

THE POETRY OF PETERLOO

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The purpose of this essay is to examine the reaction of London's radical press to news of the Peterloo Massacre and how it was expressed through the poetry they published. Of course, verse, songs and poetry were standard fare for radicals throughout the nineteenth century. They appeared in radical newspapers from the era of Thomas Spence, through the Chartists, to the Independent Labour Party. Significant events were an understandable focus for the labour movement's poets. It was therefore natural that an incident like Peterloo would generate a large amount of verse. Almost thirty original items have been identified, published within a few months of the news of Peterloo reaching London. Yet surprisingly, although the poetical responses to Peterloo have not entirely escaped the attention of Peterloo's historians — references to Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy* abound — compared to the analysis of the radical newspaper's editorial and correspondence columns, comparatively little effort has been spent in examining the often unsigned verses which filled the poetry column which most radical newspapers featured. Within the constraints of a poem, and the principles espoused by the publishers, writers expressed their reactions to the Massacre and attempted to explain what had occurred. At their best such verses can open up new perspectives on Peterloo, they can both complement and question the conventional accounts of how, in this particular case, the radical artisans of London reacted to the killings and wounding at a reform meeting held in Manchester.¹



A Free Born Englishman. George Cruikshank's response to the government's measures attacking the press in December 1819.

Why should Londoners have had an interest in the events of that day? When Calton weavers had been shot down by soldiers in Glasgow over thirty years earlier, it had hardly been noticed in England's capital.² There had been contact between London radicals and Lancashire Luddites, but only of the most tentative kind.³ But they had no first hand experience of those affairs.

Whilst it would be a mistake to place too much value on the presence of Richard Carlile at Peterloo, his report of the affair was the account that influenced all subsequent poets. What made it so powerful was the personal contacts some working-class radicals had already established with each other.⁴ The establishment of Major Cartwright's Hampden Clubs had ended the isolation of local radical groups and, more importantly, provided an organisational framework for the distribution of newsheets and educational material. Their transformation into "Political Unions" signalled that they had become plebian dominated and more inclined to the militancy proposed by Watson and other Spencean advocates.

When the London radical papers heard the news of the Yeomanry charge, there was an immediate recognition amongst the writers and printers that they had more in common with the victims than the aggressors. The massacre crystallised a class consciousness that was in the process of formation.

Of course, the meeting on the 16 August was not an isolated demonstration. It was part of a concerted campaign to reshape the political institutions of a country whose social relationships had been turned upside down by industrialism. This movement was initiated in November 1816 with a meeting in London's Spa Fields. As it soon became apparent that the London mob could not be persuaded to do more than treat these as festive occasions, the organisers sought to mobilise unionised workers in the industrialised districts.

From early in 1817 formalised contacts were made with organisations all over England and Lowland Scotland. Branches were widespread, their propaganda circulating all over the country. It took the forms that had been utilised for many years, mass meetings, songs and polemics. What differentiated these agitations from earlier attempts was access to the means of mass communication, particularly through the journal most favourable to the Hampden Clubs, T.J. Wooler's *Black Dwarf*.⁵ In this respect, a press of their own, plus a network of distribution, was the vital component in establishing a national organisation. It was claimed in 1829 that every London newspaper was read by thirty people.⁶ Far from being tied to parochial networks, as earlier radical groups had been forced to do, radicals could communicate with each other across the boundaries of trade and county.

Just as the French wars had generated a plethora of literary material so did major incidents like Peterloo, becoming a permanent ingredient of radical consciousness.⁸ The bulk of the verse dealing with the massacre was published over a two-month period. Between 11 September and 30 October 24 of the 30 pieces appeared in the main six radical papers — *Black Dwarf*,

The Medusa, The Theological and Political Comet, The Briton, The Cap of Liberty and The White Hat. Six were reprinted from other newspapers, one appeared in two different London publications.⁹ The first to reach the radical press was *Stanzas Occasioned By The Manchester Massacre*, which appeared in *The Black Dwarf* of 25 August.¹⁰ The date of composition is given as 21 August, publication day of the edition of the *Political Register* which contained Carile's famous first hand report. The writer adopted the pseudonym "Hibernicus" which may indicate either a sympathy or affiliation with Ireland.

STANZAS OCCASIONED BY THE MANCHESTER MASSACRE:

Oh, weep not for those who are freed
From bondage so frightful as ours!
Let tyranny mourn for the deed,
And howl o'er the prey she devours!

The mask for a century worn,
Has fallen from her visage at last;
Of all its sham attributes shorn,
Her reign of delusion is past.

In native deformity now
Behold her, how shatter'd and weak!
With murder impress'd on her brow,
And cowardice blanching her cheek.

With guilt's gloomy terrors bow'd down,
She scowls on the smile of the slave!
She shrieks at the patriot's frown;
She dies in the grasp of the brave.

Then brief be our wail for the dead,
Whose blood has seal'd tyranny's doom;
And the tears that affliction will shed,
Let vengeance, bright flashes illumine.

And shame on the passionless thing
Whose soul can now slumber within him!
To slavery still let him cling,
For liberty scorns to win him.

Her manlier spirits arouse
At the summons so frightfully given!
And glory exults in their row,
While virtue records them in Heaven.

August 21.

HIBERNICUS.

Stanzas Occasioned by the Manchester Massacre.

The verses are a reaction to the killings rather than an exposition of events. The reader is urged to avoid sentimentalising the dead "... weep not for those who are freed/ From bondage so frightful as ours". Anger is to be directed against those responsible for the deaths. Blame is not laid at the feet of the Mancunian authorities in particular but "tyranny" in general. The writer asserts that far from being an illustration of the state's power, the murders have exposed the weakness of the present regime and continues with a distinctly jacobin remark: "The mask for a century worn/ Has fallen from her visage at last". The reader is assured that "manlier spirits" will arise to take "vengeance".

Two weeks later the *Black Dwarf* carried a second piece, a dramatic satire combining anti-clericalism and anti-royalism with criticism of the magistrates.¹¹ The bulk of the work parodies anti-jacobinism amongst the Manchester middle and upper classes but its centrepiece is a prose passage purporting to be an anonymous letter — the traditional form of registering plebian protest.

The "magistrates" are accused of failing in their public duty. They are told: "You . . . who ought to have been the *Preservers* of peace, have been the *Breakers* of it". This does not necessarily point to a fracturing of

paternalism. More likely it suggests the writer saw them as public functionaries who ought be equally at the service of rich and poor in the execution of their duties. A brief description of the meeting's preliminaries follows, noting that patriotic songs were sung and alleging that the Yeomanry were originally welcomed before "they dashed in among the unarmed and unsuspecting multitude . . . cutting their way through". No newspaper report had suggested this greeting, yet later pieces show it entered the popular imagination as part of the events of the day. The writer concluded that although a suffering and famished population had been set a dangerous precedent in the use of violent tactics to gain political goals, they were urged that such tactics should "... never be imitated by reformers".

Three days later *The Medusa*, a penny publication printed by Thomas Davison between February 1819 and January 1820, entered the debate with lines *On A Bloody Massacre*, one of the few original contributions it published.¹² It too was mostly an attack on the events but contained a warning:

*We wait the law — If justice flee the court
Not all the fears of loyal fools, not all
The whining cant of cowards shall prevail
To keep us from our rights*

The writer held optimistic expectations that the eventual trial of Hunt would end in acquittal. If justice did not prevail immediately, inevitable reform would bring it.

The farcical proceedings that preceded the adjourned inquest of John Lees inspired a lengthy parody in the next *Black Dwarf*.¹³ Signing himself "Coroner's Clerk", the writer assumes the persona of Battye, Farmer's clerk. During the first part of the work, his reluctance to open proceedings is attributed to caring more about a meal than the death of the victim. It is not until the second part that more general radical concerns are discussed. This time the massacre is related to the wider political system. Corruption is seen to emanate from the top, the Prince Regent. His ministers: "Cold Liverpool, Sidmouth and proud Castlereagh" are described as his servants. The army know their task is simple: "to meet the Reformers and kill off a few".

Memories of repression abroad, the counter-revolution in France and Russian treatment of Poland are given as examples of what is necessary. The lack of equivalents for lettres de-cachet and the Bastille are to be regretted.¹⁴ Imitation of foreign ideas should not be taken to excess though for: "France now owns no despots that nation is free".

Regular troops, the writer continues, are not wholly to be trusted if used against the civil population: "Tho' bravely



Title-page of The Black Dwarf.

they conquered, and freely they bled/ They will ne'er aim a blow at a countryman's head".

It would be much better to reassemble the perpetrators of Peterloo for: "Our Manchester alone could do this/ For to cherish weak women they ne'er knew the bliss". This last remark is the first reference by London Radical poets to a theme that was to become a strong feature of their response to the massacre, namely the cutting down by brutal troops of women and children.

This piece was followed by a six-line attack on the Yeomanry, the bitterest yet printed. Addressed *To The Gentlemen Yeomanry Of Manchester*¹⁵ it begins by telling them they've: "done a very charming feat". In fact: "All history must sink abashed before ye". Their: "Dashing deed" is incomparable, even to those found in: "the Newgate Calendar". The thieves listed there are "Small rogues . . . who filch pounds, pence and shillings". On the other hand the *Gentlemen Yeomanry* should be proud because: "Murderers are extra-ordinary villains".

Whilst previous verses can be described as either mildly humorous or commemorative, this writer was clearly angry. Moreover with the contrast so clearly drawn between wealthy gentlemen and petty criminals this verse certainly displays evidence of that class-consciousness which some historians have found difficulty recognising in these years.

Thomas Davison kept up the momentum of attack in *The Medusa*. His publication focussed on the commander of the Yeomanry, Major Trafford, by reprinting some verses from the *Manchester Observer* of the previous week: *To The Major Of A Certain Regiment*.¹⁶

Masquerading as "a ghost", from "the Church-yard" on 2 September, it promises that the officer's actions will follow him eternally. He is termed a: "ruthless pest/ Who only lives, to murder the opprest", then warned that: "all the souls who fell upon that day" even: "In thy retirement, will in dread array/ . . . pass before thine eyes". Salvation is beyond his expectation because: "Twill take ten thousand years for saints to pray/ Before thy sins could half be pray'd away". The reaction of the radicals was becoming nastier in general as the authorities began to endorse the action of the magistrates. If there were any illusions about the old paternalism still remaining, they were quickly evaporating.

The theme of a murdered woman and child is elaborated further in the *Black Dwarf* of 22 September.¹⁷ Three verses entitled *The Sword King* tell the story of a mother, fleeing the scene of destruction. The child is told to stop crying, for: "the sword king is near!/ . . . with sabre so bloody and bright," invoking the figure as a pursuing demon.

The opening lines of the second verse indicate what radicals believed had caused the charge: the wealthy's innate hatred of reform and reformers. Their determination to snuff it out by any means, however foul. Added to which they possessed wanton pride in their supposed military splendour. Finally they had a desire to placate the aristocracy at the expense of the general population. Then is added a popular identification with the defeat of Bonaparte at Waterloo signalling the suppression of liberty in France, an addition suggestive of a degree of jacobinism surviving amongst the London radicals.

Three days later *The Medusa* carried two songs and another poem, its largest collection of verse on the subject in any single issue.¹⁸ They were all original and related in part to Henry Hunt's return to London on 13 September.

THE SWORD KING.

(No—o—glee.)

He heard with awe
This ruffian stabber fix the law—
* * * * *
For Englan's w.r.s revered the claim
Of every unprotected name;
And spared amid its fiercest rage
Childhood, and womanhood, and age.

ROBERT.

Who is it that flies from the tumult so fast
When the yeomanry bugles are mingling their blast?
The mother who folds her dear child to her breasts,
And screams, as around her expire the oppress'd;
"Oh! hush the my darling! relinquish thy fear,"
My mother! my mother! the sword king is near!
The sword king with sabre so bloody and bright,
Ah! shade my young eyes from the horrible sight!"

"Base brat of reform, shall thy cries bar my way,
To the laurels that bloom for the loyal to day?
Shalt thou live to rear banner, white, emerald, or blue?
No! this is our yeomanry's own Waterloo."
"My mother! my mother! and dost thou not hear
What curses the yeomanry shout in thine ear?"
"Oh! hush thee my child, let the murderers come!
There is vengeance in heaven for the base who strike home!"

"A curse on your standards so flaunting and fine,
Surrender or perish!—die rebel!—'tis mine!"
"My mother! my mother! oh! hold me now fast,
The sword king and steed will o'er take us at last!"
The mother she trembled, she doubled her speed,
But dark on her path swept the yeoman's black steed;
And ere she arrived at her own cottage door,
Life throbb'd in her poor baby's bosom no more.

H. MORTON,
Son of Silas Morton

The Sword King.

The Watch Word Of Britons, sung to the tune of Rule Britannia, is a rousing piece. Each of the verses appeals to: "freemen brave" to stand up for the: "rights their fathers held". The song asks whether "the bloodhounds in the shape of men" are "Allow'd to slay a harmless race?" The reference is slight but it does show the radical interpretation of the massacre creeping further into popular usage. *The Triumph Of Liberty*, three verses to the tune of Handel's, "See The Conquering Hero Comes", is another morale booster contrasting the popular acclamation of "freedom's noblest champions" with "murky tyrants crouching minions too/ [who] Tremble for feats performed at Peter-loo". The use of Handel's tune is a particularly interesting feature. It was popular amongst Lancashire weavers by the 1780s¹⁹ and had entered popular usage amongst radicals for celebratory processions to such an extent that Thomas Cooper had a broadside version in his possession when arrested in 1842. The third piece, *Hunt And Liberty*, has no direct reference to Peterloo beyond the refrain's "praise of Hunt. . ." It again refers to the general state of the country: "While mad oppression fills the land". But in the first two lines of the final verse the writer cannot resist a swipe at Sidmouth's relaying of the Regent's congratulations to the Manchester magistrates: "Let Sidmouth yelp aloud his thanks/ To men of blood-and-plunder". Of course, it has to be remembered that the writer would have been unaware of the private correspondence that later historians have used in the debate over the Government's complicity with the Magistrates.

During the following week some of the smaller

periodicals joined in the chorus of poetical protest. Another Davison paper, *The Cap Of Liberty*, reprinted *Manchester Heroes* by "Demophilus", again from the *Manchester Observer*.²⁰ It heralded another volley of abuse at the Yeomanry.

The first third of *Manchester Heroes* laments that the land: "whose quick aid was ever extended/ To each nation oppress'd" is now: "the murd'ers den through the universe posted". And then asks: "Couldst thou glut thy sword in the breast of the friendless/ And e'en slaughter the aged, the mother and child?" What worsens the crime in the eyes of the writer is: "a Prince of the line . . . / Could applaud the dread butchers," even while they are: "besmear'd with such gore". It seems there will be no chance of an appeal to the justice of due legal processes for God will surely not rest easy in his heaven: "when HIS laws are invaded". The perpetrators are reminded that there is a commandment against murder which they have violated. As a result: "the cries most appalling/ Of the widows and orphans they cruelly made will pursue then to eternity".

One of the few items that can be reliably attributed to a particular author appeared in *The Theological And Political Comet* of 2 October. Entitled *The Bloody Field Of Peterloo* carried the initials of R.S. almost certainly Robert Shorter, printer, publisher and probably editor.²¹ It is another ironic blast at the "Heroes of Manchester" in the form of a rollicking ten verse ballad that must have given great amusement when sung at radical meetings. And it is also the first attempt to give a chronological verse narrative of the day's events.

After introducing his reasons for eulogising the Yeomanry, Shorter poses as an observer of the field. He is particularly cutting about the false pride displayed in the face of unarmed opponents: "How swell'd your breasts with rapture high/ To meet the well arm'd, banner'd foe". His description is gory too, in the best broadside manner, talking of: "... the mettled steed/ Trampling the mangled corpses low" and the imagery of mayhem he employs. The last three verses are particularly inflammatory:

*Wives, mothers, children, on the plain,
In one promiscuous heap, I view;
The husband, son, and father slain,
Stretch'd on the field of Peterloo!*
*But Yeoman's hearts are form'd of steel,
Ardent to fields of blood they go;
Their gallant souls disdain to feel,
Whilst dealing death at Peterloo!*
*My muse the truth shall ne'er deny;
The good, the wise, the just, we know,
Think you deserve promotion high,
In iron case on Peterloo!*

The Medusa also took on a more traditional style for its piece; *A New Song: In Commemoration Of . . . Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry . . .*²² They begin by lamenting: "these times so notorious" asking: "what man would not rejoice, O" at the bravery shown by "Manchester cavalry boys, O!" who stood firm in the face of "thousands". There is praise too for how "... with sabre so bright/ They burn'd for the fight/ And resolved not to let forth a tear, O!" The facetious tone is pursued by pointing out that they did not let the possibility of relatives being present hinder their actions but: "on massacre bent/ to Saint Peter's Field went".

Yet again the writer repeats the image of the murdered child, and alleges that pursuit of martial glory was the true

motivation behind the attack. This repeated allegation reinforced the idea that pride and self-aggrandisement were the main concern of the Yeomanry and possibly the middle classes everywhere. It is worth noting that not once has a writer yet suggested drunkenness as a factor despite Carlile's charges of their overindulgence in the streets afterwards.²³

For a second successive week *The Cap Of Liberty* reprinted verse from the *Manchester Observer* to keep the issues of Peterloo alive.²⁴ Titled *Address To The Prince Regent*, the future king was warned that: "the Throne thou has not mounted/ Stands . . . but totters to its base". He is told the people are still loyal but this may not remain the case if present injustices remain. Primary amongst them is the sufferings endured by: "MANCHESTER". Lest he have any doubts as to the insecurity of his position, the writer reminds the Regent that it is unwise to rely purely on armed force to secure his position since: "Hirelings soon or later betray".

The Black Dwarf in the following week, continued to assert the specific injustice of the massacre itself and the part played in it by the Yeomanry.²⁵ In the first of two items they pursued the analogy between Peterloo and Waterloo with *The Peterloo Man*.

It begins with a reminder of the horrors: "of the far-renowned Waterloo plains/ Where . . . liberty fell 'midst the tears of mankind". Peterloo, though, presented a far bloodier spectacle. There: "... women, and children, and grandsires hoary" were killed: "beneath the fierce sword of the *Peterloo Man*". The Yeomanry are: "Of banditti the first" for wreaking such carnage. But natural: "justice demands, in her still even scales/ To balance the wretches who Britain disgrace." It matters not who is punished: "Whether Yeoman, or Magistrates, both should be tried, and if the state avoids doing it, God will.

The second piece, an *Elegiac apostrophe to the memory of the unfortunate persons who were killed at Manchester . . .* also appeared three days later in the short-lived *The Briton* with a similar title.²⁶ This poem begins with a lament for the victims, describing them as: "hapless victims of oppression's rage/ . . . spirits of a slaughtered race" and claims the purpose of the verse is to: "flash confusion in each murderer's face". The writer insists on the lawful nature of the assembly and claims that: "Fearless the savage cowards you beheld/ Who came with base intent your veins to drain". It is pointed out that the leaders of the meeting had complied with all the demands made by the authorities, but even this had not satisfied the magistrates in their despotic intention: "that death should triumph in the horrid field". The poem then lists the outrages believed to have been committed by the Yeomanry as: "Women unheeded urg'd her sex's claim/ . . . Age, infancy, and manhood, shared the same", before turning to the futility of expecting redress for grievances: "While pale corruption bars stern justice out". The complicity of clergymen in the event and its aftermath is also noted. Again, faced with the temporal power of those allied against them the writer looks to divine retribution. In a way this indicates that the earthly status quo is accepted, the idea of a revolution creating a fairer society is absent from the writer's vision.

Despite being the first radical to report the massacre, Richard Carlile only carried one poetical tribute to the victims and even then did not refer to them specifically but as a wider group of martyrs in the cause of liberty. His *Republican*²⁷ published *Britons Who Have Often Bled* in

which the author makes an appeal to recent history, linking the radicalism of the Hampden Clubs with their namesake, expressing a radical tradition stretching back to the seventeenth century. Given such legitimisation, they are then able to look to the use of force as a means to overthrow the "Tyrant's power". The argument was one that became a mainstay of Chartist writers, that to accept bondage is a cowardly act. Furthermore it condemned others, their successors to a servile life. The appeal is one of death or liberty.

A day later *The Briton* made its last poetic statement on the affair, *The Appeal Of Blood* by "S.L."²⁸ The arguments are by now familiar and summarised by the third verse:

*Your children, friends, your husbands, wives,
Are sabred; some have lost their lives;
To you they call; avenge their woes,
As we've been served, so treat our foes.*

The author is angered, not only by the massacre but, as with their colleagues on *The Republican*, by the lack of redress. S.L.'s solution is more extreme and is emphasised by its repetition in the final verse:

*Blood calls "Revenge!" ye, Britons, hear;
Stop murderers in their wild career:
Or else, perhaps, your doom may be,
To live and die in infamy.*

The White Hat.

No. IV, VOL. I.] LONDON, Saturday, Nov. 6, 1819. [PRICE 2d.

On attempts to excite a Civil War.

WHAT will be the state of this country a twelvemonth hence? No reflecting man, who has any patriotic feeling, can put this question without emotions of agony and indignation; of agony, that there should be such an awful uncertainty, as almost to defy calculation, about the prospects of a people, who might, but for the unprincipled conduct of men in power, have been the freest, greatest, and

Title-page of The White Hat.

The White Hat, another short-lived publication, published its only Peterloo verse on 16 October.²⁹ This was *The Norwich Declaration* and was taken from the previous Saturday's *Norwich Courier*. The nine verses parodied a loyal petition initiated by twelve aldermen of Norwich, reflecting a local argument that must have been common in many areas following the massacre. It succinctly catches the attempts made to promote loyalty amongst a population disaffected by news of the killings. It begins:

*We, the loyal of this most seditious of times,
Who think blaming great folks the greatest of crimes,
Do hereby Declare our abhorrence of those
Who've expressed their aversion to murder and
blows*

Popular indignation at "the death of a child" fails to move, the government's supporters. In their opinion, the Yeomanry had been too careless: "their haste could not wait for a few hundreds more". They: "object to no plan for a small Reformation/ But Radicals hold in great abomination" since "what scores may in fairness demand/ Is in thousands high treason". That Peterloo produced feelings of class animosity amongst radicals outside London and Manchester can be seen from the

penultimate verse. The writer feels local loyalists were:

*Panting to share in such glory with you;
But alas! the folks here are such sticklers for law,
If they meet ne'er so oft, not a sword must we draw.*

The Cap Of Liberty followed with a third reprint, *The Devils That Stirred Up The Storm*, mischievously attributed to *The Regent's Ministers and the Manchester Magistrates*.³⁰ The introduction sets a key for the verse which ingeniously transposes the sentiments expressing a sense of solidarity amongst radicals. It gratefully acknowledges the contribution made by the architects of the killings towards creating the working class unity which will eventually bring reform. First amongst the devils is Castlereagh: "skilled in blowing up strife". Whilst the middle and lower classes would usually co-exist, he seeks to divide and rule, thus creating insurrectionary conditions. The Regent, his accomplice, makes things worse with his message of congratulation to the perpetrators: "circulars reeking and warm" exacerbate affairs. Canning is given the appellation: "Nullius filius / Whose tongue could e'en beauty deform"; the former because of his relatively humble origins, the latter stemming from his denunciation of press reports in Parliament. The Magistrates deserve particular praise, for: "with heads warm & hearts cool" they have further stirred up resentment through their combination of panic and cruelty. The writer hopes that those responsible for causing the tumult will be the ones who suffer most. This optimistic note can be taken to have a wider meaning than the parochial concerns of the Manchester victims, given the national uproar government involvement has precipitated.

The Black Dwarf kept up its attack with some *Verses For The Boys Of Manchester* by J.B.³¹ They are crude, almost to the point of doggerel, but probably indicate better than anything else published how the workers were thinking.

VERSES FOR THE BOYS OF MANCHESTER.

Never remember the fifth of November,
Gunpowder treason and plot,
Bloodshed and murder carried much further,
Will make Guy's name forgot.
Blue bloodhounds worse than Guy,
In many a company,
With big-wigs and coaches,
To cut up the people alive.
Unhappy the man, accursed the day,
That saw these monsters go to their prey,
Arm'd downwards on the throng,
Charged with horse and sword along,
The laws we need not fear,
The Doctor keeps all clear,
The swinish people's blood,
Will form his choicest food;
Highest thanks will be our meed,
Then forward "urge the meed."
As I was flying over the ground,
I saw the devil with a blue blood hound,
He grin'd and look'd so like the other,
You'd say he was his own twin brother.
His brains were made of lead,
No shame his heart had fear of,
His valiant hand with a bloody sword,
Cut an old woman's ear off.
A twopenny loaf to feed such an oaf,
A nine-tailed cat to hang him,
Exercise Slop, ne shan't have a drop,
But a good strong drop to hang him.
Hollo boys! hollo boys! God save the King,
Hollo boys, hollo boys! Let the bells ring.

J. B.

They begin by evoking a popular rhyme: "Never remember the fifth of November/ Gunpowder treason and plot", which provides the metre for the poem. But the crime at Peterloo was worse than that of Fawkes and this expression of the popular imagination certainly believed there had been a conspiracy between government and magistrates. A witness to the proceedings would have felt: "Accursed . . . that day/ That saw these monsters go to their prey". The perpetrators were simply "Arm'd cowards". The perspective then suddenly changes and the writer adopts the persona of a bloodhound. The Yeomanry feel they are above the law, protected by their immediate superior. And they will perform a grisly task in gratitude, couched again, in Spencean parlance: "The swinish people's blood/ Will form his choicest food". In return they'll be content with their master's gratitude. The inference is that the Yeomanry are base snivelling scyphants to an equally servile magistracy, the total antithesis of the popular radical figure of a free-born Englishman.

The writer readjusts the position yet again by taking on the character of a fleeing victim describing the appearance of "a blue blood hound," as similar to a devil. But unlike those writers who felt the Yeomanry ought to get their justice in heaven, J.B. knows precisely what they ought to receive on earth:

*A twopenny loaf to feed such an oaf,
A nine-tailed cat to bang him,
Exciseable Slop, he shan't have a drop.
But a good strong drop to hang him.*

In the following week a second verse drama by W.R.H. appeared. This was titled *Satan's Jubilee*.³² Although lengthy in conception it has a relatively simple message to convey. The Devil and associates are gathered to elect "Ten of the sons of Adam to our clan". Each Demon has ten nominations to cast. The ten nominees receiving the most votes will be admitted to the select gathering. Previous winners included "Sidemouth, Reagcastle, Oliver". This time the Manchester Magistrates top the list and amongst them: "A certain reverend Parson stands the first" because: "Hatred and malice, ignorance, and pride/ Are most delicious in a priestly garb". Also in line for nominations are: "the Mayor of Nodnul, and his friends/ Some two or three besotted Aldermen" referring to the outgoing Lord Mayor and his cronies who had criticised the Court of Common Council's criticism of Peterloo.³³ The democratic manner of the elections, with universal suffrage for demons would not have been lost on readers who lacked the franchise.

The Medusa printed *An Address To The Rabble* in its final issue of October.³⁴ The title is harking back yet again to the furore which followed Burke's calling the population a swinish multitude. The entire piece is an evocation of the radical traditions of England, amongst which, Peterloo is identified as another outrage to be avenged. The poem begins by reminding the reader that they are: "descendants from those men/ Who shortened tyrant Stuart's reign". And they should be aware of this regicidal precedent, for:

*The brave Lancastrians bleed.
See them, in peaceful council, lie
Slaughter'd by hell-hounds.*

Redress should be sought immediately: "T' avenge the infernal deed." For it should be remembered that the brave eyes of Scotland and Ireland are watching and they will see a similarity to: "Africa's injured sons/ Whose blood 'neath tyrant's lashes runs". And the means to

effect this reversal of the system is: "Union" with fellow workers. The success of which will determine how: "soon will twine around the English name/ Eternal Glory, or Eternal Shame!"

The afterword to this intense period of propagandising appeared in the *Theological Comet* of 6 November.³⁵ Allen Davenport was a shoemaker poet who followed Wedderburn into the Spencean militants in 1819.³⁶ His *Saint Ethelston's Day* mocked both the reverend of that name who had read the riot act and the association of religion with the killings. If Robert Walmsley was shocked by Bamford's lines to Parson Hay³⁷ it is just as well that the modern apologist for Hulton was unaware of Davenport's effusion. It is also one of the best and most graphic squibs in the "canon".

Davenport certainly felt that he was writing within a popular tradition. He makes this abundantly clear in his covering letter, saying:

The following little song is from the last new, deep, and affecting tragedy, . . . "The Peterloo Massacre," as performed at Manchester. . . it is conjectured, from the high patronage which this tragedy has met, . . . it will be repeated during the present season. . . some are so sanguine in their expectations, that they think it probable, it may have a run during the Christmas holidays, instead of "George Barnwell!" . . . the song, . . . is to the Prince's favourite tune of — "Gee-up Dobbin".

He said little that was new but the verses are amongst the best productions of the genre. He pillories Ethelstone as a fawning hypocritical bully whose worldly eyes were more concerned with advancement than spiritual values. In doing so he also condemned the close relationship between established religion and the state.

*A Manchester Parson, to church and king staunch,
Much fam'd in the pulpit, but more on the bench,
Resolv'd to be sainted without more delay;
And, the SIXTEENTH OF AUGUST was fixed for the day.*

*To contrive the best means, all his genius was bent,
How to celebrate such an auspicious event;
When he saw the Reformers, in marching array,
Move on to the field on SAINT ETHELSTONE'S DAY.*

*Then, the oath of his office, inform'd him 'twas good,
That the vest of a saint should be sprinkl'd with blood;*

*When his Counsellors whisper'd " 'Twill be the best way,
The Reformers to crush on SAINT
ETHELSTONE'S DAY."*

*He took the advice, and, to make all things sure,
Read the riot act o'er, on the step of his door;
When the Yeomanry Butchers all gallop'd away,
To do some great exploit on SAINT
ETHELSTONE'S DAY.*

*They hack'd off the breasts of the women, and then,
They cut off the ears and the noses of men;
In every direction they slaughtered away,
'Till drunken with blood on SAINT
ETHELSTONE'S DAY.*

*"Cut away, my brave fellows, you see how they faint,
They are BLACKGUARD REFORMERS!"
exclaimed the new saint:*

*"Send them to the Devil, my lads, on your way,
And, no doubt, they'll remember SAINT
ETHELSTONE'S DAY".*

From this point Peterloo had entered the iconography of radicalism and would be used as an example of the injustices inherent in an unreformed system.

The Medusa's long verse *Paddy Bull's Epistle To His Brother John*,³⁸ is a parody of the "Bull" pamphlets issued by the Loyal Associations from 1792. Discussing: "Lords, Dukes and Descendants, and Princes and Kings" Paddy concludes that they: "Are vicious, expensive, and troublesome things". He then points out some of their talents, including that of being "great carcas Butchers slaughtering in blood". An obvious reference to recent exploits.

The image of the swine is reiterated and combined with such activities when discussing their means of running the country:

*They'll govern thee, John, on a wonderous plan,
Of Castlereagh's kindness full well thou dost know--
I'd some very strong proofs but a short time ago.
Thou'rt a hog and if grunting and grumbling thou goes;
Thy master must put some cold steel in thy nose;
And this bit of cold metal when fix'd in thy snout,
Will keep thee from poking and muzzling about;
And by way of restraint, in thy nose let me tell ye,
Is better by far than if thrust in your belly.
Here's Sam Straw, Harry Hobnail, Ben Buckskin,
and more,
To quiet thee joins in a Yeomanry corps;
And like Manchester Heroes, with right and left butts,
If thou open'st thy mouth they will rip out thy guts;
Then an honest sensation I trow thou would feel,
To see thy guts dangling about at thy heel.*

All of these images are already familiar to us in the verse accompanying the reaction to the massacre. "Castlereagh's kindness", "this bit of cold metal . . . thrust in your belly" and "guts dangling about" can be found in several forms.

The *Black Dwarf* too, in its final verses had formalised its account of the proceedings³⁹ but used them now as a subjoinder to an article criticising the use of mercenaries. In arguing against the use of mercenaries generally its *Tribute To Certain Military Heroes* contains references to the struggle for Greek independence, mentions both Russia and Albania's forces, then notes:

*With what unshaken nerve their valour braves,
The abject crowd of unprotected slaves!
On them, their wanton cruelty they wreck,*

The writer suggests: "are not these fit rivals of your worth" calling the Yeomanry: "English Janizaries of the north." who have never used their weapons in a real fight but "Distress'd, defenceless Britons, hack'd and hew'd".

The fault does not lay exclusively with the Yeomanry, for: "your country's erring laws/ Allowed you arms, to guard her hallow'd cause". They are bumbling cowards too who: "lack'd the needful skill your steeds to guide" and: "Whose chivalry, let female wounds attest". The writer



A Radical Reformer, i.e. A Neck or Nothing Man! by George Cruikshank.

concludes that all they are useful for is 'to shore up: ". . .the bigot autocrat of Spain/ Support his tott'ring throne, and tyrant reign/ . . . You worthy of your Prince, and he of you!"

The Medusa was still printing material in December but its verses no longer referred directly to the massacre.⁴⁰ Their last oblique reference came early in January next year when a parody of Macbeth referred to: "Lancashire witches".⁴¹ Of course, by this time they needed to be a lot more circumspect. The gagging acts had been enforced and a government reign of terror was suppressing radicals along with civil liberties.

Looking at the working-class response to Peterloo through the popular literature it created gives us a new perspective on events. The radicals were concerned less with constitutional issues, they presupposed the meeting was legal, than with the behaviour of the new middle classes. They perceived them to have formed an alliance with aristocratic government.

It seemed that the 'middling sorts' had spelt out exactly what they thought of the factory operatives and their families. This must have affected their attitude to later reforms, and contributed greatly to the determination behind the Caroline riots.

The legacy of contempt for the magistracy is harder to evaluate. How does one judge respect for the courts and their fairness? Perhaps the readiness of Carlile and his successors to defy the law in the fight for an unstamped press is one indication, but that battle had already begun.

The volume of material that poured from the London presses shows how closely the London radicals associated the massacre with their own experiences. It evidenced a national sense of injustice amongst the politically active working classes, creating a common memory that would help to form the basis of later movements, especially Chartism. It must also have created, in the Government's mind, the suspicion that risings like Bonnymuir and Cato Street were more than localised outbreaks of rebellion. That is probably why their responses were so savage.

But in one respect the writers achieved total success. Their songs, poetry and polemics sought to ensure that the massacre would never be forgotten. The issuing of this publication confirms the longevity of that memory.

NOTES

1. For accounts of these people see E.P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp.672-702, 762-8; I. Prothero, *Artisans & Politics*, (1979) pp.99-131; A.J. Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, (1982) pp.270-354; J.H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (1983) and I. McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, (1988) pp.128-77.
2. E. King, *The Strike of the Glasgow Weavers, 1787*, (1987).
3. See the references in R. Reid, *Land of Lost Contact*, (1986) p.177.
4. On the influence of Union Societies see R. Glen, *Urban Workers in the Early Industrial Revolution*, (1984) pp.225-44.
5. Wooler was a close associate of Major Cartwright. The *Black Dwarf* ran from January 1817 to December 1824. See R. Harrison et al. (eds.), *Warwick Guide to British Labour Periodicals*, (1977) p.38.
6. A. Aspinall, "The circulation of newspapers in the early nineteenth century", *Review of English Studies*, 1946 (35) p.30.
7. For example see *The Medusa*, vol.I, no.31, p.243; no.37 p.296; *The Cap of Liberty*, vol.I, no.3, p.48.

8. For a few examples of this see B. Wilson, *Struggles of an Old Chartist*, (1887) reprinted in D. Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism*, (1977) p.195; T. Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper*, (1972 edition) p.36.
9. Mostly from the *Manchester Observer*.
10. *Black Dwarf*, 25 Aug. 1819, vol.III, no.34, col.564.
11. *Black Dwarf*, 3 Sept. 1819, vol.III, no.36, cols.594-6.
12. *The Medusa*, 11 Sept. 1819, vol.I, no.30, p.240. For Davison see J.H. Wiener's biography in J.O. Baylen and N.I. Gossman (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, (1979), vol.I, pp.114-16.
13. *Black Dwarf*, 15 Sept. 1819, vol.III, no.37, cols.610-11. *From Mr. Batty, Clerk To — Milne, Esq. Coroner, To His Friend in London*.
14. This supplies evidence of the influence of *Sherwin's Political Register* on the radical writers. The Peterloo issue also contained a letter from J.A. St. John dealing with the liberties of the English people. The writer has assimilated much of this into these passages. For St. John see McCalmán, *op. cit.* pp.157-8.
15. *Black Dwarf*, 15 Sept. 1819, vol.III, no.37, col.611.
16. *The Medusa*, 18 Sept. 1819, vol.I, no.31, p.243 reprinted from *Manchester Observer*, 11 Sept. 1819.
17. *Black Dwarf*, 22 Sept. 1819, vol.III, no.38, col.628.
18. *The Medusa*, 25 Sept. 1819, vol.I, no.32, p.352, 355.
19. R. Elbourne, *Music and Tradition in Early Industrial Lancashire, 1780-1840*, (1980) p.125.
20. *The Cap of Liberty*, 29 Sept. 1819, vol.I, no.3, p.48.
21. *Theological and Political Comet or Free-Thinking Englishman*, 2 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.11, pp.85-6. For Shorter see S. Harrison, *Poor Men's Guardians*, (1974) pp.63-4; I. Prothero, *op. cit.*, pp.110, 113-14, 122-3.
22. *The Medusa*, 9 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.34, pp.271-2.
23. *Sherwin's*, *op. cit.*, p.244.
24. *The Cap of Liberty*, 6 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.5, p.76 reprinted from *Manchester Observer*, 2 Oct. 1819.
25. *Black Dwarf*, 6 Oct. 1819, vol.III, no.40, cols. 659-60.
26. *The Briton* ran from September to November 1819. It was published by J. Turner about whom nothing definite is known.
27. *The Republican*, 15 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.7, p.112. The most recent study of Carlile is J.H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth Century Britain*, (1984). *The Republican* was the name reverted to by Carlile when he took over *Sherwin's Political Register* following Peterloo.
28. *The Briton*, 16 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.4, p.32.
29. *The White Hat*, 16 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.1, p.16.
30. *The Cap of Liberty*, 20 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.30, p.112 reprinted from *Manchester Observer*, 16 Oct. 1819.
31. *Black Dwarf*, 20 Oct. 1819, vol.III, no.42, col.692.
32. *Black Dwarf*, 27 Oct. 1819, vol.III, no. 43, cols.707-8.
33. For a full account of the Common Council meeting, *London Alfred*, 22 and 29 Oct. 1819.
34. *The Medusa*, 30 Oct. 1819, vol.I, no.37, p.292. In the same issue Davison also reprinted *Manchester Yeomanry Valour* from the *Manchester Observer*, 18 Sept. 1819.
35. *The Theological and Political Comet*, 6 Nov. 1819, vol.I, no.16, p.125.
36. See biography by Prothero in J.O. Baylen and N.I. Gossman (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Radicals*, pp.111-13.
37. Walmsley refers to them as one of the bitterest, most vituperative pieces of writing in the Peterloo canon. R. Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened*, (Manchester, 1969) p.132.
38. *The Medusa*, 27 Nov. 1819, vol.I, no.41, pp.327-8.
39. *Black Dwarf*, 1 Dec. 1819, vol.III, no.48, cols.797-8. This verse was dated 20 August, 1819. It is not clear why Wooler did not print it earlier assuming it was written at that date and available to him.
40. *The Medusa*, 4 Dec. 1819, vol.I, no.42, p.234. See *Patriotic Song*.
41. *The Medusa*, 7 Jan. 1820, vol.I, no.47, p.371.

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