Canning's life. So closely was he identified with Canning, however, that in 1831 he had to defend himself against charges of inconsistency when he supported parliamentary reform, arguing that Canning's 'gigantic mind' and 'mighty genius' would have embraced reform due to the changed circumstances.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, there are clear differences between Canning's and Palmerston's approach to foreign policy. For example, Palmerston was more of an interventionist. Nonetheless, Palmerston's repeated rhetorical use of Canning's name is a significant indicator of the shadow that Canning's ideas and his approach to politics cast over those nineteenth-century Liberals who claimed to be following in his footsteps.

## Conclusion

LORD CAVERSHAM. ... Chiltern's speech last night on this Argentine Canal scheme was one of the finest pieces of oratory ever delivered in the House since Canning.

LORD GORING. Ah! Never heard of Canning. Never wanted to.

Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act IV (1895)

George Canning, despite Lord Goring's wilful ignorance, cast a long shadow across the nineteenth century. As Wilde implies, he was remembered for the power of his oratory. His foreign policy, especially its supposedly liberal approach, was influential long after his death. His followers took key elements of his politics forward into the new parties that emerged after the Reform Crisis of 1827–32, especially into the Whig-Liberal Party of the 1830s and 1840s and, with Peelite accretions, into what became the mid- to late-Victorian Liberal Party from the 1850s onwards. Canning, thus, had an important liberal legacy. While, as historians, we need to emphasise that he was a Liberal Tory, and to recognise that we run the risk of mischaracterising his contribution to British politics if we ignore the noun in favour of the adjective, we must also recognise that, in the eyes of many, followers and opponents alike, he made an important contribution to the emergence of mid-Victorian liberalism, albeit as only one strand of a much thicker rope.

*Dr Stephen M. Lee is a historian of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British politics. In 2008, his book, George Canning and Liberal Toryism, 1801–1827, won the Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize for the best first book on British and Irish history published in that year. This article draws on the key arguments of that work.*

- 1 The phrase 'Liberal Tory' is sometimes seen as an anachronism, retrospectively applied by historians to people and policies who did not use or would not recognise the term. This is not the case. It, and similar terms, were increasingly applied to Canning and others as the political schism in the Tory Party widened over the 1820s. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, for example, referred to the 'new or liberal Tories' in June 1826 (xix, p. 636). Canning was described as the leader of 'the liberal party' in Lord Liverpool's government by his High Tory opponent Harriet Arbuthnot. See Frances Bamford and Gerald Wellesley, 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Wellington (eds.), *Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot, 1820–1832* (2 vols, London, 1950), vol. ii, p. 60, entry for 28 Nov. 1826. For discussion of the use of the term Liberal Tory in the 1820s, see Stephen M. Lee, *George Canning and Liberal Toryism* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 138–140.
- 2 L. G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (London, 1992), p. 238.
- 3 Duke of Devonshire, *Notes and Queries*, vol. clxxiii, p. 332, quoted in Charles Petrie, *George Canning* (London, 1930), p. 244.
- 4 Lee, *George Canning*, p. 2.

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## *The Liberal*

Ian Macgregor Morris examines the role played by *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, and its editors, Leigh Hunt, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, in the emergence of Liberal thought and culture

# The Pisan Triumvirate The Libertine, the Atheist, and

Are there not three of us? And ought we not to have as much strength and variety as possible? We will divide the world between us, like the Triumvirate.<sup>1</sup>

Leigh Hunt to Shelley, 21 September 1821

**I**N JULY 1822 three youthful idealists met in the city of Pisa to plan a new literary endeavour. The result of their efforts, *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, would run for only four issues and has generally been marginalised in the histories of literature and politics. Yet the authors have not: Leigh Hunt, editor of radical newspaper *The Examiner*, was joined by Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. Hunt compared the circle to the three Roman potentates who carved up the empire between them; George Croly, writing in the Tory *Blackwood's Magazine*, made the same analogy to a very different purpose.<sup>2</sup>

The aftermath of the meeting is perhaps better remembered than the journal itself: Shelley's drowning on his departure from nearby Livorno. Despite a deteriorating personal relationship, Hunt and Byron persevered, more out of a mutual respect for Shelley than for one another. The first issue, in October 1822, was met with a level of withering criticism that, with hindsight, appears quite out of proportion to the influence of the journal itself. Yet the nature of those attacks reveals concerns surrounding the perceived connections between political reform, religious orthodoxy and personal morality.

Recent scholarship has suggested that the journal normalised the term 'liberal' within

political discourse through the very controversies it engendered.<sup>3</sup> However, the furore also marks one thread in the development of the concept: amidst the rhetoric lie traces of long-running disputes that formed competing definitions of 'liberalism'. First and foremost, critics sought to situate the journal and its creators within long-standing traditions of freethinking, libertinism and atheism.

Ellen Meiksins Wood has described democracy as an 'idea of ambiguous ancestry', identifying the development of the modern concept through manifestations that may make modern democrats uncomfortable. The same could be said of liberalism. Political ideals do not form in a realm divorced from the often paradoxical world of cultural practice. While the thought of Locke and Spinoza must form the core of any understanding of political liberalism, the cultural milieu that produced, critiqued and appropriated their ideas left a mark upon them.

And here *The Liberal* proves to be particularly revealing. Hunt's insistence that they include a variety of literary genres resulted in a veritable cornucopia that wanders from the suggestive to the subversive. The volumes are not, on first inspection at least, particularly cohesive in terms of content or even ideology. But they do reflect a range of ideas, attitudes and sentiments that challenge established standards of taste and behaviour, as well as those of politics and religion. Critics adopted a carefully constructed language that evoked some of the most notorious associations of the previous century, from the extreme profanity of the *Hell-fire Club* and the Satanic republicanism of the

Leigh Hunt (1784–1859); line engraving by Henry Meyer from a drawing by John Hayter, 1828. (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822); stipple and line engraving by William Finden, Black & Armstrong, Amelia Curran, 1819. (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron (1788–1824); stipple engraving by Henry Meyer from a drawing by James Holmes, 1824. (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



# Invirate and *The Liberal*

*Calves' Heads Club*, to the more genteel degeneracy of the Society of Dilettanti. Behind this critique lay a comprehensive rejection of the ideas of the *philosophes* and the impulses of the libertines: the two trends which had corrupted, respectively, the minds and the souls of a previous generation, thus paving the way for the French Revolution.

Such accusations were by no means unfounded. Each member of the Pisan Circle embodied elements of such 'degeneracy': Hunt was imprisoned for his 'libellous' comments about the prince regent; Shelley was known, in Wordsworth's uncharitable words, for his 'pretty paganism'; and Byron's personal conduct was the proverbial 'talk of the town'. With the new journal, they suggested that they had no intention of denying their reputations, but rather that such reputations could be read another way: a 'liberal' acceptance of free-thinking, atheism and libertinism.

Daisy Hay has suggested that *The Liberal* generated a liberal 'mode of behaviour'.<sup>4</sup> In what follows I hope to show that the Triumvirs of *The Liberal* were actively engaging with a variety of legacies in what could be termed a 'performance of liberalism', or perhaps better, of what they thought a liberal should be. Certainly, many of these traits – the rampant anti-clericalism, sensualised lifestyle, and even the ardent cosmopolitanism – were roundly rejected by what would become the liberal Victorian establishment. But they envisioned a particular embodiment of liberalism that was cosmopolitan, individualistic and tolerant; and most crucially, a liberalism of action.



### The Professors of the Satanic School

The object of our work is not political, except inasmuch as all writing now-a-days must involve something to that effect, the connection between politics and all other subjects of interest to mankind having been discovered, never again to be done away. We wish to do our work quietly, if people will let us.<sup>5</sup>

Leigh Hunt

This Manifesto of the Pisan Conspirators ... the very supremacy of weakness and wickedness in which the Professors of the Satanic School have indulged.<sup>6</sup>

*New European Magazine*

The names associated with *The Liberal* were enough to create a sense of foreboding. Leigh Hunt had long been a pariah to the establishment he constantly critiqued, a 'demoralizing incendiary' whose verse was 'vile, profligate, obscene, indecent, and detestable'.<sup>7</sup> His incarceration had only served to enhance his reputation: his cell became a cultural centre in its own right, hosting a string of literary and philosophical figures. It was one of those visitors – who had recently awoken one morning to find himself famous – that dubbed Hunt the 'wit in the dungeon'.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the Tory press labelled Hunt the 'King of Cockayne' and those around him the Cockney Circle.<sup>9</sup> The label sought to demean the radical journalist in terms of both class and locale, an unworthy metropolitan contrast to the sublime – and more conservative – Lake poets. Shelley and Byron were associated with the 'Cockneys', although their social status required a different critique. The former's rampant atheism made him a target of often unimaginative and generic attacks, although the deployment of such longstanding tropes is itself revealing of how conservative writers were responding to the threat of liberalism. While Byron's 'private' life – if any actions of the poet could be described as such – provided scope for criticism, his growing 'degeneracy' was attributed to something more pernicious than aristocratic excess.<sup>10</sup> His association with the 'Cockney Bluestockings', murmured the Tory journalists, had tainted his entire being, prompting his 'heartless, heavy, dull, anti-British garbage'.<sup>11</sup>

Establishment concerns were expressed most fervently by Robert Southey, poet laureate, who in abandoning his youthful radicalism had become the Cockney Circle's *bête noire*. His encomium to the late George III, *A Vision*

**The names associated with *The Liberal* were enough to create a sense of foreboding. Leigh Hunt had long been a pariah to the establishment he constantly critiqued, a 'demoralizing incendiary' whose verse was 'vile, profligate, obscene, indecent, and detestable'.**

of *Judgement* (1821), opened him to far greater ridicule than he bestowed; but it also framed the political struggle and the place of the radical writers within it. He lambasted the circle around Hunt:

The school which they have set up may properly be called the Satanic school ... Moral and political evils are inseparably connected. ... Where the manners of a people are generally corrupted ... government cannot long subsist ... There is no means whereby that corruption can be so surely and rapidly diffused, as by poisoning the waters of literature.<sup>12</sup>

The tone and ideology of the attacks against the Circle display a remarkable consistency with the critiques that had raged against the free-thinkers and libertines of previous centuries. This was not a matter of a lazy derivativeness, but a conscious strategy to situate a radical politics that, to conservative minds at least, had been discredited by the events of the last generation. In the febrile atmosphere of regency England, Tory thinkers associated the growing pressure for reform with Jacobinism. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre and the repressive governmental measures known as the 'Six Acts', the prospect of violent change appeared almost tangible. Conservative opinion repeatedly identified moral and cultural patterns that had led to the Revolution in France: religious nonconformity, a spectrum of opinion that stretched from dissenting to deism and outright atheism; moral degeneracy, often related to a lack of faith and associated with libertinism; and a rejection of traditional values and customs, which, from an English perspective, was characterised by an excessive classicising and a continental orientation. Former radicals such as Southey and Wordsworth had adopted a more conservative outlook and were often pronounced in their condemnation of the youthful idealism of Hunt and his associates. But they also recognised that such 'deviant' modes of thought had a long history in European society: these were no passing affectations, but seductive ideas that had infested the cultural life, indeed soul, of the nation. The seismic impact of the American and French Revolutions all too often overshadows the continuities between earlier ideas and subsequent developments such as the growth of liberalism. Yet a key feature of the ideological struggles of the early nineteenth-century concerned these very legacies. The language, tone and substance of these conflicts were part of a culture war that had,

through various manifestations, been underway for a century and a half. For conservative writers, past experience warned of the dangers of reformist policies that threatened the very structure of the social order; and their wholesale condemnation of transgressive ideas and behaviour had become increasingly shrill since the 1790s. Hunt and his circle, however, rather than merely disputing such concerns, sought to invert them through literature. Thus Southey's charge of 'Satanism' encouraged Byron's development of the so-called 'Byronic hero', which in recasting Milton's Satan challenged the theological landscape of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>13</sup>

It was within this context of conflict and critique that the new journal was conceived. It is unclear whether Byron or Shelley was the prime mover, although Byron had been thinking of a journal for some time.<sup>14</sup> The basing of their efforts in Italy – a detail stressed in the subtitle, and therefore integral to the identity of the journal – reflected a cosmopolitan orientation quite at odds with the increasing parochialism of British political culture.<sup>15</sup> Their notion of 'liberalism' was a 'function of place'.<sup>16</sup> This meant, on the one hand, the *classical*, the ancient alternatives to modernity, embodied in the *lieux de mémoire* – the sites of memory – of ancient culture and action; and on the other, a cosmopolitan contrast to the emerging nation state. Mary Shelley, who remained an associate of the Circle after her husband's death, identified some features of what she termed the 'Anglo-Italians', individuals who spoke the local language and whose interest went beyond visiting 'churches and palaces, guidebook in hand': they have 'lost the critical mania in a real taste for the beautiful', and feeling 'pity' for their benighted countrymen 'have erected a literature calculated to disseminate ... a portion of that taste and knowledge acquired in the Peninsula'; they are 'well-informed, clever', and perhaps most significantly, an 'active race'.<sup>17</sup> Shelley contrasts the Pisans with the insularity of their critics, but stresses that they seek to *improve* their homeland. Her language is deeply coded, echoing the story of the cave from Plato's *Republic*: the individual who has seen the 'truth' – by virtue of leaving his abode, quite literally through travel – seeks to free his 'fellow-bondsmen' from ignorance.<sup>18</sup> Both Shelley and Plato portray a figure who is condemned for exposing the 'chains' of a repressive society. Her metaphor succinctly legitimises the entire project of *The Liberal* and frames the critique as driven by the terrified intolerance of the unenlightened.

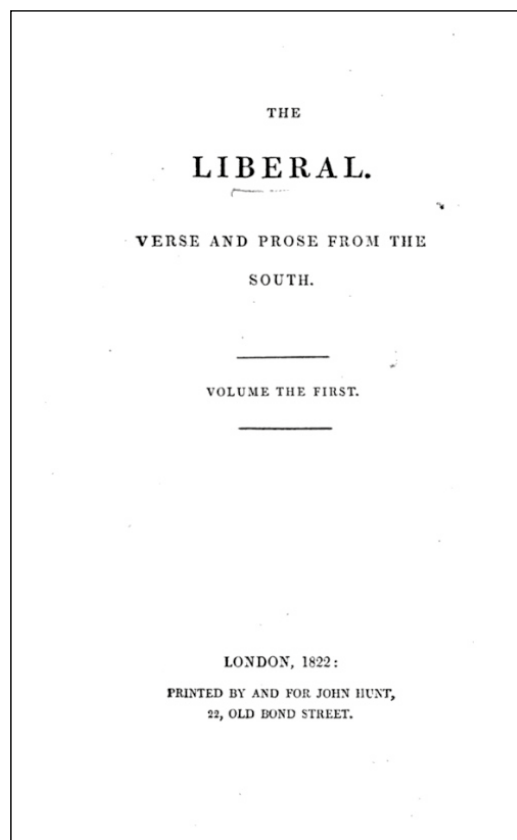
Eighteenth-century precedent coloured both the self-styling of the Circle and the hostility

of their detractors. Mary Shelley's reference to the 'long tradition' of English on the continent invoked the most extreme manifestation of the Grand Tourist: the Society of Dilettanti. While the Dilettanti had become a respectable institution, its founding generation was remembered primarily for a rampant Italophilia that was used to perform a particularly refined form of libertinism. Moreover, many of the leading Dilettanti were rumoured to be associated with some of the most notorious circles of eighteenth-century England: the probably apocryphal *Calves' Heads Club*, a radical republican group that supposedly celebrated the execution of Charles I but also practiced Satanism; and the *Order of the Friars of St Francis*, a circle of libertine aristocrats who parodied religious rituals as sexual symposia. Such associations placed the Dilettanti as a key ancestor of the Pisan Circle in terms of transgressive practice, if not in actual ideology. This is not to imply that the Dilettanti were revolutionary, 'liberal', or even Whiggish in outlook, although they did foreshadow the Pisan's anti-clericalism. Rather, it is that they practised modes of behaviour that would become a template for subversive action in a more volatile, and paranoid, political climate.

After some debate, the editors settled on the title *The Liberal*. It was an emphatic statement. As an adjective the associations were generally congenial: but *politically* the meaning was quite ambiguous. In Britain the connotations were essentially foreign, un-English; while across Europe the term was undergoing a process of definition through use and action, of which the Pisan Circle were part.<sup>19</sup> They hoped to access the positive associations of the English word, a counter to the vitriol usually written about them, and thereby present their ideas as congenial, reasonable and non-threatening. But the cosmopolitan associations, especially of the revolutionary struggles in Spain, Italy and Greece, were paramount.

Such concerns were echoed in the diverse contents of the four issues. While some pieces were unashamedly partisan, especially Byron's verse, these sat alongside generous translations from various languages, short stories, and descriptive pieces such as Hunt's 'Letters from Abroad'.<sup>20</sup> While Hunt wrote much of the content himself, the circle of contributors included Mary Shelley, William Hazlitt, and Thomas Jefferson Hogg, alongside posthumous works of Percy Shelley. The tone varies, but there is a thoroughly cosmopolitan perspective throughout that forces readers to think beyond their own horizons; and there are many inferences, some more explicit than others, to reform and

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revolution. Their ‘weapon’, if one can term it as such, was *literature*, in its broadest possible sense. There was to be no ‘political programme’ as such, but a vision of ‘liberalism’ that was cultural as much as political – ‘taste and knowledge’, in Mary Shelley’s words. But as we have seen, a conservative such as Southey feared that this amounted to ‘poison’.

For some commentators it appears that the reputations of Hunt’s circle did more to define the term ‘liberal’ than *vice versa*. Responses varied, from rival publications that satirically ‘reclaimed’ the word, to an outright rejection:

And this they call Liberalism, the essentials of which are candour and moderation! If Liberalism seals the heart to every tender sensation of loyalty and patriotism ... make morality a toy ... throw off all check, and bring society to a chaos of wickedness, let us banish it as a traitor, and avoid it as a pestilence.<sup>21</sup>

In the conservative rejection of the term there lay an opportunity for Whigs and reformers that would be formative to ‘liberalism’.

Such responses suggest a sense of trepidation even before the appearance of the first number. The radical productions of the Hunt circle were a known quantity, but some feared that the new publication represented a rather different threat. Shortly after the fateful meeting in July, the

*Literary Chronicle* remarked that the new journal ‘has been looked for with considerable anxiety’, before adding, somewhat uncharitably, that the death of Shelley would hopefully end the entire venture.<sup>22</sup> Rumour mingled with disdain: Wordsworth commented that the Pisans ‘are to lay their heads together in some Town of Italy, for the purpose of conducting a Journal to be directed against everything in religion, in morals and probably in government and literature, which our Forefathers have been accustomed to reverence’<sup>23</sup>

The new journal was the latest stage in a ‘culture war’ that was engulfing the worlds of letters and politics. Moreover, it was a bold statement of principle and intent on the part of the Triumvirs. The association with the ‘South’ carried resonances of a cosmopolitanism that embraced two complementary currents: firstly, classicising elements that had underlain radical and transgressive thought throughout the Enlightenment; and secondly, the subversive behaviour that characterised libertine action and the Grand Tour, and the social networks that these individuals developed. These two currents operated together, giving freethinking and counter-cultural actors a geographical space that was both literal and ideological; and that was, moreover, buttressed by the ‘philosophical arsenal’ of antiquity.

### Freethinkers and libertines

Be present then, and put life into our work,  
ye Spirits ... not of ye miserable tyrants,  
slaves, bigots or turncoats of any party  
... but all who have thrown light and life  
upon man, instead of darkness and death;  
who have made him a thing of hope and  
freedom, instead of despair and slavery; a  
being progressive, instead of creeping and  
retrograde.<sup>24</sup>

Leigh Hunt

Leigh Hunt’s preface presented the term ‘liberal’ as way of thinking that was fundamentally progressive, forward looking but with a keen eye on predecessors; yet within the context of British political life such language created unavoidable resonances with Jacobinism.<sup>25</sup> The Tory press, for its part, struggled in a somewhat paradoxical response. They sought to demonise, to paint the writers as atheists and radicals beyond redemption; yet they also dismissed them as talentless and impotent. Thus *Blackwood’s Magazine* mocks Hunt’s ideas as ‘a poor tame dilution of the blasphemies of the *Encyclopedie* ... a crude, vague, ineffectual, and

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**The casting of the Pisans as free-thinkers was not lazy rhetoric, but a carefully constructed assault on the politics and morality of the liberal movement.**

sour Jacobinism'.<sup>26</sup> Trepidation is balanced by a casual dismissal, leaving one uncertain as to whether these exiles were to be feared or derided. But the overriding parallel presented was with the freethinkers of previous generations.<sup>27</sup> And even though the Pisan Circle are consistently judged as inferior, they nevertheless represented a threat in an unstable political climate.<sup>28</sup> This sense of imminent danger was not restricted to the Tory press. The dissenting *Investigator* reveals that some reform-minded commentators were no more sympathetic: in response to Byron's claim that revolution in England was 'inevitable', the reviewer rails at his inactions: 'He lifts not a finger to prevent it; but has taken up residence for many years abroad associating almost exclusively with foreigners ... he must be a coward or a traitor'.<sup>29</sup>

The casting of the Pisans as freethinkers was not lazy rhetoric, but a carefully constructed assault on the politics and morality of the liberal movement. To understand this debate, one must turn to a long-running intellectual, cultural and moral conflict dating to the mid-seventeenth century: this was the framework the Tory critics drew upon, the key to their entire strategy. In this discourse, a freethinker *was* a libertine: by definition, atheistic and therefore lacking any moral code; they seduce through 'wit', beguiling the unwary with clever words, operating only for their own interest. These were the forerunners of liberalism, and their degeneracy – an established 'truth' to many Tory writers – attested to the vices and malign nature of Hunt and his friends.

In the late seventeenth-century, it was in what Jurgen Habermas termed the 'public sphere' that the 'scourge' of freethinking rose to threaten the established order of Church and King.<sup>30</sup> The fervent concoction of coffee-house and club, fuelled by a burgeoning independent press, created a space that traditional forms of authority could not police, in which new ideas were freely circulated. One can see the seriousness of the perceived threat in the attempts of the authorities to respond, laughable though they may appear to a modern observer. Charles II's *Proclamation to Restrain the Spreading of False News, and Licentious Talking of Matters of State and Government* (1672), and his pitifully unsuccessful *Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee-Houses* (1675), use a language of conspiracy and of political and moral corruption. Such measures revealed the impotence of royal power to counter the new discourses that were sweeping an increasingly literate society.<sup>31</sup> Such decrees of state proved to be of little effect: it was *within* the emerging

public sphere that the cultural conflict would take place.

In conjunction with the philosophical refutation of leading freethinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza and Anthony Collins, conservative writers adopted a strategy of moral conflation.<sup>32</sup> This required the reduction of various forms of natural philosophy, religious scepticism and political nonconformity into a single *moral* quality, which was then sensualised. All forms of scepticism and deism were reduced to atheism. Finally, the lack of respect for received standards was conflated with a lack of seriousness, thus rendering the individual a 'wit'. A lack of religious faith, they argued, twisted all judgements toward the cynical, because it prompted the assumption that all others are like the freethinker himself; that is, acting entirely out of self-interest. This necessary link between atheism, wit and libertinism was elaborated upon by the Jesuit theologian, William Darrell, who decried 'Atheistical Wit': 'If you love your Soul, and resolve to save it, avoid the Conversation of Libertines and Atheists ... They are Satan's Deputies, Devils by Proxy'.<sup>33</sup>

This language of condemnation sought to discredit subversive ideologies through an association with the most notorious examples of excess and depravity. Figures such as the Earl of Rochester served as 'proof' not only of the trope of libertinism, but also that the figure of the libertine himself was deeply tragic, beset by his own misery. Such figurations became the model for characterising subversive figures throughout the eighteenth century and into the context of *The Liberal*. Thus Rochester presaged Byron, his alleged deathbed reformation suggesting that the younger poet was not lost to hope.<sup>34</sup>

Such tropes were applied to the entire Pisan Circle, and to Byron in particular: his writing *is* the seductive wit of the Libertine, and it stems from a bitter cynicism – that is, a lack of faith – that poses a risk to the reader.<sup>35</sup> Accusations of Satanism are applied by reviewers with a playful wit that clearly seeks to engage with the tone of *The Liberal*: thus the *Gentleman's Magazine* responds to Byron's use of a demon to satirise the late king, by suggesting that 'this fiend of lust and malignity ... may in some sort be called his Lordship's patron *daemon*'.<sup>36</sup> Critics need only invoke these images to situate the Pisan Circle in a tradition of transgression, and thus discredit their aspirations to political legitimacy. What may appear to a modern reader, and indeed some at the time, as hyperbole, was a tactic to negate the liberal threat by situating it in a 'damning' context.

This philosophical libertinism inspired subversive practice, both moral and political, throughout the eighteenth century and into the Romantic period. It involved a very particular search for wisdom with 'knowledge being defined as a deepening of sensation'.

Yet the legacy of libertinism, as these writers well knew, was far more nuanced. Freethinkers had responded to the condemnation of scepticism and wit, forging new modes of thought. The Earl of Shaftesbury argued that ridicule revealed 'truth' through exposing absurdity and imposture: no subject, he insisted, is too sacred to forbid the question, 'Is it not Ridiculous?'<sup>37</sup> Such thought reflects the development of *libertinisme érudit*, transgression as a carefully considered ideology.<sup>38</sup>

This philosophical libertinism inspired subversive practice, both moral and political, throughout the eighteenth century and into the Romantic period. It involved a very particular search for wisdom with 'knowledge being defined as a deepening of sensation'.<sup>39</sup> It embraced an emancipation from authority, morality and religion, and a pursuit of personal fulfilment through sensuality and pleasure. Libertines would typically avoid public display of their convictions, but were personally liberated from the conventions that blight others; they sought a self-control determined only by their own judgement, not the moral code of society, and thus they were free.<sup>40</sup> Such a philosophy was carefully calculated and utterly dismissive of social values. However, it was also a *private* mode of behaviour: the Libertine was not a revolutionary, he cared not at all for the common good. He was by definition completely self-centred, autonomous, and therein lay his liberty. In public life he appeared the epitome of polite sociability.<sup>41</sup> To live such a life of deception, however, caused no distress, for he had no conscience. It is little wonder, then, that he was deemed dangerous.

While generally a literary motif, this figure did allow writers across the political spectrum to conceptualise transgressive behaviour. Certainly, for the conservative critics of *The Liberal*, the *libertin érudit* served as powerful rhetorical tool, suggesting a malign, manipulative presence: precisely what they sought in invoke in readers' imaginations. Yet liberals who saw social institutions as fundamentally unnatural and repressive – for example, Shelley's outburst against marriage<sup>42</sup> – may have read the manipulation of those institutions in a very different way. That is not to say Shelley, or even Byron for that matter, sought to manipulate and deceive. Rather, in the *libertin érudit* they saw a philosophically aware figure forced to negotiate a repressive social environment in order to free himself from it. On such a reading, it is the social institutions, not the individual, that is flawed.

The figure of the 'Byronic hero', all too often cast as a stylised self-representation of the

poet, was a manifestation of the *libertin érudit*: a powerful form of social critique, the very 'poisoning' of literature that Southey feared. Daniel Watkins has considered the characters of Byron's later texts, observing that the poet:

never identifies guilt in his characters with wrong personal choices; their guilt is always presented as socially determined ... he depicts individuals who knowingly and firmly reject both their specific social roles and the culture that has assigned them these roles.<sup>43</sup>

Characters such as the Biblical Cain, synonymous with the betrayal of the most fundamental familial ties, become tragic heroes. Cain is 'never malicious, never criminally insane, but rather driven to distraction by the politics of Paradise ... by a social order that makes criminal activity virtually inevitable'.<sup>44</sup> This is the *libertin érudit*, whose crimes, if such they be, are the inescapable fate of those who dare think for themselves within the stifling confines of a repressive system. Watkins adds that 'society allows Cain no expression except endorsement; in such a world any resistance would be extreme and violent'.<sup>45</sup> This is the libertine response to repression, which in its extreme form as imagined by the Marquis de Sade was indeed innately connected to violence.<sup>46</sup> Within this are traces of the revolutionary impulse that emerges in Byron's later thought as he grew increasingly frustrated with the pace of moderate reform.<sup>47</sup>

For the development of liberal thought, the primacy of the individual within libertine discourse is central. Whiggish notions of liberty had centred on the 'liberation of individuals within a hierarchical society ... contingent upon the perpetuation of social and political inequality'.<sup>48</sup> Here lies slippage between the world of drawing room sensibility and the dark recesses of libertine action. Since Shaftesbury, Whig apologists had defended privilege as a necessary evil, that access to the elite need be regulated by standards of 'politeness', qualities of education and etiquette that – for the foreseeable future – were best inculcated by breeding. Libertine and Whig alike adroitly negotiated social practices and strictures for their own benefit. Indeed, one could well read the anti-heroes of the libertine novel as nothing more than a satire on polite society. The centrality of the individual in liberal thought emerged from this context, one of self-interest. The contribution of the libertine was to *reveal* it to be so.

For all the myths of the mysterious libertine navigating society in his own interest, the most infamous examples of libertine practice in early-modern England were associative. Individually such malevolents harmed only themselves, and those who lacked the spiritual fortitude to resist their ‘wit’. But together they presented a quite different proposition; and this is precisely how the Pisan Circle was conceived by both their critics and themselves. Once more, our sources for such associations emerge from critique and satire, suggesting that these clubs, and the threats they posed, existed more in the public imagination than in reality. An *Order of Council for suppressing certain impious Clubs* (1721) declared that:

Certain scandalous clubs or societies of young persons, who meet together, and, in the most impious and blasphemous manner, insult the most sacred principles of our holy religion, affront Almighty God himself, and corrupt the minds and morals of one another.<sup>49</sup>

But even contemporary commentators doubted whether any such clubs actually existed.<sup>50</sup> A rich vein of scandalous ‘journalism’ provided lurid details, repeating and developing rumours so that such tales, by their very ubiquity in the public imagination, became common knowledge. Like the Pisan Circle, these clubs were emerging at a time of great uncertainty. Amidst such paranoia, there appears to have been a conflation of the threat of Jacobite-Catholic absolutism with both Puritan republicanism and Satanic libertinism, into one amorphous whole. Through the conflation of subversive ideas and absurd stories, critics sought to show that the rhetoric of freethinking was ideologically insubstantial and disingenuous.

Eighteenth-century tropes of ‘foreignness’ and patterns of associative sedition – imagined or real – determined and shaped conceptions of *The Liberal* and the threat it posed. Hunt, Shelley and Byron were fully aware of these patterns, and understood that the only possible response was to embrace them. Associative libertinism was most fully embodied by one group that provides a revealing parallel to the Pisan Circle. The Society of Dilettanti were formed nominally for the promotion of Italian art and opera, although the rakish reputation of the leading members ensured that, from the very start, they were not taken seriously. This, however, they took as their starting point. From Shaftesbury they adopted the principle, which they developed into an insistence, of ridicule as

essential to polite conversation. For the early Dilettanti, quite literally nothing was sacred. In the notorious portrait Francis Dashwood submitted to the Society, he appears as ‘St. Francis at his devotions’; while the blasphemy is clear to any viewer, it carries coded aesthetic clues that intensify the statement, subverting symbols of Christian asceticism into a statement of a sublime pagan sensuality.<sup>51</sup>

Such parody was performed with a knowing wink to the viewer, playing on the knowledge that their aristocratic status gave them freedom to transgress. The Dilettanti anticipated and provoked outrage, fulfilling and fanning rumours of their debauched behaviour. Indeed, the only alleged meeting of the *Calves’ Head Club* for which we possess anything approaching evidence lies in press reports of riots caused by Dashwood’s circle goading a mob with provocative toasts.<sup>52</sup> Acts of transgression that were the subject of paranoid terror a generation before became comedic performance.

Their refusal to take themselves seriously made them appear less threatening, but that did not prevent them from serious endeavours. Moreover, they remained very much part of the establishment: Dashwood served as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Tory-led ministry of Lord Bute, although his performance in office remained comedic. However, their flippant demeanour left an enduring mark on eighteenth-century political culture: perhaps their most significant legacy lay in fracturing the mirage of religious awe. Their ridicule of the sacred endured because it was melded to a cultural positioning that implied something more substantial than jest alone. And herein lay their relevance for the liberal libertines of the Pisan Circle.

### **Seria ludo: a Liberal virtù?**

We are advocates of every species of liberal knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

Leigh Hunt

The Dilettanti were notorious for enjoying their wine – the ‘actual’ qualification for membership, joked Horace Walpole, was ‘being drunk’.<sup>54</sup> It was ‘within their cups’ that they expressed their ideas most adroitly. They raised their glasses to toasts such as ‘Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit’, ‘Viva la Virtù’ and ‘Seria Ludo’, literally ‘serious games’. These mottoes reveal their intense classicising and a curious combination of the puerile and the profound. While the classical world was integral to polite learning, it carried subversive

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potential: the Dilettanti were cultivating ideological and aesthetic links with a past that was pre-Christian and, in the main, fiercely anti-monarchic. The 'Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns', nominally a late seventeenth-century dispute over ancient versus modern learning, was, in essence, part of an ongoing cultural battle that pitched pagan precedent against Christian modernity. 'From the reading' of ancient histories, warned Thomas Hobbes, 'men have undertaken to kill their kings'; similarly, the great French historian of antiquity, Charles Rollin, warned his readers 'not to imbibe, unperceived ... sentiments' of 'heathen authors'.<sup>55</sup> Libertines and atheists found inspiration and justification in the classical for transgression: Rochester used Seneca to deny divine justice, while Dashwood replaced the crucifix with Venus as the object of theological contemplation.<sup>56</sup> Antiquity provided a 'philosophical arsenal', and engagements with the classical would be a driving force of the Enlightenment.<sup>57</sup> In *seria ludo* lies the essence of the Dilettanti: a carefully coded citation of the classical that imbues action, a programme that is necessarily both frivolous and philosophical.<sup>58</sup>

Shaftesbury had drawn on antiquity to generate a model of polite society that formulated liberty as 'a condition of discourse and cultural production': 'the language of politeness' demonstrated 'good taste in ... social interactions, ... cultural predilections and activities'.<sup>59</sup> This constituted *virtù*, an aesthetic sense that rejected the parochial in favour of principles of cultural production that both the Dilettanti and the Pisans identified first and foremost with Italy, rendering their principles fundamentally cosmopolitan. The *virtuoso* was an individual whose knowledge and understanding was broad and inclusive; a better path, claimed Shaftesbury, to becoming 'A Man of Virtue' – distinct from, but related to, *virtù* – than the 'the profound researches of *Pedants*'. Indeed, 'the arts of virtuosi and that of virtue become, in a manner, one and the same'.<sup>60</sup> However, it also fostered a sense of superiority akin to the libertine dismissal of morality. This overlap between the virtuosi and the libertine was recognised throughout the eighteenth century: the Tory satirist Ned Ward imagined a 'Virtuoso's Club' who sought to 'propagate New Whims' through their absurd abstractions;<sup>61</sup> while decades later, Gilray's *The Charm of Virtù* (1794) presents Dilettantism as little more than libertine fetishism.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, these principles would underlie both the Dilettanti and the Pisans. In the

preface to one of their ground-breaking archaeological works, Robert Wood outlines the principles of the Dilettanti in terms that would later be echoed by Mary Shelley:

Some gentlemen who had travelled in Italy, desirous of encouraging, *at home*, a taste for those objects which had contributed so much to their entertainment *abroad*, formed themselves into a Society, ... Friendly and Social Intercourse was, undoubtedly, the first great Object in view; but ... it is hoped this Work will show that they have not, for that Reason, abandoned the Cause of *Virtù*, in which they are also engaged.<sup>63</sup>

Joy in transgression was an integral aspect of, not inimical to, the passion for cultural excellence: these are inextricable aspects of the *virtù* to which they aspired. Thus Dashwood's portrait, mentioned above, carries clues displaying his aesthetic sense and learning alongside, indeed *innate to*, his devotion to the sensual. It is quite literally a performance of libertinism.

In the preface to *The Liberal*, Hunt expressed a notion of 'liberalism' which owes a great deal to these previous concepts:

We must confess we have a regard for the Dandies, properly so called ... we mean the pleasant and pithy personages who began the system, and who had ideas as well as bibs in their head.<sup>64</sup>

We wish the title of our work to be taken in its largest acceptance, old as well as new, – but always in the same spirit of admiring and assisting rather than of professing ... we are advocates of every species of liberal knowledge, and ... we go in the full length in matters of opinions with large bodies of men who are called LIBERALS.<sup>65</sup>

Hunt's liberalism is inclusive, looking both back and forward, open to all new knowledge, thus gaining a wide perspective; and thus exudes *virtu*, 'polite' in a Shaftesburyean sense. Its critique is never absolute, but appropriate to the context:

The force of our answers will always be proportioned to the want of liberality in the assailant ... although we condemn by wholesale certain existing demands upon our submission and credulity, we are not going to discover every imaginative thing in a religion to be nonsense ... nor, on the other hand, to denounce all levity and wit to be nonsense and want of feeling.<sup>66</sup>

**'We wish the title of our work to be taken in its largest acceptance, old as well as new, – but always in the same spirit of admiring and assisting rather than of professing ... we are advocates of every species of liberal knowledge, and ... we go in the full length in matters of opinions with large bodies of men who are called LIBERALS.'**



For Hunt, ‘liberal’ knowledge is a *mode of behaviour* that must balance civility, sociability and a cosmopolitan learning; the critique of individuals or institutions is *proportionate*.<sup>67</sup> Thus in the first number of *The Liberal*, Byron’s ‘The Vision of Judgment’ and ‘Epigrams on Lord Castlereagh’ ridicule Southey and the former foreign secretary with a savagery that shocks to this day; but this is not *illiberal* because of the nature of the opponents and the witty manner of composition.

Both Pisans and Dilettanti embody Shaftesbury’s vision of ridicule as a way to critique and reveal as part of an enlightened form of cultural production. They share a rejection of convention that is libertine in essence, and thus they were coalesced into one subversive tradition by critics. The difference between them lies the context of their transgressions. The outrage over Dashwood’s *Order of St Francis* was greater than that over the Dilettanti, as it emerged amidst political conflict between former members, the Earl of Sandwich and John Wilkes. It was the act of *publication* – firstly of Wilkes’ radical journal *The North Briton*, and then the discovery of the scandalous poem *An Essay on Woman* – that made them matters of public concern.<sup>68</sup> Dashwood’s circles were essentially private affairs, that courted rumour, not publicity. It was only in the paranoia the 1790s that the Dilettanti too faced more sustained criticism.<sup>69</sup> However, the Pisan Circle operated at a time of great political uncertainty and specifically intended to *disseminate* their ideas; this gave political direction to their transgressions.

This difference of critique is reflected in the scale and intensity of the conservative attack, rather than its form. The precedents of libertines and Dilettanti gave critics ready-made tropes. But it also hindered them: in their fixation to situate the Pisans within a subversive tradition, they failed to take into account what had changed. Moreover, it made their critique predictable. As Hunt, with a ‘liberal’ sense of irony, announced: ‘The least we can do is to let these people see, that we know them, and to warn them how they assail us.’<sup>70</sup>

### Critique and dismissal

Never was there a greater outcry raised among the hypocrites of all classes, than against this publication.<sup>71</sup>

Leigh Hunt

Amidst the hyperbole and shrill rhetoric, a threefold pattern can be detected that echoes, indeed often repeats, the conservative discourse

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of the previous century. Firstly, critics questioned the conviction of the transgressors; secondly, they queried their sanity; and thirdly, they expressed surprise at their ineffectiveness.

The question of conviction rests on the flip-pant – one could almost say *laissez-faire* – attitude amongst wits and libertines. The rakes of Restoration drama tended to reform: faced with the ‘strength’ of faith the libertine was supposedly powerless, because he believed nothing – or, what was worse, whatever was fashionable or convenient.<sup>72</sup> Tales were circulated to ‘prove’ that freethinkers were cowards lacking the courage of their convictions, conducting childish performances of transgression. In his account of the ‘Atheistical Club’, the Tory hack Ned Ward claims the ‘worshippers’ fled in terror when a prankster wearing a bearskin interrupted their invocations, fearing Satan had indeed arrived.<sup>73</sup> An almost identical scene appears in a story of *The Order of St Francis*, in which the Earl of Sandwich mistakes a baboon for the Devil, and is reduced to a state of panic, crying out: ‘Spare me, gracious devil! ... [I am a] wretch who never was sincerely your servant! I sinned only from vanity of being in the fashion ... I never have been half so wicked as I pretended’.<sup>74</sup> These scenes serve to ridicule as much as demonise: when confronted with the ‘reality’ of their spurious claims, like Rochester before them, they quickly recant. Such tropes were applied to the Cockney Circle: Southey insists that despite ‘all their efforts and bravadoes, they are unable entirely to disbelieve’ the religion they attack; while another critic dismisses Shelley’s atheism as a ‘superficial audacity of unbelief’.<sup>75</sup> The Pisans speak not from conviction, but because their loss of faith has left only ‘the wretched feeling of hopelessness’.<sup>76</sup> Thus Byron, ‘because he is miserable himself, in consequence of his vices and his follies, is labouring, with the zeal and alacrity of a fallen spirit, to render others like unto him’.<sup>77</sup> The critics seek to re-affirm the faith that the Pisans attack by insinuating that these liberals are driven by a miserable resentment of what they have lost; that they have no political programme or ideology beyond malign bitterness.

Secondly, the question of sanity echoes attacks on the intellectual ‘limitations’ of libertines, who were derided as being ‘no more capable of Reason than an Ape’, as ‘puzzled and confounded’, and forfeiting ‘all pretence to wisdom’.<sup>78</sup> For the Pisans this is taken to an extreme: one critic stated of Shelley’s blasphemy that ‘we never thought that any one ... outside of bedlam, could have uttered’ it; and also wondered whether ‘Byron [would]



ever become permanently, what we cannot but think and hope he is by fits and starts, a lunatic'.<sup>79</sup> Such accusations echo Ned Ward's accounts of both the Atheistical Club and the Virtuosi, serving to discredit the Pisans and frame their ideas as nothing more than the exhortations of the permanently befuddled. This renders them aggressive, unreasonable, and thus unworthy of consideration. Thus the *Literary Register* rejected Hunt's journal not so much for its ideology, but for its tone:

We are ready to peruse a book which shall seek to dethrone heaven itself ... If we can believe the doer sincere, we shall respect him; but if it be attempted with sneers and scuffs instead of calm assertion and argument – if our quiet belief – say prejudice – is to be insulted with mockery, and not be approached with argument ... [this] can only arouse our loathing and our chastisement. Such ... is the manner in which the 'Liberal' puts forward its infidelity.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, critics sought to apply the *coup de grâce* to the new journal. The editors' insincerity and insanity led to the 'failure' of *The Liberal* as either a political or literary project. Critics contrast a sense of trepidation with a bemused relief:

This so much puffed, and so long promised work ... [readers are] prepared for blasphemy and impurity of every kind ... but we doubt that they can anticipate all the atrocity of 'The Liberal' ... [but] its capacity of doing mischief is contracted by a stupidity greater than the best men could have hoped for.<sup>81</sup>

When the grand Pisan Conspiracy was first bruited about, we did expect that a production of at least some mark and likelihood would be the issue. That it would be as conspicuous for bitterness as profligacy, for wit as malignity, and for talent as inclination to do mischief. But alas for this Foreign Levy and Domestic Treason! It is only as impotent as disgusting, as foolish as egotistical, and as despicable as indecent.<sup>82</sup>

Critics took great pleasure in dismissing the publication altogether, echoing tropes of Satanism and transgression in mocking tones: 'the union of wickedness, folly, and imbecility, is perfect; and, as they congratulated the devil, so do we congratulate the Authors of the Liberal'.<sup>83</sup> Should any be tempted nevertheless to peruse the journal, one critic suggested

an even worse offence: 'we are still at a loss to account for Lord Byron's becoming so dull'.<sup>84</sup>

The critical response to *The Liberal* is the principal reason for its brief existence. Some contributions, especially Byron's attack on Southey, are still read, but in isolation rather than as part of an overarching concept. Shelley's untimely demise and the relationship between Hunt and Byron resulted in a somewhat disjointed production. Thomas Carlyle, who had not yet grown dismissive of Byron, appeared somewhat confused by the lack of any discernible coherence to the first volume:

Hunt is the only serious man in it, since Shelley died: he has a wish to preach about politics and bishops and pleasure and paintings and nature, honest man; Byron wants only to write squibs against Southey and the like. The work will hardly do.<sup>85</sup>

Carlyle does praise the production on several occasions, but also reveals the reason for its failure: 'they will not sell it, it is so full of Atheism and Radicalism and other noxious *isms*', adding in another letter that 'the honest people of letters are much shocked at the appearance of Byron's and Hunt's Magazine *The Liberal*, which hardly one of the Bibliopologists will venture to sell a copy of'.<sup>86</sup> The outrage, it appears, had made the journal hard to come by. One must therefore assume that the fate of *The Liberal* owed far more to the critiques of the press than any reading of the journal itself.

### Epilogue: liberal revolution.

Whenever we see the mind of man exhibiting powers of its own, and at the same time helping to carry on the best interests of human nature ... there we recognise the demigods of liberal worship; – there we bow down, and own our lords and masters; – there we hope for the passing away of all obscene worships ... of all monstrous sacrifices of the many to the few.<sup>87</sup>

Leigh Hunt

The legacy of *The Liberal* may indeed lie in the normalisation of the term. Yet it also provides insight into the legacies from which liberalism developed, often rejected but nevertheless formative. And it suggested that ideology, however loosely defined, embodies behaviour.

Hay remarked that it 'is easy to discover what *The Liberal* is against: less easy, perhaps, to discover within its pages a manifesto for change'.<sup>88</sup> If one seeks a specific programme,

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one will indeed be disappointed. But in the very act of critique and satire, the authors of *The Liberal* were never seeking to tell readers what to do or think. What underlies the programme of the Pisans is the principle that being a ‘liberal’ is not merely a question of ideology, or of politics in the sense of party. It is a *cultural*, as much a political, stance. And crucially, liberal revolution was to be *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*, for in the latter lay only the replacement of one set of moral certainties with another. The events of the 1790s had shown that revolution conducted with moral absolutism can only result in horror: in dictating ‘truths’ the Jacobins became the tyranny they sought to overthrow. It is not so much that the Jacobins were wrong in principle, but that they took themselves too seriously: after all, Robespierre dismissed wit as the ‘aristocracy of the mind’.<sup>89</sup> Their inability to laugh at themselves meant that they could not *see* themselves critically. In their rejection of the light-hearted sociability that underlay liberal *virtù*, they echoed the conservative critics of previous generations; as Shaftesbury would have said, they became ridiculous.<sup>90</sup> Their prescriptive form of revolution was doomed, because they swept away the certainties, however oppressive, that had allowed people to orientate themselves and give their lives meaning, however false that meaning may have been. Gilbert Highet once suggested that the gradual turn to a ‘Spartan’ model of education represented ‘the hopeless, suicidal enterprise of denying the French their cuisine, their wine, and their conversation’.<sup>91</sup> Soon after the fall of their sombre regime, one French commentator remarked that ‘the people hunger for laughter’.<sup>92</sup>

In contrast, the Pisan Circle sought a descriptive form of revolution; one that revealed absurdities, shattering the mirage of religious and monarchic awe. Such a task, in the tradition of Shaftesbury and the Dilettanti, was best achieved through ridicule. The character in Plato’s cave would have succeeded – and survived – had he been able to *show* the real world, rather than just announce it: but a people will kill to keep the chains they do not recognise as such. Ridicule, however, reveals the true state of what is mocked: it does not *declare* something is false, but merely highlights the absurd, thus inviting closer, more critical, inspection. Then the individual – the key component of liberalism – can recognise the true state of things for themselves.

This is, perhaps, what offended Tories and moderates alike: it was not merely a matter of Catholic emancipation or extending the

franchise, necessary steps though those were. A theme that was evident in radical thought since James Harrington’s *Oceana* (1651), and stressed by several of the more radical *philosophes*, is that real change must involve the ‘manners’ of a people.<sup>93</sup> The Pisans understood liberalism as a programme of cultural revolution every bit as radical as that of the Jacobins, perhaps even more so: for they sought to enable the individual to determine their own cultural and moral understanding, a form of *libertin érudition* for all. Such a programme, of course, necessitated revealing the chains of a repressive society that prevented self-realisation. The Triumvirs of *The Liberal* sought a balance that was ‘liberal’ in the most literal sense, and dared to admit that they did not have all the answers: ‘a spirit of admiring and assisting rather than of professing’.<sup>94</sup> They suggested readers determine answers, if indeed there are answers, for themselves. This, first and foremost, was the liberal of *The Liberal*.

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- 1 *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt* (London, 1862), vol. i, p. 173.
- 2 *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Dec. 1821, pp. 696–700. The reference was to the political arrangement between Octavian (the future Augustus), Mark Antony and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, formed in 43 BC.
- 3 J. Gross, ‘Byron and “The Liberal”’, *Philological Quarterly*, 72 (1993), p. 471; M. Schoina, ‘Leigh Hunt’s “Letters from Abroad” and the “Anglo-Italian” Discourse of The Liberal’, *Romanticism*, 12 (2006); D. Hay, ‘Liberals, Liberales and The Liberal’, *European Romantic Review*, 19 (2008); D. Craig, ‘The origins of “liberalism” in Britain: the case of The Liberal’, *Historical Research*, 85 (2012), pp. 469–70, 487–9; J. Leonhard, ‘Translation as cultural transfer and semantic interaction’, in M. J. Burke (ed.), *Why Concepts Matter* (Leiden, 2012), p. 105f; J. Stabler, ‘Religious Liberty in the “Liberal,” 1822–23’, in D. F. Felluga (ed.), *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* (2015).
- 4 Hay, ‘Liberals’, pp. 313, 318.
- 5 *The Liberal*, 1, p. vii.
- 6 *New European Magazine*, 1 (Oct. 1822), pp. 354–5.
- 7 *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 3 (Jul. 1818), p. 453;

**The Pisans understood liberalism as a programme of cultural revolution every bit as radical as that of the Jacobins, perhaps even more so: for they sought to enable the individual to determine their own cultural and moral understanding.**

## The Pisan Triumvirate: The Libertine, The Atheist, and *The Liberal*

- Blackwood's Magazine*, 2 (Jan. 1817), p. 416.
- 8 Byron to Thomas Moore, 19 May 1813. The phrase has proven enduring, with at least three studies of Hunt choosing it as a title: A. Blainey, *Books at Iowa*, 34 (1981), pp. 9–23; G. Kucich, *European Romantic Review*, 10 (1999), pp. 242–53; A. Holden, *The Wit in the Dungeon: The Remarkable Life of Leigh Hunt* (Boston 2005).
- 9 On the 'Cockney Circle', see J. N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* (Cambridge 1998); Craig, 'Origins of liberalism'; M. Horová, 'The Satanic School', and M. Schoina, 'The Pisan Circle and the Cockney School', in C. Tuite (ed.), *Byron in Context* (Cambridge 2019).
- 10 *The Investigator* (Oct. 1822, p. 357) remarks that Byron himself made his 'domestic history ... a matter of legitimate investigation' through his 'frequent and unmanly allusions to it'.
- 11 *Gentleman's Magazine*, Oct. 1822, p. 351; *Blackwood's Magazine*, Jul. 1823, pp. 88, 92.
- 12 R. Southey, *A Vision of Judgement* (1821), pp. xvii, xviii, xx–xxi.
- 13 Horová, 'Satanic School', pp. 184ff. Critics did dispute this reading: *The Investigator* (Oct. 1822, p. 353) insists that while, in Milton, the arguments of the Devil are 'introduced only to be refuted', in Byron's Cain he 'has not only the best, but the whole of the argument to himself'. Whether we agree with this interpretation or not, we should note a sophisticated differentiation between what Mikhail Bakhtin would later identify as monologic versus dialogic forms of narrative, deployed in this case to critique radical literature as unreasonable and absolutist, essentially embodying the very fanaticism it seeks to attack.
- 14 Gross, 'Byron and The Liberal', p. 475; Stabler, 'Religious Liberty', n.p.
- 15 M. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford 1981), pp. 113–37; D. Simpson, 'The Limits of Cosmopolitanism and the Case for Translation', *European Romantic Review*, 16 (2005), pp. 142–5; J. N. Cox, 'Cockney Cosmopolitanism', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 32 (2010), pp. 245–59; M. Schoina, 'Pisan Circle', pp. 217–8.
- 16 Gross, 'Byron and The Liberal', p. 478.
- 17 Shelley, 'English in Italy', *The Bijou*, Oct. 1828, p. 327.
- 18 Plato, *Republic*, 514a–520a.
- 19 Gross, 'Byron and The Liberal', pp. 471–2; Stabler, 'Religious Liberty', n.p.; Hay, 'Liberals', p. 310; Craig, 'Origins of liberalism', p. 477ff; Schoina, 'Letters from Abroad', p. 117; Leonhard, 'Translation as cultural transfer', pp. 96–107.
- 20 See Stabler, 'Religious Liberty', n.p.; Schoina, 'Letters from Abroad'.
- 21 *A Critique on The Liberal* (London, 1822), pp. 14–15. Satirical responses included: *The London Liberal: An Antidote to Verse and Prose from the South*; and *The Illiberal, or Verse and Prose from the North*. See also *Council of Ten VI* (1823), pp. 149–78.
- 22 *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, 169, 10 Aug. 1822, p. 504. See also *The Investigator*, Oct. 1822, p. 368.
- 23 Wordsworth to W. S. Landor, 20 Apr. 1822; E. de Selincourt (ed.), *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* (London, 1939) vol i, p. 69.
- 24 *The Liberal*, 1, p. viii.
- 25 Leonhard ('Translation as cultural transfer', 107) terms it a 'progressive semantic indicator'. See also Craig, 'Origins of liberalism', pp. 478–9.
- 26 Oct. 1817, pp. 37, 39. See also Craig, 'Origins of liberalism', p. 486. On the Circle and Enlightenment ideas: Cox, 'Cockney Cosmopolitanism', pp. 248–9.
- 27 Most explicitly expressed in *Council of Ten*, VI (1823), pp. 150–1.
- 28 D. V. Erdman, 'Byron and Revolt in England', *Science & Society*, 11 (1947), pp. 234–48; Craig, 'Origins of liberalism', p. 476.
- 29 *The Investigator*, Oct. 1822, p. 358. Byron made the claim in an appendix to *The Two Foscari* (in *Collected Poetical Works*, vol. vi, p. 223).
- 30 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Mass., 1989).
- 31 William III's *Proclamation for Preventing and Punishing Immorality and Prophaneness* (1697) displays much the same zeal, but is more ambiguous in its demands, seeking to encourage a general change in literary culture.
- 32 While Hobbes and Spinoza provided very different challenges to orthodox thought, Collins's *A Discourse of Free-thinking, occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect called Freethinkers* (1713) provided perhaps the most comprehensive argument and summary. See P. Miller, 'Free-thinking and Freedom of Thought in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 599–617.
- 33 *The gentleman instructed, in the conduct of a virtuous and happy life* (London, 1713), pp. 92–3.
- 34 *The Investigator*, Sep. 1822, p. 360; Oct. 1822, pp. 320–1.
- 35 Such critiques were not restricted to the Tory press. See: *Edinburgh Review*, Feb. 1822, pp. 448–9; *Eclectic Review*, Mar. 1823, p. 216.
- 36 *Gentleman's Magazine*, Oct. 1822, p. 349. The use of the Greek spelling 'daemon' evokes and reverses the idea of the Socratic daimon, rendering Byron's 'inspiration' Satanic, and thus his thinking as depraved as the philosopher's was sublime. This parallel could be taken much further: See Plato's *Symposium*, 202d–e. A similar trope appears in *The Investigator* (Oct. 1822, p. 351), which describes Byron as Satan's 'laureate'.
- 37 *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, pp. 40–2; see also *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1707). On wit and ridicule, see R. Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit in Augustan England* (London, 2012).
- 38 This was most clearly expressed in the anti-heroes of libertine literature, who can serve as models for understanding the philosophical basis of early modern transgression. See T. Gregory, 'Libertinisme érudit in seventeenth-century France and Italy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 6 (1998), pp. 323–49. The most notorious examples of the libertine novel appeared as the growing cult of sensibility was taming the sexual excesses of the aristocracy: Rochester's *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery* (1684) was more satirical. The model libertine begins to emerge in characters such as Versac in the novel by Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (aka Crébillon fils), *Les Égaréments du cœur et de l'esprit ou Mémoires de M. de Meilcour* (1736–8). The classics of the genre appeared in the later eighteenth century, such as Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) and Sade's *L'Histoire de Juliette* (1797–1801).
- 39 P. Sollers, 'What is Libertinage?', *Yale French Studies*, 94 (1998), p. 205.
- 40 For an excellent summary of the literary libertine, see E. Russo, 'Sociability, Cartesianism, and Nostalgia in Libertine Discourse', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 30

- (1997).
- 41 Russo, 'Sociability', pp. 387–91.
- 42 'Chastity is a monkish and evangelical superstition, a greater foe to natural temperance even than unintellectual sensuality; it strikes at the root of all domestic happiness, and consigns more than half the human race to misery ... A system could not well have been devised more studiously hostile to human happiness than marriage.' Notes to *Queen Mab*, p. 112.
- 43 'Byron and the Poetics of Revolution', pp. 107–8.
- 44 *Ibid.* p. 108.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 L. Frappier-Mazur, 'Sadean Libertinage and the Esthetics of Violence', *Yale French Studies*, 94 (1998), p. 184f.
- 47 'Byron and the Poetics of Revolution', p. 96ff.
- 48 A. Kriegel, 'Liberty and Whiggery in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Journal of Modern History*, 52 (1980), p. 277.
- 49 *Gazette*, 29 Apr. 1721.
- 50 Thomas Gordon, 'Reflections occasioned by an Order of Council for suppressing certain impious Clubs that were never discovered', *Cato's Letters*, 29, 13 May 1721.
- 51 B. Redford, *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* (Los Angeles, 2008), pp. 33–7; J. M. Kelly, *The Society of Dilettanti: Archaeology and Identity in the British Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2010).
- 52 *Weekly Oracle*, 1 Feb. 1734. J. M. Kelly, 'Riots, Revelries, and Rumor?: Libertinism and Masculine Association in Enlightenment London', *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (2006), pp. 759–95.
- 53 *The Liberal*, 1, p. ix.
- 54 Walpole to Horace Mann, 14 Apr. 1742.
- 55 *Leviathan, or the matter form and power of a common-wealth* (1651), pp. 170–1; *The ancient history* (London, 1738), vol. i, pp. xvii–xviii.
- 56 *A Translation from Seneca's 'Troades'*, Act II, Chorus.
- 57 P. Gay, *The Enlightenment* (London, 1966–69), vol. i, pp. 32–44; I. Macgregor Morris, 'From Ancient Dreams to Modern Nightmares: Classical Revolutions in Enlightenment Thought', in T. Coignard, et. al (eds.) *Lumières et histoire* (Paris, 2010), pp. 301–21; L. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature & History in Early Modern France* (Chicago, 2011); I. Macgregor Morris – U. Degner, 'Événements de circonstance: the Classical Tradition in the Age of Revolution', in M. Oergel (ed.), *(Re-)Writing the Radical* (Berlin, 2012), pp. 186–203.
- 58 Redford, *Dilettanti*, p. 3.
- 59 L. E. Klein, 'Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 603, 588.
- 60 'Advice to An Author', *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), vol. i, pp. 215–7.
- 61 *Secret History of the Clubs* (London, 1709), p. 11. The obvious model for Ward in this case is Aristophanes' parody of philosophers in *The Clouds*, an association that reflects a general suspicion linking subversive thought and the likes of Socrates: Swift, after all, associated the *Calves' Heads* with John Toland, whose *Pantheisticon, sive formula celebrandae sodalitatissocratica* challenged established religion in favour of 'Socratic' societies. The model of Socrates, of course, was an appealing one for thinkers fearing persecution. See I. Macgregor Morris, 'The Refutation of Democracy? Socrates in the Enlightenment', in M. B. Trapp (ed.), *Socrates From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 209–27.
- 62 James Gillray, *The Charm of Virtù – or a Cognoscenti discovering the Beauties of an Antique Terminus* (1794).
- 63 R. Wood, 'preface', *Ionian Antiquities* (1769).
- 64 *The Liberal*, 1, p. vii.
- 65 *Ibid.*, pp. viii–ix.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- 67 Stabler, 'Religious Liberty', n.p.
- 68 Kelly, 'Riots, Revelries, and Rumor'; and *Society of Dilettanti*.
- 69 Kelly, *Society of Dilettanti*, pp. 243–63; Redford, *Dilettanti*, pp. 113–28; J. R. Moore, 'History as Theoretical' Reconstruction?', in J. Moore, I. Macgregor Morris, A. Bayliss, *Reinventing History* (London, 2008), pp. 157–62.
- 70 *The Liberal*, 1, pp. xi–xii.
- 71 *The Liberal*, 2, p. v.
- 72 Thus William Darrell's dismissal of deism: 'his Religion is universal, calculated for all Meridians ... he is any thing without, and nothing within; so that his whole Religion turns upon Convenience and Interest' (*Gentleman instructed*, p. 92).
- 73 *The second part of the history of the London clubs* (London, 1720), pp. 7–8. Ward's conflation of atheism and Satanism was typical of such rhetorical strategies.
- 74 Charles Johnstone, *Chrysal; or, The adventures of a guinea* (London, 1760–65) vol. iii, pp. 242–3.
- 75 Southey, *Vision*, p. xix; *Blackwood's Magazine*, Jan. 1819, p. 475.
- 76 Southey, *Vision*, p. xx.
- 77 *The Investigator*, Jan. 1823, p. 84.
- 78 Darrell, *Gentleman instructed*, p. 92; Mary Astell, *Bart'lemy fair: or, an enquiry after wit* (1709); Isaac Barrow, *Against Foolish Talking and Jest* (1678).
- 79 *The Investigator*, Oct. 1822, pp. 357, 342.
- 80 *Literary Register*, 19 Oct. 1822, p. 241.
- 81 *Gentleman's Magazine*, Oct. 1822, p. 348.
- 82 *Literary Gazette*, 19 Oct. 1822, p. 655.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 2 Nov. 1822, p. 694.
- 84 *Gentleman's Magazine*, Oct. 1822, p. 348.
- 85 Carlyle to Jane Welsh, 28 Oct. 1822.
- 86 *Ibid.*; Carlyle to Alexander Galloway, 6 Nov. 1822.
- 87 *The Liberal*, 1, p. xii.
- 88 'Liberals, *Liberales* and The Liberal', p. 318.
- 89 M. Rapport, 'Laughter as a Political Weapon', in A. B. Duncan and A. Chamayou (eds.) *Le rire européen* (Perpignan, 2010), pp. 241–55.
- 90 Robespierre's outrage at the mockery of his *Cult of the Supreme Being* could have come from the pen of many a seventeenth-century Tory cleric: 'il s'est permis sur ce sujet les plus grossiers sarcasmes et les déclamations les plus indécentes!' ['in the presence of the people he allowed himself, on this subject, the most crude sarcasm and the most indecent claims'] (*Papiers inédits trouvés chez Robespierre, Saint-Just, Payan, etc.* (Paris, 1828) vol. ii, pp. 19–20). The Jacobin 'religious' ceremony displayed a remarkable parallel to the classicising blasphemies of the Dilettanti, but without the crucial element of self-aware humour.
- 91 *The Classical Tradition* (London, 1949), p. 399.
- 92 'Le peuple a faim de rire'. *Le Contradictéur*, 4 Messidor An 5 [1797], p. 1.
- 93 Macgregor Morris, 'Ancient Dreams to Modern Nightmares'.
- 94 *The Liberal*, 1, p. viii.

# Liberalism and the L in the aftermath of t



**T**HE CONSEQUENCES OF the Reform Act of 1832 (Representation of the People Act) have generated considerable academic debate over the decades. Perhaps surprisingly, with a few notable exceptions they have not been represented much in this journal.<sup>1</sup> This overview of Lancashire, the county which experienced the most rapid industrial,

commercial and demographic growth and a major centre of earlier Radical agitation for parliamentary reform, is necessarily broad in approach and some of its generalisations more tentative than others, but it hopefully provides some indication of the factors which may have influenced the political landscape of the county in the immediate post-Reform Act decades.



# Lancashire electorate the 1832 Reform Act

## The reformed electoral system

It is worthwhile at the outset reviewing essential components of the 1832 Act and how they affected Lancashire.

Nationally there was a redistribution of seats. So-called ‘rotten boroughs’ with handfuls of electors were disenfranchised, but in Lancashire only Newton-Le-Willows, with an estimated fifty electors and two MPs and where there had been no contest since 1797, lost its seat. Clitheroe, a small market town, lost one of its two seats but other older corporate towns of Lancaster, Liverpool, Wigan and Preston retained both theirs. County representation – covering all the areas outside the urban parliamentary boundaries – was doubled from two to four, with the division of the county into two, two-member constituencies: North and South. Manchester, Oldham, Bolton and Blackburn received two members and Salford, Rochdale, Bury and Ashton-under-Lyne were granted one. Away from the textile districts, however, Warrington, with one member, was the only new borough. Representation within Lancashire was therefore not so much redistributed from old boroughs to new but supplemented by the creation of new seats in the south-east of the county. Cumulatively this amounted to a near doubling of seats from fourteen to twenty-six, but it still fell far short of reflecting the population or economic significance of the county nationally.

There was no uniform franchise. In the county seats, forty-shilling freeholders retained their rights to vote but they were supplemented by tenants who paid £50 per annum rent. These included not just rural voters but men who owned or rented property of that value in the boroughs. Over two-thirds of electors in the South Lancashire constituency lived in industrial areas. In the borough seats, old and new, ‘£10 householders’ were enfranchised; that is,

any man who owned or tenanted any ‘house, warehouse, counting-house, shop, or other building’ in the parliamentary borough district with a rateable value (estimated net annual rental after deduction of expenses) of £10 or more. Electors had also to have been occupiers of the property for twelve months prior to the last day of July each year and have paid all the taxes due and to have resided in the borough or within seven miles of it for six months. In a two-seat constituency, electors had two votes. Since the majority of properties in towns were valued below £10, the electorate cannot be considered working class or representative of a town’s social make-up. Indeed, it has been estimated that the proportion of houses rated at £10 or more in borough constituencies in the North West were among the lowest in the country.<sup>2</sup> The electorate in the new manufacturing boroughs, therefore, did not reflect the local occupational structure of the towns. Most of the industrial working class remained excluded, their potential influence restricted to extra-parliamentary campaigning or tactics such as exclusive dealing. Consequently, the electorate was comparatively small. Among one-member constituencies, only Salford exceeded 700 voters. With nearly 7,000 voters there were more electors in the commercial hub that was Manchester than all the other new borough constituencies combined.

In the old corporate towns with ancient charters granting certain rights and privileges to freemen, however, resident freemen retained their rights to vote if they had qualified before 1 March 1831, whether or not they were occupiers of £10 properties. The effect of this varied depending on the constituency. In Wigan and Clitheroe there were few resident freemen and the new £10 householders dominated. Elsewhere freemen were an important component of the electorate, particularly in the 1830s. For

The 1832 Blackburn Election, unknown artist, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery (Creative Commons, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

## Liberalism and the Lancashire electorate in the aftermath of the 1832 Reform Act

example, whereas Liverpool and Manchester had broadly similar populations in 1832, Liverpool's freemen boosted the potential electorate to 11,283 while Manchester's was just 6,726. Preston, with about a fifth of the population, had an electorate only marginally smaller than Manchester in 1832. In Lancaster, of the 1,110 electors eligible to vote in 1832, 848 were freemen and only 262 were £10 householders.<sup>3</sup> In the Lancaster election of 1837, 780 of the voters qualified as freemen, but only 208 were new £10 householders.<sup>4</sup> Freemen's right to vote was extended to subsequent generations, but only if they qualified by birth or 'servitude' (apprenticeship) rather than by ownership of certain burgage plots or honorary appointment. Numbers in Preston therefore shrank rapidly as those who had qualified under the pre-1832 male inhabitant franchise died or moved away in the following decades. Urban expansion in Liverpool had eroded the potential influence of freemen by the 1850s, but in Lancaster, which experienced little population growth during the period, they remained an important component of the electorate until the enfranchisement of all adult male, resident householders under the Reform Act of 1867. Every election year through to the 1860s witnessed a sharp rise in the number of admissions to the rolls.<sup>5</sup>

An often overlooked yet important element of the act was registration: the compilation of annual lists of potential voters. Overseers responsible for collecting local property rates from householders submitted lists of qualified electors to the annual registration courts, which were presided over by revising barristers who adjudicated on any contested claims. To remain on the register then required an annual payment of one shilling. This all meant that there was ample scope for disputes about who should be on the lists and created an opportunity for local party activists to ensure that potential supporters were registered and opponents removed.

### Liberal fortunes and the new electorate

How well did 'Liberals', or 'Reformers' as they were commonly referred to, fare under this new, diverse system? We need to bear in mind at the outset that there was no agreed definition of the term, and no national party structure or policy manifesto. Candidates stood on platforms which encompassed a wide spectrum of views on a diverse range of issues. Margins of victory could also be very narrow. There was nearly always a significant Conservative vote even in superficially staunch Liberal towns. In the Manchester by-election of 1839,

for example, at the height of the Anti-Corn Law League's campaign, Sir George Murray, secretary of state for war under Wellington and who had denounced reform in 1831 and repeatedly refused on the hustings to commit himself to support repeal of the Corn Laws, came within a few hundred votes of defeating the local Liberal manufacturer Robert Hyde Greg.<sup>6</sup> Two years later, he polled 3,115 votes, just 460 behind Thomas Milner Gibson. An individual candidate's vote could also vary significantly between elections. In two-member constituencies where voters could cast two votes, a significant minority split between parties, suggesting either that they did not have strong party loyalty, or that they cast their votes tactically to keep out their least preferred candidate.

Historians have adopted a variety of approaches when analysing election outcomes in the county: single-member as opposed to two-member constituencies; cities, town and county seats; new boroughs as opposed to pre-1832 survivors. The approach adopted here reflects that of contemporaries who identified the textile manufacturing district as distinctive. All but one of the new constituencies in the county were located here.

Manchester and the single-member constituencies of Salford, Ashton-under-Lyne and Bury consistently returned reformers from 1832 to 1867, many of them major local textile employers.<sup>7</sup> Conservatives briefly triumphed in Rochdale in 1835 and again in 1857, but the borough was otherwise solidly Liberal. Two-member boroughs were more mixed. Oldham briefly returned the local employer John F. Lees as a Conservative in the by-election of 1835 and also returned a free-trade Conservative employer, John Duncuft, as one of its representatives between 1847 and his death in 1852. John Morgan Cobbett, son of William Cobbett who had represented the borough between 1832 and 1835, sat between 1852 and 1865 but, despite claiming Radical credentials and his general support for the Palmerston ministry in the 1850s, local campaigning and voting patterns during that period clearly suggest that he was not viewed locally as a Liberal candidate.<sup>8</sup> In 1868, he stood as a Conservative. In Bolton, Liberal success was also qualified. William Bolling, the Conservative employer and newspaper proprietor, claimed one of the two seats in every election except 1841 until his death in 1848. Stephen Blair replaced Bolling until 1852 and William Gray, another Conservative mill owner, was returned for one of the seats from 1857.

Yet further afield success was also more muted. In Blackburn, members of the Feilden

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**The reputation or local connections of a candidate may well have been sufficient to sway electors who did not have strong political views. William Ewart's earlier support for William Huskisson in Liverpool when he was MP helped secure his electoral victory in 1832. Successful candidates elsewhere were also often local men, whatever their party.**

and Hornby families, both large employers in the town, claimed one of the seats every year except 1852.<sup>9</sup> Feilden held liberal views on trade and had welcomed the 1832 measure which enfranchised the town, but he predominantly voted with the Conservatives in parliament. Hornby was uncomplicatedly Tory. In Preston, a textile town but also a long-standing administrative, legal and social centre, the Earls of Derby (the Stanleys) had exercised considerable influence under the pre-1832 system and continued to do so initially into the 1830s, but it swung between Liberal and Conservative, reflecting the vacillations of the local landowner, Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood; elected as a Conservative in 1832 he was voting with the Liberals by the 1830s and stood as a reformer in 1841. Henry Hunt was decisively defeated in 1832. Conservatives held at least one seat in every election from 1852. Clitheroe elected a reformer until 1841 when Matthew Wilson was unseated and replaced by the Conservative Edward Cardwell, later a prominent Peelite. Thereafter Conservatives were returned until 1865 apart from Le Gendre Starkie MP, 1853–57. Wigan returned two reform MPs till 1841, with exception of 1835 when the local textile employer John Hodson Kearsley took a seat. Two Conservatives were returned in 1841 and thereafter representation was shared with locally born Conservatives with landed connections. Yet further north, Lancaster returned its pre-1832 MPs unopposed, one Whig, one Conservative. William Rathbone Greg, whose brother John had mills in the area, stood unsuccessfully on a reform platform in 1837. After 1847, the Liberals Samuel Gregson and Robert Baynes Armstrong claimed one of the seats, but local landed connections remained strong.

The Liberal cause was weakest in south-west Lancashire. In Liverpool the Radical William Ewart had been returned as one of the two MPs in 1832 and 1835 but he had been joined by Dudley Ryder, Lord Sandon, a Conservative with strong Anglican views and inclined at that time at least towards protectionism in terms of corn, although in favour of moderate electoral concessions. After 1835 the town largely returned Conservatives although Sir Thomas Birch and the Peelite and later Liberal minister Edward Cardwell triumphed in 1847 and Joseph Ewart, William's brother, sat for ten years after 1855. Edmund George Hornby won a narrow victory in Warrington in 1832 but the constituency returned a Conservative every election thereafter and, apart from 1847, he was unopposed from 1841 to 1868.<sup>10</sup> Reformers were

returned for the county seat of South Lancashire in 1832 and were unopposed from 1846 to 1859, but Conservatives reasserted their presence in the intervening periods and won both seats in 1859 and all three in 1861 after a third was added to the constituency. William Ewart Gladstone narrowly secured the third of these in 1865. There were no contests in the North Lancashire seats before 1868; the parties shared the spoils.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, therefore, Liberal Lancashire's heartland throughout this period was centred on Manchester and its immediate satellite towns. Elsewhere success was less secure. Is it possible to explain this?

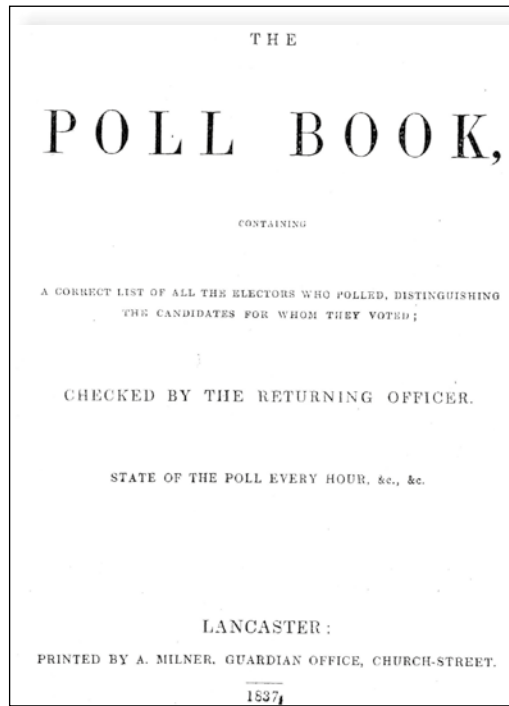
### Local connections and national reputations

The reputation or local connections of a candidate may well have been sufficient to sway electors who did not have strong political views. William Ewart's earlier support for William Huskisson in Liverpool when he was MP helped secure his electoral victory in 1832. Successful candidates elsewhere were also often local men, whatever their party. Away from the textile towns, Conservatives were often from local landed families. The Conservatives who outpolled Liberal outsiders in Blackburn, Bolton and Oldham were all prominent local employers. In Ashton-under-Lyne, the reformers were united from 1835 behind Charles Hindley, a local employer who sat until 1857; in several years, no one felt confident enough to challenge him. In Bury, local Liberal employer Richard Walker sat until he retired in 1852. He was succeeded by Robert Peel's son, Frederick, who in turn was succeeded by Robert Needham Philips, brother of Mark, MP for Manchester from 1832. John Fenton and John Entwistle in Rochdale were both local employers as was the Radical Joseph Brotherton who sat for Salford from 1832 until his death in 1857.

Personal connections were particularly evident in smaller constituencies. In Lancaster, local landowner Thomas Greene sat as a Conservative and, latterly Peelite from 1824 to 1857 with only a short interlude in 1852–53. He was joined by another local landowner, George Marton (1837–47), and succeeded after 1857 by another landowner, William Garnett. The Liberals who represented the town after 1847 were born into prominent local business families although they lived and worked elsewhere. Candidates with local connections dominated in Clitheroe, Wigan, where two generations of the Thicknesse family were returned, and Warrington, where first the local landowner John

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Title page and part of an inside page from the Lancaster poll book, 1837 election



		G.	S.	M.	GR.
Ball, William, Heaton-with-Oxcliffe, farmer	...	1	1		1
Ball, Mark, Halton, cotton-spinner	...			1	1
Ball, George, Halton, labourer	...			1	1
Barber, James, Church-street, tailor	...	1			1
Barber, John, Skerton, cabinet-maker	...			1	1
Barrow, George, Bowerham, gentleman	...			1	1
Barrow, Corbyn, Bowerham, woollen-draper	...			1	1
Barrow, William, Bath House, gentleman	...			1	1
Barrow, John, King-street, woollen-draper	...			1	1
Barrow, William, Damside-street, cabinet-maker	...	1			1
Barrow, Nicholas, Damside-street, cabinet-maker	...			1	1
Barrow, John, Damside-street, cabinet-maker	...	1			1
Barrow, Thomas, St. Leonard-gate, cabinet-maker	...			1	1
Barrow, Edward, Little John-street, painter	...			1	1
Barwick, William, Market-street, printer and stationer	...	1			1
Bateman, Matthew, St. Nicholas-street, turner	...			1	1
Bateson, John Thomas, Church-street, surgeon	...			1	1
Bateson, Rowland, Bridget-street, saddler	...			1	1
Battersby, John, Moor-lane, cabinet-maker	...			1	1
Batty, Jonathan, Chapel-street, joiner	...			1	1
Batty, Richard, Saint Leonard-gate, painter	...			1	1
Batty, William, Cable-street, joiner	...			1	1
Baxter, Robert, Winter Ends, Heysham, farmer	...			1	1
Bayles, Thomas, Church-street, hair-dresser	...			1	1
Baynes, William, St. George's Quay, warehouseman	...	1			1
Baynes, Philip, Market-street, shoe-maker	...			1	1
Beckett, John, Cable-street, cabinet-maker	...			1	1
Beckett, John, Penny-street, tailor	...			1	1
Beesley, Thomas, Spring-court, tailor	...			1	1
Bell, William, Poulton, fisherman	...			1	1
Bell, James, Poulton, fisherman	...			1	1
Bell, Daniel, Poulton, fisherman	...			1	1
Bell, Thomas, Bridge-lane, whitesmith	...			1	1
Bennison, Thomas, Bolton, weaver	...			1	1
Berry, Richard Sparling, Bolton, gentleman	...			1	1
Bibby, Thomas, Castle-hill, cooper	...			1	1

Blackburne and then the brewer Gilbert Greenall were returned until 1868.

Outsiders tended to succeed only if they had national reputations like Philips's running partner in Manchester until 1839, Charles Poulton Thomson. Thomas Milner Gibson from 1841 to 1857, and William Sharman Crawford in Rochdale in the 1840s. William Cobbett's high national profile was not sufficient to secure his return for Manchester in 1832 but he romped home in Oldham, albeit against ineffectual opposition and in a constituency which, because of its extensive nature, contained a significant body of rural voters: farmers were the largest occupational grouping.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, conflicts within local ranks over who should stand for the reform cause, or the unwanted appearance of an outsider who nominated himself to stand, could split the reform vote in two member constituencies. In Oldham, in 1835, Nonconformist Radicals were unhappy about John Morgan Cobbett's stand on church disestablishment. His campaign was undermined by the intervention of Feargus O'Connor, later the prominent Chartist leader. Although O'Connor withdrew early in the contest, he had already obtained more votes than the eventual winning margin of local Conservative coal proprietor and mill owner John F. Lees.<sup>13</sup> The split in Conservative ranks enabled Liverpool to return Edward Cardwell in 1847 alongside the local merchant and landowner Sir Thomas Birch, a man whose nomination was seen 'as acceptable as that of any Liberal can be to the Tory portion of the constituency'.<sup>14</sup>

Personal connections and reputations, therefore, were clearly important, but since successful candidates everywhere could often boast some local affiliation, they cannot really account for the consistent political differences in voting patterns across the county and between different types of constituencies. Local connections were also not always sufficient to secure victory.

### Party organisation and influence

Philip Salmon and Nancy LoPatin-Lummis have documented the ways in which the registration process gave an impetus to party organisation.<sup>15</sup> From the early 1830s, lawyers acting for local activists regularly challenged the inclusion of individuals not favourable to their causes, defended those who were, and promoted the claims of those omitted from the lists. In some cases, they were reported to have paid the annual registration fee of cash-strapped potential electors. The local press carried detailed reports of contentious cases and their outcomes in the 1830s. Conservatives appear to have been initially more successful in their actions. In Lancaster in 1835, for example, they removed seventy names from the register as opposed to just twelve successfully challenged by the reformers.<sup>16</sup> The revising court for South Lancashire constituency held in Liverpool the same year saw 140 Conservatives struck off, but as many as 271 reformers.<sup>17</sup> Similar successes followed in succeeding years in many of the boroughs. Confidence in Birch's success in 1847, however, was boosted by the fact that as many

as 1,600 Tory voters had been removed from the lists in recent years.<sup>18</sup> Barristers financed by the Anti-Corn Law League were particularly active in the Manchester region in the 1840s and beyond. When, as was the case, the margins of victory could be very small, actions in these courts could well have helped determine the outcomes of elections. But press reports of the courts' deliberations became less detailed in time; and, when both parties contested claims, they sometimes seem to have come close to cancelling each other out; so it is difficult to evaluate how influential these actions were without more detailed local research where that is possible.

Registration was only one element of local party activism, however. In Manchester, a 'small but determined band' campaigned tirelessly for reform in the aftermath of Peterloo, mobilising ratepayer support to challenge the Tory-controlled Improvement Commission in the 1820s, albeit with mixed success. In the following decade, they were active in the selection and promotion of parliamentary candidates, the fight to incorporate the borough, and the formation of the Anti-Corn Law League.<sup>19</sup> We know a lot about them, because their activities were widely reported through the *Manchester Times*, owned by their chief propagandist Archibald Prentice, and in John Edward Taylor's *Manchester Guardian*. Whether their achievements were replicated to the same extent elsewhere is less clear, since towns like Rochdale, Ashton and Bury lacked their own newspapers until the 1850s. The manuscript notebooks of Edwin Butterworth, Oldham correspondent for the Manchester papers, however, certainly suggest that reformers there were active in campaigns; but it is also clear that their priorities differed, as was evident in the split in 1835 over J. M. Cobbett's candidature.<sup>20</sup> Some studies of Liverpool have sought to emphasise the significance of reform activities there, but the overall impression is that, in Philip Waller's words, 'Liberalism was a creature of stunted growth in Liverpool'.<sup>21</sup> The Conservatives were also not idle in seeking to mobilise popular support. A Liverpool Conservative Association was in existence as early as 1832. By the mid-1830s, Operative Conservative Associations with low subscription rates, regular lectures and convivial social events were active in all the Lancashire boroughs. Membership could run into the hundreds.<sup>22</sup> Clearly such local efforts could have an effect on both turnout and results, but judging their overall contribution is, again, problematic. Did effective

local organisation influence public opinion or reflect it?

Unsuccessful candidates frequently claimed, with varying degrees of conviction, that their opponents owed their success to bribery, intimidation or influence. It was clearly more feasible in boroughs with small electorates, such as Clitheroe where results were overturned in 1841, 1852 and 1853. Free-men voters in the older corporate boroughs like Lancaster were also viewed as more corruptible than the new householders, and the town acquired an unenviable reputation for bribery which eventually resulted in the borough's disenfranchisement after 1865.<sup>23</sup> Adel Manai's study of voting behaviour in mid-century Lancaster elections, however, concluded that such practices were more likely to confirm rather than change voters' preferences which, as elsewhere, were closely correlated to occupation. Freemen also contained a much higher proportion of farmers, husbandmen and labourers, who were more likely to support the Conservatives everywhere.<sup>24</sup> Vincent and Foster in particular have suggested working-class boycotts of shops – exclusive dealing – could have been influential in Rochdale and Oldham.<sup>25</sup> Exclusive dealing could be championed by either side, however, while in practice it was difficult to sustain, requiring effective organisation and a degree of commitment on the part of sufficient non-electors with purchasing power who shared the same political convictions. Such claims were also not unique to Lancashire and cannot explain the distinct variations across the region.

#### The social composition of the electorate

While we usually know quite a lot about some of the candidates and activists, we know less about the backgrounds, views and commitment of the mass of electors. Salmon's extensive survey of electoral lists and Gatrell's more limited analysis of Manchester show that a significant percentage of registered electors did not vote.<sup>26</sup> There seem to have been few attempts to analyse this group whose failure to participate may well have determined outcomes. Unless there is a poll book detailing how individual electors cast their votes, we also have no way of knowing who voted for whom. Poll books that are simply of lists of names are unhelpful. Those with electors' addresses or occupations enable some spatial and socio-economic analysis, but it is difficult to correlate this information accurately with rate books or other social attributes such as religion, family background, place

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of birth, age, wealth, social status, income or involvement in other public arenas, except for a small minority of individuals, particularly in the larger constituencies. Even then, it is difficult to know how to weigh the relative importance of each. Nevertheless, they provide some useful insights into voting behaviour.

Poll books in Liverpool and Lancaster distinguished the new householder from the old freeman franchise. Collins' analysis of early Liverpool elections reveal that the two groups displayed very different patterns of voting. In 1835, £10 householders accounted for over 80 per cent of the votes cast for William Ewart and his Liberal running partner James Morris but less than 50 per cent of those for their Conservative rivals. Over two-thirds of freemen were Conservative. Two years later, reformers comfortably won the householder vote but lost the election.<sup>27</sup> Freemen continued to vote overwhelmingly for Conservatives, but they declined as a proportion of the electorate and ceased to be separately recorded after 1853. The situation was similar in Lancaster in 1837: over 70 per cent of householders voted for both reformers as opposed to less than half of freemen.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, the Whig government in the early 1830s made repeated attempts to repeal these clauses of the 1832 Act but all failed.

Although more difficult to document, the freeman/householder distinction in the old corporate towns was reflected elsewhere, including Manchester, in what Derek Fraser described as a conflict between the 'old' and 'new' middle class: the long-established versus the newly founded dynasties, the insiders versus the outsiders.<sup>29</sup> Like the corporate boroughs, local administration in the new textile towns had been largely dominated by Anglican Tory cliques before the 1830s. In Manchester the Improvement Commission, court leet and vestry were all effectively controlled by Tories until 1838 when Cobden mounted his campaign to 'Incorporate Your Borough'. Even then, the old guard refused to acknowledge the validity of the new council and continued to function for the next four years. A similarly protracted battle ensued in Bolton at the same time. As Peter Taylor noted, 'The predominant endemic rivalry in the town was that between rival sections of the middle class and not one between the middle class and working class or rich and poor'.<sup>30</sup> Whether these divisions between freemen and householders, old and new men, also represented a generational divide is not clear. Nossiter has suggested that it may have done so in the North East, but we lack sufficient

evidence on voters' ages to make a definitive conclusion.<sup>31</sup> What is clear is that they often mirrored other social and religious distinctions in the electorate.

Studies of the occupational backgrounds of electors suggests that there was, in Nossiter's words, a 'remarkably consistent social basis to voting' after 1832.<sup>32</sup> His conclusions are based on a study of the North East but are echoed by Lancashire case studies. Assigning the large number of occupations listed in poll books to meaningful analytical categories is, admittedly, rather subjective, since we rarely have other information on which to build up a rounded picture of most voters' backgrounds. The correlation is also stronger for some groups than others. In the towns examined by Brian Lewis, the more substantial middle class, whom he called 'the middlemost', did not vote consistently for one party.<sup>33</sup> Professionals and [Anglican] clerics were overwhelmingly Conservative, but substantial manufacturers and merchants were divided. Gatrell's analysis of the 1839 Manchester election came to similar conclusions.<sup>34</sup> Textile employers who became MPs may have been overwhelmingly Liberal, but this did not reflect the group as a whole.<sup>35</sup> Further down the social scale, builders, butchers, jewellers, farmers and the publicans were, not unsurprisingly, also overwhelmingly Conservative. Although many publicans and farmers had voted for the populist radical William Cobbett when he stood in Oldham in 1832 with his emphasis on repealing the malt tax, these groups moved into the Conservative camp in succeeding decades.<sup>36</sup>

The largest occupational categories in the new boroughs were retailers and what are generally labelled as skilled tradesmen, although it is likely that some of these were in business rather than employees. Some historians have gone so far as to call this electorate 'pre-industrial', but that would be to overlook the fact that most manufacturing businesses well into the nineteenth century (and even beyond) were relatively small-scale enterprises and that the expansion of the retail and service sector was an integral part of the industrial economy. Among these, the most consistent reform categories were grocers, bakers, flour dealers, provision dealers, drapers, tailors, shoemakers, hatters and clothes dealers, and what are loosely called craftsmen, artisans and skilled workers: workshop manufacturers, clockmakers, printers, overlookers, spinners. In the Manchester election of 1832, they voted for Philips and either Thomson or Cobbett, with the latter drawing most support from the lower rated voters. In

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1839 they supported the Liberal manufacturer Robert Hyde Greg.<sup>37</sup> In the Rochdale elections of 1841 and 1857 they were the only categories to vote overwhelmingly for the Liberals.<sup>38</sup> Even among Lancaster freemen, the small minority of freemen shoemakers, cordwainers, white-smiths, tailors and grocers were consistently more Liberal than other occupational groups.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly it was the 'shopocracy' to whom Cobden appealed most directly when he campaigned for the municipal incorporation of Manchester in 1838. It was these groups who were the most consistent supporters of reform candidates and these groups which dominated the electorate in the newly enfranchised boroughs.

#### Religious affiliations

Correlations, however, are one thing. Explanations are another. What determined individuals' preferences? The candidates they voted for publicly proffered their views on a wide variety of issues in public meetings and in the press, but we do not know which, if any, of these concerns carried most weight with voters. John Vincent has simply described their voting as 'the way these people looked at things, their domestic morality writ large', an expression of religious, moral and cultural values and causes.<sup>40</sup> In the vast majority of cases, however, we do not know the nature or strength of voters' religious and moral convictions. Having said this however, there does appear to be a strong correlation with denomination.

Many of the leading activists were Old Dissenters. 'New Dissenters', particularly mainstream Wesleyan Methodists, were far less prominent. Unitarians dominated the small early band of reformers in Manchester and the leading ranks of the Anti-Corn Law League supported by other, largely older Nonconformist religious sects.<sup>41</sup> The 'Little Circle' or 'small but determined band' included seven Unitarians associated with the Cross Street chapel; Archibald Prentice was a Scottish Presbyterian; there were also two Bible Christians and a member of the Methodist New Connexion. Mark Philips, Manchester's first MP, George Wood, MP for South Lancashire 1832–35, Robert Hyde Greg, Manchester MP 1839–41, John Fielden, MP for Oldham from 1832 to 1847 and Richard Potter, MP for Wigan 1832–39, were all Unitarians, as was Richard's brother Thomas who was first mayor of Manchester in 1838 and John Edward Taylor who founded the *Manchester Guardian*. Joseph Brotherton, MP for

Salford from 1832 to 1857, was a Bible Christian. Charles Hindley, MP for Ashton-under-Lyne from 1835 to 1857 was the first member of the Moravian church to sit in parliament. In contrast to the rest of the county, appointments to the county magisterial bench in Salford Hundred from the late 1830s were also overwhelmingly old Dissenters.<sup>42</sup>

Occasional surveys published in the local press confirm this strong correlation between Nonconformity and Liberal views among the wider electorate, although they do not tell us how the information was collected. In Blackburn in 1835, over 70 per cent of Anglicans voted for William Feilden, as opposed to none of the Unitarians and Baptists, only 12 per cent of Quakers, 18 per cent of Independents, 20 per cent of Roman Catholics and 26 per cent of Methodists. The Conservative *Blackburn Standard* concluded, 'We hope that the friends of the church will consider these facts, and strengthen the majority of its advocates upon any future struggle for ascendancy'.<sup>43</sup> The Liberal *Bolton Free Press* published an analysis of religious affiliation and voting in 1847. Churchmen again were overwhelmingly Conservative, Wesleyans (unclassified) marginally so. All other affiliations were, almost to a man, Liberal.<sup>44</sup> A survey of dissenting voters in Lancaster, also in 1847, produced comparable results.<sup>45</sup>

Many of the issues which mobilised these groups had a moral and religious basis: the abolition of slavery, the end of 'Old Corruption' and the promotion of public and self moral and intellectual improvement. Others reflected denominational rivalries: the championing of secular rather than religious education; the disestablishment of the Anglican church or at the very least the abolition of church rates; removal of bishops from the Lords; and Dissenters' right of admission to the ancient universities. Conservatives' most common rallying cries were Church and State in danger, the need to preserve church control over education, and, less blatantly, the defence of working-class pleasures such as drink. As Simon Gunn observed, 'Victorian radical Nonconformity saw itself in direct descent from sixteenth-century puritanism'.<sup>46</sup> It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that the Liberal cause was strongest in south-east Lancashire which boasted a long history of religious and political dissent dating back to that time. In both periods it appealed to the 'middle sort' in the 'clothing towns, market centres and in the industrialising pastoral regions'.<sup>47</sup>

Religious, political and economic individualism particularly appealed to the aspiring

**‘Ever since the Reform Act of 1832 and still more since the Anti-Corn Law League Agitation, Liberals in other parts of the country had looked to the manufacturing districts of Lancashire as to a political Mecca, and they have repeated, not without jealousy, but with warm sympathy and admiration, our proud country saying “What Lancashire thinks today, England thinks tomorrow”!’**

middling ranks who, although a minority of the population, comprised a significant element of the post-1832 electorate. The Religious Census of 1851 clearly demonstrates that south-east Lancashire was also the area of the county where the established Church experienced the greatest difficulty to adapting to the new industrial society and where its provision was exceeded by the various Nonconformist denominations, particularly in Rochdale.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, Mark Smith’s detailed analysis of religious provision in Oldham also suggests that Old Dissenters, like Nonconformist Liberals, were concentrated in the township’s urban centre where they even challenged Anglicans as the major ecclesiastical presence.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere in south-west and north Lancashire, the census reveals a significantly lower Nonconformist presence and much higher Catholic representation, residual allegiance to the Old Faith being supplemented by a massive influx of poor Irish in the early nineteenth century in Liverpool. The cry of ‘Church in danger’ had more urgency here, where Liberal support for what were seen as Catholic and Irish causes strengthened Conservative appeal among less committed Protestant voters who might otherwise have voted for reformers, and where passions were inflamed by men like Revd Hugh McNeile with his cry of ‘No Popery’. Sectarianism remained a potent force in Liverpool politics for the rest of the century and beyond.

#### Looking back

Addressing a crowd in north-east Lancashire in August 1868, Grant Duff, Liberal MP for Elgin, looked back over the previous three and a half decades.

Ever since the Reform Act of 1832 and still more since the Anti-Corn Law League Agitation, Liberals in other parts of the country had looked to the manufacturing districts of Lancashire as to a political Mecca, and they have repeated, not without jealousy, but with warm sympathy and admiration, our proud country saying ‘What Lancashire thinks today, England thinks tomorrow.’<sup>50</sup>

He was essentially correct. In Manchester and the ‘manufacturing districts’ immediately surrounding it, the restricted nature of the new electorate, together with longstanding political and religious dissent and effective local party organisation, helped to give Liberals the edge. Elsewhere in the county, however – particularly in Liverpool and older corporate towns

like Lancaster – reform had shallower roots, and consistent success was far from ensured. As this analysis has sought to demonstrate, what Lancashire as a whole thought was both complicated, as well as regionally and socially differentiated.

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# 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**

**A**T 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. Her 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,

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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

Continued from page 31

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## Peterloo: The English Uprising

### Continued from page 13

of Yorkshire, a stronghold of Ludism in 1812 and rebellion in 1817, the establishment Whigs had little fear of an uprising in 1819. Their more conservative leader, the Lord Lieutenant of the county Earl Fitzwilliam, went so far as to give his approval to a formal county meeting to demand an inquiry into Peterloo; he was promptly removed from office by the government. Edward Baines, editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, whose son was one of the reporters at Peterloo, led a high-profile campaign against the Tory government. The paper came closer than it knew to being closed down, but emerged much stronger, as did other Whig papers. A particular beneficiary was the middle-of-the road *Times*, whose chief reporter John Tyas brought back a particularly hard-hitting report from Manchester. The general election of 1820, which followed the accession of George IV, who had notoriously congratulated the troops after Peterloo, saw significant gains for the Whigs, putting them on the road to effective opposition after fifty years of near impotence.

In the 1820s, the Whigs in parliament made a series of moves to disenfranchise a handful of rotten boroughs in the south of England and give their seats to Manchester, Leeds, or Birmingham. All of them failed. In 1831–32 however a mass movement similar to that of 1819, this time under middle-class leadership, succeeded in ejecting a Tory government still implacably opposed to parliamentary reform. Further mass meetings induced the House of Lords to back down and pass the Great Reform Act. This was the sort of scenario envisaged by the radicals of 1819, but this time the reformers were far better organised, and crucially backed by many of the middle classes and by bills in parliament. When a quarter of a million people rallied in Birmingham to support the Reform Bill the government had armed troops at the ready with sharpened sabres, but this time it was the authorities who blinked: they dared not risk another Peterloo. There is room to argue that,

notwithstanding the very limited provisions of the 1832 Reform Act, this time round the mass platform strategy succeeded.

In the nineteenth century, the memory of Peterloo was claimed by the reform wing of the Liberal movement; in the twentieth century by the labour movement and the left. In the 2010s, a political period as turbulent as the 1810s, another candidate for the legacy has emerged: populism. Gentleman leaders such as Hunt and Cobbett (former wartime patriots both) rallied their followers using populist language and techniques. How far they had a vision of building an enduring infrastructure of democracy is unclear; their aim was to bring an unrepresentative government to irreversible account through mass pressure. The radical and democratic ideas of Thomas Paine continued to sustain the core of the radical movement, but its success in 1819 owed as much to a strain of outraged patriotism which had developed during the war years and exploded in angry despair in the ruinous peace that followed. The radical movement sought to mobilise the English people to reclaim their lost rights from an over-mighty British state.

In my book I call this episode ‘the English uprising’, a subtitle which did not immediately appeal to the publisher when it was written into the contract in 2015. As I began writing, an English populist movement against the supposedly over-mighty European state for a time swept all before it; one did not need to be a populist to see the parallels. When I delivered the typescript in 2018 the publisher suggested making ‘the English Uprising’ the main title. I decided to stick with the original: the democratic legacy of Peterloo, whether left or liberal, should outlive that of populism. But how will it all look a century from now?

*Robert Poole is Professor of History at the University of Central Lancashire. His illustrated book, Peterloo: the English*

*Uprising was published by Oxford University Press in July 2019. He is co-author of the graphic novel, Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre.*

### Links

- Robert Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising*. 30 per cent discount with code AAFLYG6 at <https://global.oup.com/academic>.
- *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre*, the graphic novel: [www.peterloo.org](http://www.peterloo.org).
- Peterloo 2019 commemoration & resources: <https://peterloo1819.co.uk/>

### References

Except where noted, all references can be found in my book *Peterloo: the English Uprising*.

- 1 This figure of 40,000 is lower than the 50–60,000 usually given. The reasons are given in the concluding chapter of my book. Numbers were not counted, and at this period both authorities and radicals exaggerated the size of meetings.
- 2 For a more positive assessment of the period as one of the expansion of effective government, see Roger Knight, *Britain Against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory 1793–1815* (Allen Lane, 2013); for a rounded account, see Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain through Napoleon's Wars 1793–1815* (Faber & Faber, 2014).
- 3 ‘The 1817 mass petitions for parliamentary reform’, UK Parliament petitions committee website: <https://old.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/petitions-committee/petition-of-the-month/the-1817-mass-petitions-for-parliamentary-reform/>.
- 4 John Belchem, *Orator Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (1985; Breviary Stuff publications, 2012).
- 5 Robert Poole, ‘The Manchester Observer: Biography of a Radical Newspaper’, open access at <http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/journals/bjrl> (issue 95/1, 2019)

# Reviews

## The Peterloo massacre

Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (Head of Zeus, 2018); Polyp, Eva Schlunke and Robert Poole, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* (New Internationalist, 2019); Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford University Press, 2019)

Review by **Ian Cawood**

**T**HE VIOLENT SUPPRESSION of a mass public demonstration in Manchester on 16 August 1819, first satirised as ‘Peter-loo’ by the radical *Manchester Observer*, has held a very ambiguous place in the historiography of Britain in the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Although it has remained a staple item in the teaching of modern British politics on A-level syllabuses and undergraduate history courses since the 1960s, largely owing to the influence of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* on the imaginations of a generation of history teachers, it rarely features in compulsory secondary school history lessons and there have been surprisingly few discrete studies of the event that Professor Robert Poole describes as ‘the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil.’<sup>2</sup>

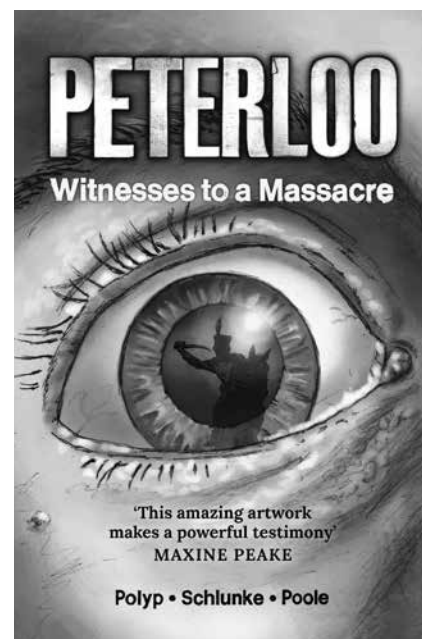
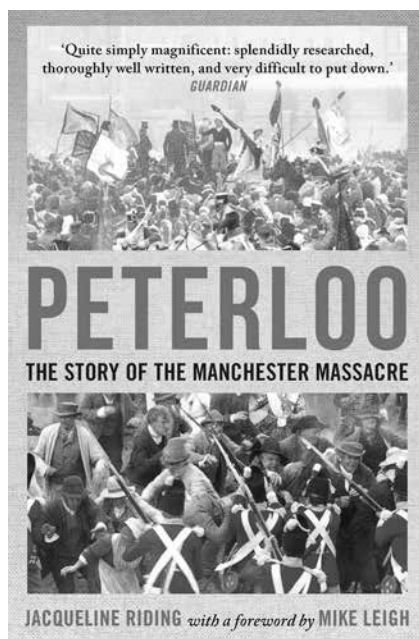
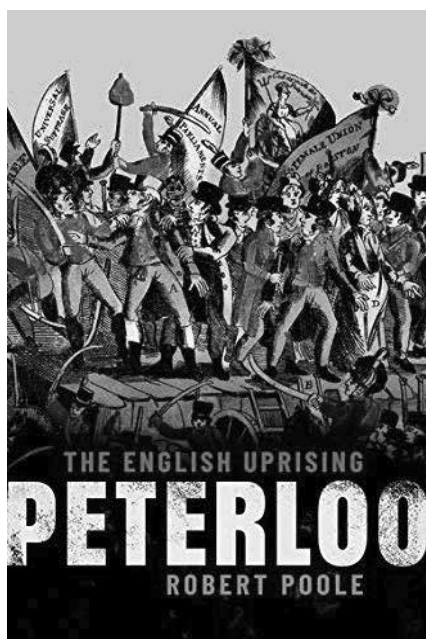
Thankfully none of the authors of the three most recent studies are interested in tired debates on who was responsible for the massacre. There is simply no question that the protestors at St Peter’s Field themselves were in any way to blame and, in Poole’s view, the events of Peterloo should be placed alongside other infamously violent responses by bankrupt regimes such as at Amritsar, Soweto and Tiananmen Square. Instead, the texts under review all concentrate on detailed archival research to present narratives of the events, characters and context of that summer Monday afternoon. They succeed in illuminating the scale of the horror of what happened at St Peter’s Field in central Manchester and the impact of the completely unexpected violence on almost the full range of

the political spectrum. However, as is common with so much academic and popular history written this century, they fail to add much to existing interpretations of the significance of the event. The most traditional popular interpretation, still perpetuated on educational websites such as that of the National Archives’ ‘The Struggle for Democracy’ pages, is that Peterloo was a necessary stepping stone on the inevitable march to universal suffrage.<sup>3</sup> Although this has been repeatedly challenged by academic historians, it is this view that Jacqueline Riding perpetuates in her 2018 narrative account of ‘the Manchester massacre’.

Riding sets out her position fairly openly, with George Cruikshank’s illustrations from William Hone’s pamphlet, *The Political House that Jack Built*, and his scurrilous newspaper, *A Slap at Slop*, reproduced as frontispieces for each chapter without any comment as to their partisan nature.<sup>4</sup> The meetings of radical Hampden Clubs, Patriotic Union and Female Reform Societies and the reports of the *Manchester Observer* are recorded sympathetically and in depth, but the views of loyalists and non-radical papers such as the *Manchester Chronicle*, genuinely afraid of the anarchy of the French Revolution being unleashed on Lancastrian Streets, are ignored or traduced. That said, her account is extremely powerful in illustrating the characters of the participants through anecdote and judicious quotation. There is no doubt that one is left with a huge sense of pity for the victims of the authorities’ thoughtlessness which led to brutality, but Ridings seems unsure

of what more to make of the event. In her nine-page final chapter, she claims that ‘through the 1820s there were few significant advances’ but, a few pages later, states that there was ‘a shift in the attitude by the “middling sort” towards the plight of the disenfranchised labouring class’ which seems both contradictory and unsustainable, given the ‘modest nature’ of the 1832 Great Reform Act and the viciously Malthusian Poor Law Amendment of 1834. She also asserts that ‘when national or local government is judged to have run roughshod over the rights ... of citizens ... Peterloo is evoked’ but in the next sentence describes the massacre as ‘little known.’<sup>5</sup> One is tempted to conclude that if one needs to belong to a particular political position in order to have the right to invoke the name of Peterloo, it is not surprising that the average, apolitical citizen of twenty-first century Britain has never heard of it.

In 2019, alongside the release of Ken Loach’s typically didactic film and the unveiling of Jeremy Deller’s bathetic ‘installation’ in St Peter’s Square, one relatively new form of history has actually succeeded in engaging with those outside the usual circles of socialist commemoration. This is the graphic novel, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre*, based on Robert Poole’s research. Working with the Australian artist Eva Schlunke, the book is chiefly the work of the highly skilled satirist ‘Polyp’ (Paul Fitzgerald), who has been the cartoonist for *New Internationalist* magazine for nearly thirty years. Polyp has previously produced a graphic history of the Rochdale Pioneers, entitled *The Co-operative Revolution* in 2012, so he was the obvious choice for this new work. The artwork is startlingly vivid and tells the story of the events in upsetting detail. It carries references to the available sources (surely a first for a graphic novel), with a determination to be as factually accurate as possible. In the references section at the end of the novel, the authors state that ‘everything in a white panel or speech bubble was written or said at the time’ with two very minor exceptions which they scrupulously identify.<sup>6</sup> In the novel itself, there are odd moments of



humour, such as the case of John Sadleworth who was saved from a fatal sabre blow by the bread and cheese lunch he had placed in his hat. There are scenes which graphically depict the brutal violence that a sharpened sword can do to the human body. But most of all, there is a lingering sense that the poor people of Manchester were used as pawns, both by the radical agitators who sought a confrontation to provoke a wider uprising and by the authorities who sought to teach the common people their place by a show of paramilitary power. The book suggests that Henry Hunt was more interested in self-publicity than amelioration of the people's condition, that the army Hussars, deployed to rescue the yeomanry, intervened frequently to prevent the yeomanry attacking members of the crowd and that many Manchester shopkeepers and businessmen were repelled by the tactics used by the magistrates. Nevertheless, the book perpetuates the interpretation of an uncaring establishment, bent on keeping the starving subjugated and using spies, hunger and sabres to do so. It may not go as far as Robert Reid, who claimed in his 1989 text that England in 1819 was 'closer in spirit to that of the early years of the Third Reich than at any other time in history' but, at times, it comes close.<sup>7</sup> The fact that many politicians, some radicals and the bulk of the contemporary press, including *The Times*, had warned of the likelihood

of this outcome if Hunt persisted in holding such large scale meetings, is ignored, as is standard in the left-wing's partial view of the massacre.

Although E. P. Thompson depicted the bloody event as part of a larger, proto-Marxist uprising which the aristocratic authorities in league with the bourgeois businessmen of Manchester were inevitably bound to attack, Robert Poole is more concerned with placing the events of 1819 in the context of a wider political debate on 'citizenship' which had been stimulated (and then suppressed) by the French Revolution.<sup>8</sup> He takes a less literary approach than Riding and offers a more rigorous analysis of events leading up to the fateful events of 16 August 1819, in which he manages to align the motivations of both the authorities and the demonstrators in a manner which no previous account has achieved. He is also highly conscious of the local and regional context of the politics and economics of Manchester, at a time when an elite, educated group of workers, the handloom weavers, were facing an assault on their livelihoods and status from mechanisation of the weaving process. However, the role of religion, or rather Christian faith, dismissed by Thompson and other Marxists, needed more attention in Poole's work in order for that context to be fully established. The most effective attack on 'Old Corruption' (the radicals' nickname for the political system) was that mounted

by critics both within and outside the Church of England. The way in which the aristocracy had captured the Church's hierarchy in order to enrich themselves had been exposed in the anonymous *Red Book*, published in 1816 and then developed by the journalist William Hazlitt in his essay, 'On the Clerical Character' in 1818.<sup>9</sup> This critique of the moral failure of the Church to address the spiritual needs of the newly urbanised populations of northern Britain, focused political, cultural and economic anger in a region where the nonconformist community represented a wider rejection of metropolitan values, morality and authority. Poole's work is nevertheless fastidious and highly detailed, with a command of the archival and printed sources that comes from a long career of research and scholarship. It is also written in a compelling and accessible fashion and one hopes that it will lead to a popular rediscovery of the massacre and enable its memory to be revived outside university seminar rooms and avowedly socialist networks.

Poole could also have considered exactly how Hunt and the *Manchester Observer* persuaded the working people of Manchester and the surrounding districts to support *his* tactic of demanding immediate universal manhood suffrage 'by great public meetings . . . peaceably but firmly conducted', in his otherwise excellent chapter on Hunt's visit to Manchester



in January 1819.<sup>10</sup> Although Poole claims that the enthusiasm in Manchester derived from a political tradition of demands for full citizenship which the workers believed they had won through their participation in the war against France, rather than from mere economic hardship, the case is not wholly established. His book is subtitled 'The English Uprising' but it is never made clear what this actually means. Is it a reference to the wave of popular demonstrations that culminated in Peterloo? In which case, one would have to question an interpretation which conflated the violence of the Spenceans and the Pentridge Rising with the peaceful approach of the Blanketeers and the crowds in Manchester in August 1819. The historians of Peterloo still need to decide if it was a peaceful protest which resulted in a 'massacre' or a popular revolt against unjust, corrupt and undemocratic tyranny which was met with implacable resistance by the government and English establishment. It suits neither narrative to suggest, of course, that the event was a terrible accident, which is probably far closer to the truth. The unfocused grievances of the poor were dangerously encouraged by unscrupulous, self-appointed radical 'leaders' and that these were then confronted by untrained, inexperienced local authorities who had no experience in handling such events and were given little guidance and support by a government keen to keep its own hands clean. If nothing else, the disaster of Peterloo makes one even more appreciative of the government's handling of later mass demonstrations, such as the 1848 Chartist meeting at Kennington Common, which passed off with no significant violence at all, despite the threats of the radical leaders, the deployment of the army under the hostile command of the Duke of Wellington and the arming of the middle-classes in the guise of 'special' constables.<sup>11</sup>

All the authors are, however, highly unconvincing on the aftermath of Peterloo, almost as if the horror of the event prevents them from confronting the fact that, in reality, it had little lasting positive impact. Although their careers came to a swift end,

Nadin and the Manchester magistrates were never held to account for their actions. The trial of Hunt and the other radical leaders may have backfired as it exposed the incompetence of the Manchester magistrates and the complicity of the government in the violence that took place, but Hunt was still imprisoned and never achieved the same popular status again. Shelley may have poured vitriol on Liverpool's government (although his singling out of Castlereagh in 'The Mask of Anarchy' does appear to have been because it rhymed easily) but the Conservatives remained in office for another eleven years. Lord Sidmouth remained home secretary until 1822 and in the cabinet for two more years after that. As Poole points out, the radicals failed to capitalise on the propaganda victory which the authorities had handed them and the momentum shifted to moderate 'liberal' Tories such as George Canning and reformist Whigs such as Henry Brougham, none of whom advocated substantial electoral reform. Other radicals, such as Hazlitt, Hone and John Wade, sought instead to use journalism to expose the abuses of the elite and thus convince the public to demand reform and shame the elite into granting it.<sup>12</sup> William Cobbett, then at the height of his fame, and with whom Hunt shared a mutual detestation, championed petitioning in order to achieve repeal of the Corn Laws and reform of the tax system; more achievable targets, which he felt would relieve popular suffering more swiftly than universal suffrage.<sup>13</sup> The strict Six Acts restricted print debate of the event and the loyalists' belief in the connection between radicalism and revolutionary violence appeared confirmed when Arthur Thistlewood and others were apprehended plotting the assassination of the cabinet in Cato Street. Many cultural historians actually believe that the 1820 Queen Caroline Affair did more to damage the government and respect for the Crown and the Church and that politicians soon came to regard Peterloo as a tragic, but highly un-British misfortune, caused by mistakes on the sides of both radicals and local authorities which would best be swiftly forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

The only historian who attempted systematically to analyse the aftermath of Peterloo was Donald Read in his classic 1958 study. Although Poole has claimed that Read 'blames the magistrates, but exonerates the government', that judgement, based on that of Robert Walmsley, is hardly fair.<sup>15</sup> Read found that the government had been highly unwise to trust the unrepresentative Manchester magistrates to cope with the crisis of 1819, but that their advice had clearly been to avoid violent confrontation where possible. The government's firm backing for the actions of the magistrates cannot be regarded as anything other than a grudging necessity in that they had little choice but to stand firm in defence of property or to risk the breakdown of authority across the country and the loss of resolve by local authorities in the north of England.<sup>16</sup> In early 1820 Robert Peel wrote to the secretary to the Admiralty that the consequences of repression meant that 'the tone of England ... [now] is more liberal than the policy of the government' and he looked forward to 'some undefined change in the mode of governing the country' which no doubt included the demotion of hard-liners like Sidmouth, who was widely blamed for letting the crisis get out of hand.<sup>17</sup> This demonstrates that elements of the government recognised the limited effectiveness of repressive measures which would only retain popular support while there was clear evidence of an ongoing crisis of mass demonstrations and political violence and which would need to be replaced with a more emollient approach as soon as the danger passed (as it did by 1822). This hardly supports the depiction of the ruling elite as indifferent to 'public opinion' and bent on indiscriminate violent suppression presented in the books under review.

Read noted that narcissism of the reform leaders, chiefly Hunt, soon led to equal disenchantment with them and their tactics on the radicals' side. As he put it, drily, 'only the most extreme depression had driven many of the weavers to Radicalism: when the depression eased a little [in 1820] they reverted to their distrust of all politicians.'<sup>18</sup> It was middle-class

reformers who capitalised on the revulsion for the event and a petition expressing anger at loyalist support for the massacre was signed by 5,000 inhabitants of Manchester (including 148 cotton masters). Henry Grey Bennet, the defender of chimney-sweeps, spoke in parliament in support of electoral reform as a means to 'avoid civil dissention' and in support of local government reform to prevent 'the shedding of English blood by English hands.'<sup>19</sup> The aldermen of the Common Council of London rebuked the prince regent for his swift congratulations to the Manchester authorities

His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, through ... the gross misrepresentations of others had been adduced to sanction, and not only to sanction, but to applaud and express his thanks for the conduct of the Manchester Magistrates and of the Yeomanry Cavalry – conduct which no dispassionate man could contemplate without feelings of indignation.<sup>20</sup>

The chance to seize the initiative by offering constructive criticism of the authorities, led to John Taylor's establishment of the *Manchester Guardian*, a paper which largely created the 'Manchester School' of liberalism and which was, in the words of its biographer, 'the most durable ... outcome of the Battle of Peterloo.'<sup>21</sup> Read probably underestimates the way in which the Church of England's enthusiastic support for the actions at Peterloo helped to further discredit the established Church in the eyes of the urban communities of England. The symbolic promotion of the Reverend William Hay, who claimed to have assisted in reading the Riot Act that no one else heard that Monday, to the rectorship at Rochdale, one of the richest livings in the country, probably sealed the fate of the Church. From that point onwards and throughout the 1820s it was seen as a mere source of Tory self-enrichment by northern town-dwellers in particular and the Whigs and radicals in general. The collapse of any attempt by the Church's authorities at neutrality over the massacre ended any viable

claim for it to be a truly national institution, harmed the Tory government who failed to reform it before 1830 and nearly led to its disestablishment (from which it only was saved by Robert Peel's neat but drastic invention of the Ecclesiastical Commission).<sup>22</sup>

The books under review and the left-wing discourse of 'tyranny' and 'massacre' which has, in general, dominated the historiography of Peterloo, fail, therefore, to demonstrate convincingly the ways in which middle-class and wider public opinion was inflamed by the event to such an extent that respectable urban professionals willingly participated in mass demonstrations during the crisis of 1830–32. Poole points out that the eyewitness reports of John Tyas, the *Times* correspondent, did much to convince even those fearful of revolutionary mobs that the authorities had gone too far this time and that such an event must never be allowed to re-occur. But he never develops this into a systematic analysis of the subsequent discourse of the press or the development of the liberal reform movement in the 1820s. The puzzling gulf between the violence of 1819 and the relative peace of the 'Reform Crisis' of 1830–32 remains unbridged by all these works. *The Times's* accusations of the 'dreadful fact' of the massacre, bolstered by the reports from the *Manchester Gazette* and the *Manchester Observer*, Wade's enormously popular *The Black Book: Or Corruption Unmasked* and Hone's *The Political House that Jack Built*, marked the popular reaction against repression that Peel noted and which would, once the economy recovered, push the Canningite Tories to demand legal reform, relaxation of the Corn Laws and a further purge of expensive sinecures and reductions in the Civil List; the gradual rise of an irresistible liberal tide which would lead to Catholic and Nonconformist emancipation, the collapse of the Tory Ministry and the advent of 'the Age of Reform'.<sup>23</sup> This reviewer therefore hopes that any future study of Peterloo might examine the subsequent rise of popular support for the radical and liberal press of 1820s.<sup>24</sup> Only then might we understand why the Scots Guards, stationed in Birmingham in

the 'days of May' in 1832, with swords sharpened and discipline firm, were told to remain in their barracks during the 'monster meeting' at Newhall Hill and, ultimately, why Peterloo happily remains the exception in the course of modern British political history.<sup>25</sup>

*Dr Ian Cawood is Associate Professor in British Political and Religious History at the University of Stirling and Reviews Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 *Manchester Observer*, 28 Aug. 1819, p. 694.
- 2 R. Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 1.
- 3 [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle\\_democracy/getting\\_vote.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/getting_vote.htm)
- 4 After the popular success of Hone's pamphlet, Cruikshank took a bribe from the government in 1820 not to lampoon the prince regent again. V. Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (Atlantic, 2006), p. 221.
- 5 J. Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (Head of Zeus, 2018), pp. 319–24.
- 6 Polyp, Eva Schlunke and Robert Poole, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* (New Internationalist, 2019), p. 110.
- 7 R. Reid, *The Peterloo Massacre* (Heinemann, 1989), p. 38.
- 8 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Gollancz, 1963), pp. 669–99.
- 9 K. Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 17.
- 10 H. Hunt to E. Blandford, 8 Jul. 1819, the National Archives, London, HO42/194. See John Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism (Oxford, 1985), ch. 2.
- 11 R. E. Swift, 'Policing Chartism, 1839–1848: The role of the "Specials" reconsidered' *English Historical Review*, 497 (Jun. 2007), pp. 677–8.
- 12 D. A. Kent & D. R. Ewen, 'Introduction' in D. A. Kent & D. R. Ewen (eds.), *Regency Radical: Selected Writings of William Hone* (Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 9–27.
- 13 J. Osborne, William Cobbett: His Thoughts and his Times (Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), pp. 156–60.
- 14 R. McWilliam, *Popular Politics in*

# Liberalism in the United States

What is political liberalism in the United States? The original concept was the protection of people from arbitrary power, support for the free market and advocacy of religious tolerance. But that started to change in the early twentieth century, when American liberals joined with progressives in advocating government intervention in the economy and social legislation. The presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933 to 1945 confirmed that American liberalism would be based on using the market economy to deliver mass prosperity and active government to promote greater equality. FDR's version of liberalism became America's national creed and for three decades, the welfare state expanded massively.

But in 1981, the new President, Ronald Reagan declared, 'Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem'. Most Americans seemed to agree and, despite some interruptions, a powerful surge from the right has dominated American politics ever since. The word 'liberal' is now a term of abuse in the country's political discourse.

Discuss the origins, development and challenges of American liberalism with **Helena Rosenblatt** (Professor of History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York and author of *The Lost History of Liberalism*) and **James Traub** (journalist and author of *What Was Liberalism? The Past, Present and Promise of a Noble Idea*). Chair: **Layla Moran MP** (Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesperson).

## 6.30pm, Tuesday 6 July

Online meeting, on Zoom: register via the History Group website at [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk)

- Nineteenth Century England* (Routledge, 1998), pp. 7–13; N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Clarendon, 1998), pp. 248–73; S. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 37–38, 132, 149, 154; J. Grande, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792–1835* (Palgrave, 2014), pp. 114–47.
- 15 R. Poole, "By the Law or by the Sword" Peterloo Revisited', *History* 91:2 (Apr. 2006), p. 257; R. Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened* (Manchester University Press, 1969), p. 274.
- 16 D. Read, *Peterloo* (Manchester University Press, 1958), pp. 184–209. E. P. Thompson had to agree that 'there remained no alternative but to support them [the magistrates]'. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 684.
- 17 Robert Peel to John Croker, 23 Mar. 1820, in J. L. Jennings (ed.) *The Correspondence and Diaries of the late rt. hon. John Wilson Croker*, vol. i (John Murray, 1884), p. 170.
- 18 Read, *Peterloo*, p. 160.
- 19 R. Thorne, 'Bennet, Henry Grey (1777–1836)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2008)
- 20 *Manchester Observer*, 18 Sep. 1819.
- 21 D. Ayerst, *Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper* (Collins, 1972), pp. 19–25.
- 22 P. Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform, 1700–1840* (James Clarke, 1989), pp. 144–70.
- 23 P. Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption'* (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 182–96; *The Times*, 20 Aug. 1819; *Manchester Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1819; *Manchester Observer*, 21 Aug. 1819; Anon. [J. Wade], *The Black Book: Or Corruption Unmasked!* (John Fairburn, 1820); W. Hone, *The Political House that Jack Built* (William Hone, 1819).
- 24 Such as that which Ian McCallum offered for the period 1815–21: I. McCallum, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers: London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 152–80.
- 25 J. Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life, or a Chronicle of Local Events from 1741 to 1841*, vol. ii (E. C. Osborne, 1868), p. 616.