

PETERLOO: THE ENGLISH UPRISING

By Robert Poole

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The *Manchester Observer*: biography of a radical newspaper’, open access at

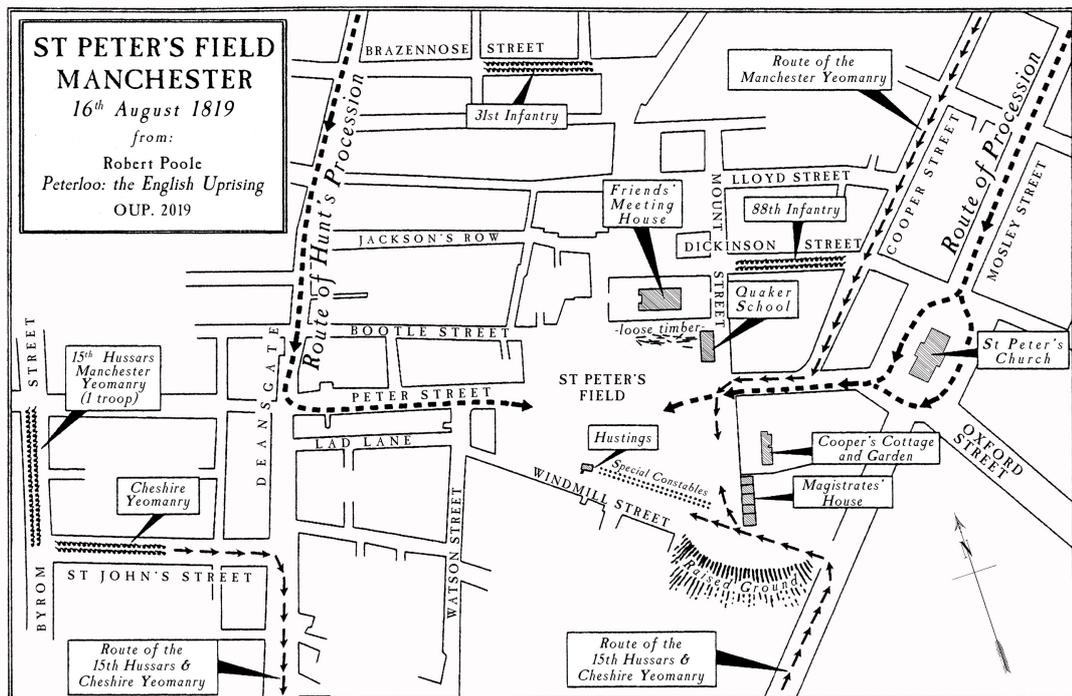
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Prologue

Two hundred years on, it is still possible to be angry about Peterloo. A mixed crowd of tens of thousands of people from all over the region gathered peacefully, if defiantly, in St Peter’s Field, Manchester, to claim political citizenship. They were attacked without provocation or warning by the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry Cavalry, armed with freshly sharpened sabres, by the Cheshire Yeomanry, and by special constables wielding truncheons, and then ridden down and dispersed by galloping Hussars. Seventeen people died of injuries received on the day and nearly 700 were seriously injured, more than 200 of them by sabre wounds, many of them women, some of them children. All this happened in the space of a few minutes; it was the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil. There were Waterloo veterans on both sides, men who had been on the same side at the final allied victory over the Emperor Napoleon in 1815. Four years later, British troops were turned upon their own people. The event known as the ‘Manchester massacre’ soon acquired a bitter title: ‘Peterloo’.

Although the death toll was small in comparison with most other well-known political ‘massacres’—the September massacres in Paris (1792), the Paris commune (1871), Amritsar (1919), Sharpeville (1960), Soweto (1976), Tiananmen Square (1989), Cairo (2013)—the hundreds of injuries were inflicted individually and face-to-face in the space of a few minutes. The 400 volunteer Yeomanry and special constables engaged willingly, even enthusiastically, against their unarmed ‘enemies’, destroying flags and banners, attacking the

injured and fallen, and pursuing their victims into the surrounding streets. Those whom they attacked, however alarming they may have been in point of numbers, had done all they could to telegraph their peaceful intent, walking into Manchester in family or neighbourly groups, leaving their walking sticks behind, and even cheering the troops when they first arrived. This was not a clumsy exercise in crowd control; it was an atrocity which requires explanation. There was no ‘battle of Peterloo’ but there was a riot, and it was the forces of order who rioted. They were backed up by the local magistrates, who were backed up in turn by the government. The Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, while he did not directly order the intervention, had made it clear that he was willing to see military force used and to assist the authorities with any resulting legal difficulties.

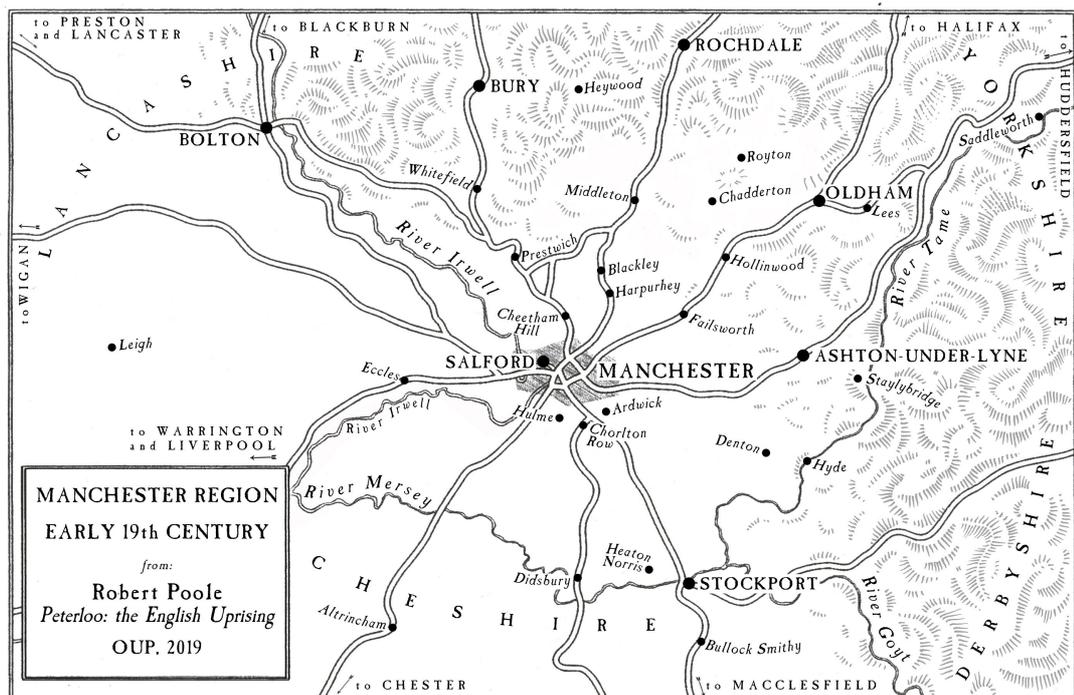


All this was carried out in plain sight. Uniquely for a provincial event, the rally took place in the presence of reporters from the national and regional press, and there were numerous independent observers. There was no direct press censorship, and reporters were able to report all that they saw (though not all chose to do so). Peterloo was the best-documented crowd event of the nineteenth century; over 400 eye-witness accounts survive. Many of these were generated by the three major investigations that followed—an inquest, a trial, and a prosecution brought by the victims—but there are also newspaper reports, letters, memoirs, and numerous petitions for justice, many of them recently discovered. We also have the names and other details of some 700 killed and wounded, and information on hundreds of others who were there as soldiers, constables, participants, or witnesses. A pit disaster or theatre fire for which we had this kind of information would be historically important. But Peterloo was no accident; it was a political earthquake in the northern powerhouse of the industrial revolution. All these features, in the words of the author of the

New Oxford History of England for the period, Boyd Hilton, ‘put Peterloo up there with Magna Carta’.

Hilton’s comment was made as part of a debate in 2018, sparked by a statement by the film director Mike Leigh that Peterloo should be taught in schools. Leigh’s feature film *Peterloo*, which was made during the writing of this book, marks the bicentenary of the ‘Manchester massacre’, an event which Leigh learned about only briefly while at school in Salford in the 1950s. It is a rare privilege for a historian, working for years in archives and libraries to reconstruct past events, to see them brought to life — to surging, powerful life — on the big screen. Even with the immense creative resources which can be brought to bear in the making of a feature film, however, it is difficult to convey, and even more to explain, the life of a period which is now almost as remote from our own as Shakespeare and the gunpowder plot were from the inhabitants of Regency England. In many ways the industrial revolution feels modern, and Manchester seems familiar, but this is to a great extent an illusion, conjured by the concerns of our own period. Every age has its own illusions, and the past is always one of them.

The modern locations available for filming conveyed the impression that protestors at Peterloo were mainly factory workers, and that they marched through remote moorland. Yet only about one in twenty of those injured at Peterloo were cotton factory workers, while more than one in three were handloom weavers. The land through which they marched was populous countryside close to their own homes, and these weaving districts were the real heartland of the radical movement. As this book goes to press ambitious plans are in hand to commemorate Peterloo in Manchester, and the site of St Peter’s Field will have its monument at long last. Yet at the same time the landscape of lanes and folds around Tandle Hill through which Samuel Bamford and his fellow handloom weavers marched for reform, the most important part of the world of Peterloo still to survive, is threatened by redevelopment.



It would be a bitter irony indeed if in the bicentenary year of Peterloo the inhabitants of these economically 'deprived' areas were to lose their historic landscape; they will never be truly deprived as long as they have their green belt. Bamford himself was from nearby Middleton, as was the actor who played him in the feature film. While *Peterloo* was in production a group of young people in Middleton were making their own film about Bamford with the community film-maker REELmanchester. Resourcefully researched by its cast and crew in and around the district it was set in, it imaginatively connected the past with the present, in important respects getting closer to the heart of the matter than its big-budget contemporary.

An author, of course, has to believe that Peterloo can best be understood through a good book, and for the past fifty years and more there has been none better than Edward Thompson's 1963 classic *The Making of the English Working Class*. As an evocation of the radical culture of the period, and of the Pennine manufacturing districts in particular, the book is unsurpassed, and probably unsurpassable. Thompson lived in the landscapes he studied and taught the descendants of those involved in the events he wrote about, learning from them about their working lives and encountering stories handed down from the period. Peterloo is at the core of Thompson's saga, the climax of a book-length chapter entitled 'Demagogues and Martyrs'. 'It really was a massacre', he wrote—but, he added, 'we need not give the hour by hour account once again'. He referred readers in a footnote to some contemporary sources, and to a short history written for the centenary in 1919. His discussion of the government's responsibility for the episode appears in another extended footnote. After a brisk sally among the Home Office papers he concluded:

My opinion is (a) that the Manchester authorities certainly intended to employ force, and (b) that Sidmouth knew—and assented to—their intention to arrest Hunt in the midst of the assembly and to disperse the crowd, but that he was unprepared for the violence with which this was effected.

As a footnote this takes some beating, and it also gets close to the truth. But a thorough treatment of any one episode, even one as important as Peterloo, was beyond the scope of a wide-ranging work which had begun life as a 'teach yourself' volume on working-class history. It is a tribute to Thompson's skill as a writer and polemicist that generations of readers should have come away from his book feeling that they know all about its subjects, but at the same time wanting to find out more. Since then, however (indeed since 1958), no serving academic has written a book-length study of Peterloo. Related developments have been explored in some depth in a variety of academic works, but not in a major study of Peterloo itself. Peterloo is often invoked but rarely examined.

To attempt to update, and still more to challenge, so influential a work as *The Making of the English Working Class* is fraught with risks. An occupational hazard of speaking at events in the thriving field of labour history is to be firmly referred back to Thompson for a closer look. Thompson, always combative and always pushing against the orthodoxies of both right and left, would not have wished to become an authority. His work is open to

revision in three main respects. The first and most obvious is that, Peterloo aside, Thompson had relatively little to say about Manchester, or the north-west generally. Indeed, he wrote, ‘we can no more understand the significance of Peterloo in terms of the local politics of Manchester than we can understand the strategic importance of Waterloo in terms of the field and the orders of the day’. The field and the orders of the day are in fact crucial issues. Manchester, too, was part of national politics, and itself became central at the time of Peterloo. Thompson had chapters on the London radical movement (which was also local), but the book was principally set in the Luddite landscapes of the Yorkshire Pennines where he lived and taught. Manchester, and the factory system, were largely outside his frame of reference (and it continues to cause surprise that a book on the English working class in the industrial revolution period should have chapters on handloom weavers, artisans, and agricultural labourers, but not on factory workers). Most of Thompson’s writing on Peterloo was actually contained in two extended book reviews. Yet, as will appear, Peterloo (and the whole four-year run of events surrounding it) exercised a formative influence on the entire reform movement, as did the government’s clampdowns of 1817 and 1819 in response to events in the Manchester area. There was also a significant relationship between the radical movements in London and Manchester which caused the government much trouble; if we want to study the national picture, they have to be considered together.

Second, if Peterloo really was a massacre then the weight of explanation must fall on the perpetrators. At Peterloo it was the authorities who rioted, not the people. As the title of his book makes clear, Thompson’s commitment was to the popular movements he studied, and none of his readers would wish it otherwise. His judgements on the individuals who wielded power could be brisk and penetrating, but his main interest in authority was in challenging and debunking it. The Manchester authorities, however, really were something else. The scale of the violence perpetrated by magistrates and their allies on their own citizens, and of the deceptions and cover-ups both before and after, almost defies belief, and it requires explanation. Amid all the familiar assumptions about industrial towns and the factory system, the special character of Regency Manchester and its region has been overlooked. The Manchester of handloom weavers, stagecoaches, and boroughreeves in 1819 was a different world from the Manchester of powerloom factories, railways, and town councillors which Engels visited a generation later.

Historians who spend long studying the sources for any political subject will sooner or later find themselves on the track of those in power, consumed by the desire to work out the differences between what they believed they were doing, what others thought they were doing, what they pretended they were doing, what they were doing in secret, and what they were doing without realizing it. This also applies to the study of history from below, since so many of the sources are generated by those seeking to control, monitor or document what was going on below them. ‘History from below’ is often history from above, viewed in reverse. No matter how good a job one does on the movement or phenomenon one is studying, it can never be more than half the picture. History is not the study of any one set of forces or phenomena, but of what happens when it meets and mixes with other forces and phenomena, and then only after the causes and consequences have had a generation or more to make themselves apparent.

The third point is changing context, which affects everyone and everything sooner or later. In Thompson's day, the emergence of the working class, in a country whose industrialization was thought to have set the pattern for the rest of the world, was believed to be of great historical importance. Popular conservatism was an anomaly, probably explained by enemy action, and would die away with progress; much the same was true of riots. Today the mix looks very different, and we are less confident. Imperial, ethnic, and gender history can make the study of the English working class look like the study of privileged white males, although that is not how it felt to those under the hooves of the cavalry. Cultural history makes class look appear as just another form of self-expression. Some of these new perspectives can be brought to bear on the blood and thunder of Peterloo. The involvement of female reformers in defence of the colours turns out to be central to events; misogyny and male honour were important factors in the attack on the crowd, not to mention an almost colonial brand of arrogance, picked up in part in Ireland. The way that the marchers organized themselves in processions tells us a lot about how they saw their place in the political order, how they imagined it could be changed, and why the authorities feared them.

One context for Thompson's work that has emerged particularly strongly since he wrote is the study of nationalism, patriotism, and conservatism. In 1993 Thompson wrote a review of the book that, indirectly, has done more to challenge his interpretation of the period than any other: Linda Colley's study of the making of British national identity in the same period, *Britons*. In it she argued that 'It was training under arms under the auspices of the state that was the most common collective working-class experience in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, not labour in a factory, or membership of a radical political organization or an illegal trade union.' Thompson was not about to give ground easily. He pointedly entitled his review 'Which Britons?', thinking no doubt of an early criticism of his own book, that it neglected 'the flag-waving, peer-respecting' side of working-class history. The review was a prolonged 'yes, but ...'. He was willing to let Colley and the loyalists have the 1800s, the years of greatest national resistance to Napoleon's empire, but he thought the 1790s and 1810s still belonged to the reformers. In the end he paid tribute to Colley's work: 'Her stimulating book will be, and deserves to be, influential. Instead of trying for some mid-way compromise, we might say that *both* views might be true.' This was one of the last, and most prescient, things which Thompson wrote. The challenge, then, is to write a work which embraces both these perspectives, the loyal and the radical, and which shows how they relate to each other, and how their combined action can account for historical events.

The attempt has been made possible by the extraordinarily rich sources available. Early industrial England, especially in the north, has often been thought of as a dark land, requiring imagination and empathy (and perhaps political night vision) to recover its hidden experiences. In the case of Manchester in 1819 the smoke lifts, thanks to the intense scrutiny surrounding Peterloo. Occasionally some exceptional event or body of sources allows entry into a previously little-recognized realm of the past, like the heresy hunt in the medieval French village of Montailou. Peterloo was Manchester's Montailou moment. As well as the hundreds of eye-witness accounts, press reports, and memoirs, there are the Home Office disturbances papers, an extensive collection of correspondence from all parts in the National Archives. Here can be found long sequences of letters from local magistrates and others, at times providing daily bulletins and enclosing opened mail, leaflets, pamphlets, newspapers,

threatening letters, and reports from a dozen different spies and informers. Then there are all the Home Office's replies (both ordinary and 'Private and Secret'), and a further raft of legal material including trial papers, law officers' reports, and prison correspondence. The private papers and thoughts of ministers and politicians are strewn across archives from Durham to Devon. Recent cataloguing and some digitization has made this material much easier to explore and piece together at leisure. The digitization now extends to the *Manchester Observer*, not just Manchester's but England's leading radical newspaper and the principal organizing force behind the radical campaign. While Manchester is well known as the national centre for labour history, with its People's History Museum and Salford's Working Class Movement Library, it also houses important collections accumulated by Manchester's Tory authorities in the Central Library, the John Rylands Library, and Chetham's Library. Hardly anything political seems to have happened in 1819 that was not written down somewhere.

All this material offers an unsurpassed view of the political and social landscape of Regency England, and especially Regency Manchester. It is possible, at long last, to trace in detail, explain, and even understand the immense collision of forces that occurred at St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819. On to Peterloo.