

PETERLOO: A CONSTABLE'S EYE-VIEW RE-ASSESSED

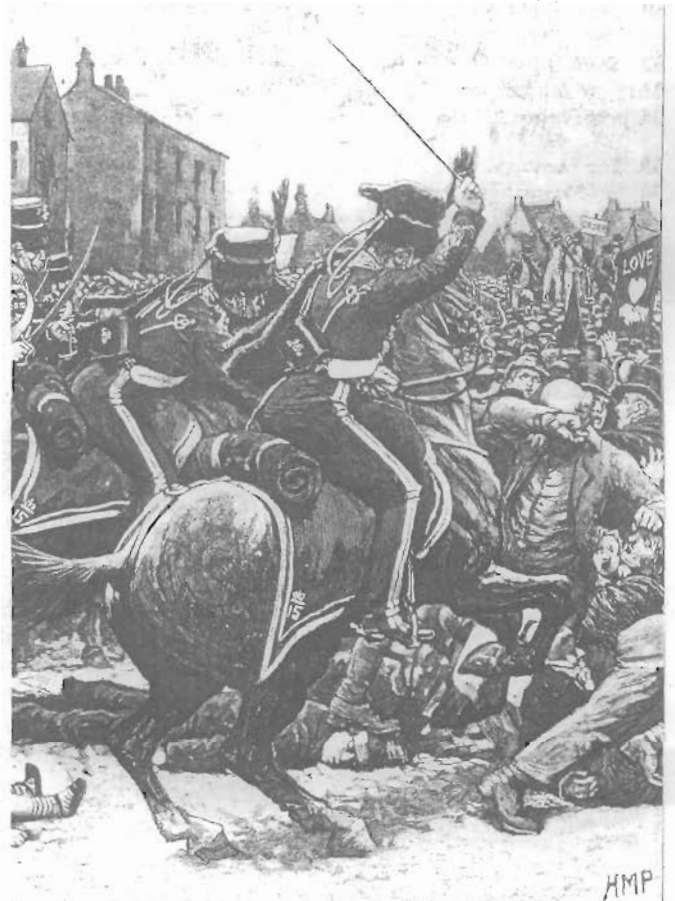
Philip Lawson

The pioneering social histories of modern England written in the post-war era have had many guiding lights. The mantle of socio-economic analysis passed, it seemed, effortlessly from Tawney, Cole and the Hammonds to a generation of younger ideologically committed scholars like Foster, Samuel and Stedman Jones. The detail and colour of everyday life as Britain moved from rural to industrial life is now revealed on a very full canvas indeed, as historians and their enthusiastic students seek out the lacunae in these momentous and oft told events. Over time, approaches to this work have covered the whole spectrum of analytical method: from a straightforward Marxist imperative to a hybrid libertarian cause and effect. Yet within this whole framework common denominators exist and remain constant. Of these, the crudest and most enduring approach sees the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a stepping stone in the advent of industrialization, giving way to economic and social unrest which, in its turn, raised the spectre of popular, political protest.

Those who have pressed on through the voluminous historical accounts of these events in the early nineteenth century would find it difficult to describe them as dull. On the contrary, fact and theory are run together to produce some of the most fascinating and divisive literature available on England's past. The discovery of Peterloo over the last generation, in particular, has more than satisfied Edward Thompson's plea to rescue the lives of ordinary people from the "monstrous condescension of posterity". There is now available a plethora of accounts, analyses, interpretations and mythologies on the events surrounding 16 August 1819 which serve a variety of purposes, and meet the demands of different markets. The question to be asked here, however, is, has this rescue mission gone too far? Have the people been drowned in a surfeit of good historical intent? In examining a case study like Peterloo, over which there has been so much blighted debate and critical comment, it can be argued that one condescension has been replaced by another. The role of the people in the action at St Peter's Field has been plucked from obscurity by serious scholarly endeavour, but in the process of explaining the dynamic of the day's events, the participants have become trapped in an immutable paradigm. This pattern of modern analysis reflects that of the contemporary press to all intents and purposes. On the one hand, there is the school of opinion that views the reformers as little better than a rabble, predictably receiving the fate meted out to it. On the other, the reformers have become elevated in the eyes of many observers to the rank of victims of a generic oppressive authority, valiantly pushing forward a cause that would lead to a brave new democratic world.

Indeed, the immediate early nineteenth-century reaction to Peterloo holds the key to understanding much of the debate that has gone on since. The polarization of opinion after 16 August 1819 was rapid, and is generally perceived by historians to have been finite. Newspapers, pamphlets, broadsheets and cartoons carried the message of Peterloo to a voracious reading public. Consumers of this early

nineteenth-century copy responded no differently than have students and scholars today when confronted with evidence of a classic adversarial conflict. The battle lines appeared to be quickly drawn between sympathy for the defenceless reformers or empathy for the embattled Manchester magistracy charged with policing the day's events.¹ It is an object lesson for history teachers, leading students through divergent contemporary and historical accounts, to appreciate how mythologies and controversies develop over one incident in a nation's past. Moreover the language employed by writers, then and now, to convey these facts invariably inflames the debate further: in one recent study, for example, the Yeomanry were described as the "murderers of Manchester" while another reduced all the events of 16 August to "the St Peter's Field incident".²



A Victorian view of the Hussars charging the People at Peterloo.

Such debate is surely healthy and absolutely necessary to an understanding of Peterloo — even if at times it only tells the reader more about the historian than the events themselves. During these exchanges, however, something of the detail and general context of Peterloo is always lost. And it is in this light that the discovery of any new evidence about Peterloo is of vital importance, for it forces students and scholars to review and reassess accepted historical opinion on this important event in English social history. The account of Robert Mutrie, a special constable on duty at St Peter's Field on 16 August,

certainly falls into this category. Mutrie wrote his story of Peterloo in a letter to his brother-in-law, Archibald Moore, then factor to the Marquess of Bute on the Isle of Rothesay, Scotland.³ The fascinating story told by the constable has recently been examined in *History Today*, and is of immediate importance to those interested in this era of English history for it offers new perspectives on some of the most contentious issues surrounding established analyses of Peterloo.⁴

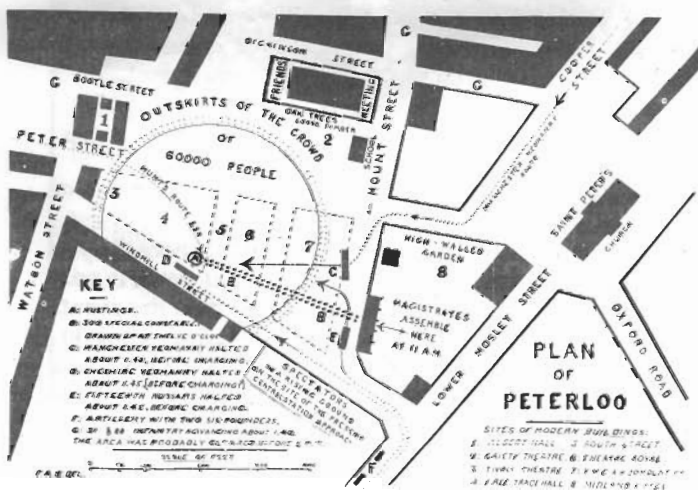
The account, in itself, is a striking eye-witness summary of the events of 16 August and their aftermath, from the pen of someone who suffered or inflicted suffering on others during the many confrontations of those hours. Mutrie's report represents one of those rare sources on Peterloo written for private not public consumption. The constable bared a little of his soul in recounting the events for his brother-in-law because he knew that the editorial detail of his story would go no further. Mutrie did not seek to grind an axe in public about the way he had been treated by his superiors or, what he perceived to be the general ineptitude and predictably unpleasant outcome of official policing policy. The result for historians is a remarkable new snapshot of what it must have been like to be caught up in the crowd and the pandemonium after Henry Hunt began to speak. No less interesting or important is the fact that this report presents a view of events from the side of the policing authority, albeit the lowest rung, without the sort of malice or prejudice towards the reformers that afflicts other accounts emanating from official sources.

It is not intended here to reiterate the analysis made elsewhere about Mutrie's letter, but, rather, to expand upon some of the points in his narrative which offer correctives and fresh insights on traditional assumptions about Peterloo: some of which have caused comment and debate. Mutrie raised three issues. The first concerned the constables' lack of prior knowledge of what the Yeomanry and mounted regulars intended on 16 August in terms of crowd control. This ignorance resulted in the constables being mistaken for armed reformers, and Mutrie himself enduring three blows to the head from the blades of erstwhile comrades. A second point, linked directly to the first, is Mutrie's observation that the reformers came "on the green in regular military order with monstrous clubs over their shoulders", or as he later described them, "pistols". In other words part of the crowd attending at Hunt's rally carried weapons of one sort or another and appeared ready for trouble. Mutrie put it thus: "I felt much for them, for I was well aware that if not dispersed by the Military from that green, then,

when dispersed of their own accord they would end their day's work by murder and expire at night on the way home when perhaps more lives would have been lost".⁵ The third issue of importance to this examination, is Mutrie's discourse on the hopelessness of trying to mop up civil disorders and riot in the streets of Manchester in the week after Peterloo, using troops as policemen. Once the Riot Act had been read by the anxious magistrate, Norris, under pressure from Captain William Booth of the regulars, Mutrie was sensitive to the woeful consequences that would befall "many a poor devil" caught in the sights of the infantry rifles. Overall, this account represents one of the least embroidered and dispassionate sources with which to reconstruct the events of Peterloo and its aftermath.

The immediate response to the publication of Mutrie's evidence in March 1988 revealed a good deal about today's debate over Peterloo. A couple of newspaper articles, for example, saw the chance to inject a little presentism into a perennially lively discussion. Here was an opportunity to draw out some of, what the editorial staff saw as, the underlying messages of Peterloo in order to remind readers of its important lessons for the late twentieth century. In the case of the *Sunday Telegraph*, this new evidence became a convenient tool with which to dismantle "views based as much on emotional conviction as anything else". The piece concluded that Mutrie had somehow, undermined the view that "troops were deliberately ordered to stifle growing demands by workers for democracy". But the author warned that it might all be for naught because "the traditional account of Peterloo is probably too firmly ingrained in left-wing folklore to be discredited now".⁶ The *Manchester Evening News* also carried a summary of the account, though it proved much less ideological in intent. This report cut right to the heart of the matter by observing that Mutrie's letter "seriously challenges the traditional view that the victims were mere lambs to the slaughter". Perhaps the most striking part of this newspaper article, however, was the delightful turn of phrase used to encapsulate the impact of the letter on scholars of this period, which the author clearly viewed as important. With (unintentional?) irony the author opened his piece by stating, "startling new evidence about the infamous Peterloo massacre in Manchester has put historians in a tizzy!"⁷ This is dramatic stuff, indicating first and foremost that Peterloo can touch the rawest of political nerves today, as it did 170 years ago. But, more important, the events surrounding 16 August 1819 offer a constant reminder to historians that, as Butterfield put it, "the truth of history is no simple matter, all packed and parcelled ready for handling in the market-place".⁸ Peterloo is just one of several episodes in the English past where there is a need to keep a firm historical hand on the temporal and contextual significance of the outcome.

A further focus for comment about Mutrie's piece has centred on the military component in the interpretations of these events. This critique ranges from detail about whether or not the mounted regulars who charged into the crowd on St Peter's Field have been identified correctly, to broader concerns about the lack of understanding shown by historians over the concept of controlling large crowds in the days before organized policing forces were trained for this task.⁹ This represents fair comment and criticism, while also indicating an avenue of future study which could well break the old moulds of thought on these events. Whatever the direction ahead, there is no doubt, as Mutrie's letter



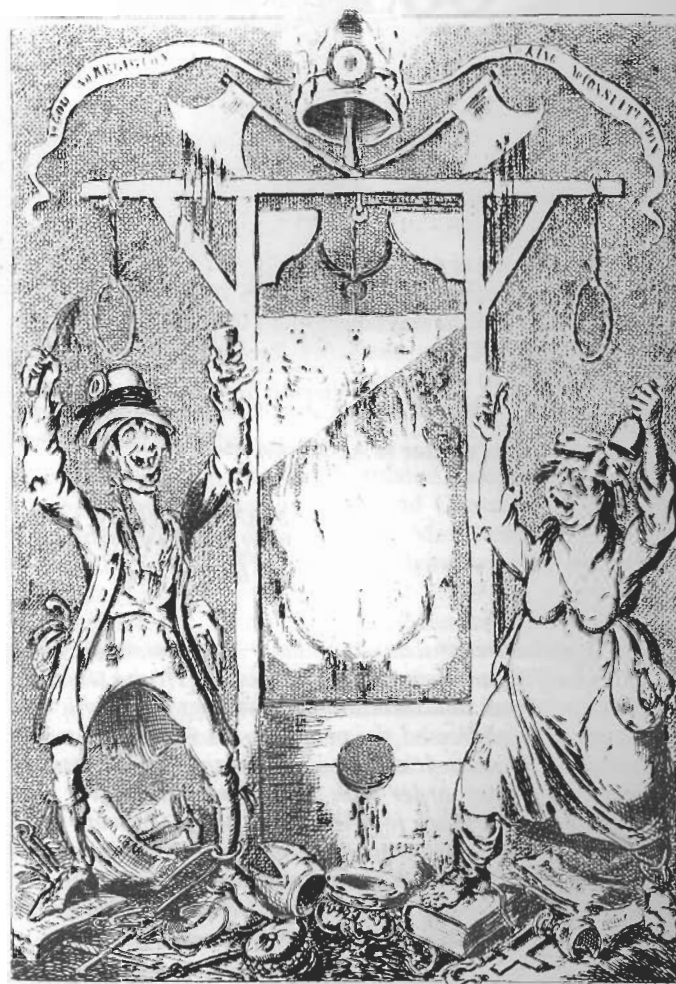
Plan of Peterloo.

illustrates, that an understanding of the military and policing aspects of Peterloo is absolutely necessary to an appreciation of the dynamic governing the action on 16 August. Collusion of the élites or a finely crafted military operation to crush the reform movement in the north of England hardly troubled the constable when he wrote of his experiences. The sad truth of the matter for Mutrie was that he had no faith in either the yeomanry or the regulars to police the crowd successfully: which, in turn, meant that the shedding of blood and endless nights of mayhem on the streets of Manchester could not be avoided.

Why Mutrie felt this way is best answered by the fact that the military themselves had no faith in their policing abilities, and were more than aware of their shortcomings in controlling civilian gatherings that threatened to breach the peace. The "aversion" of the vacillating stipendiary magistrate, Norris, to allowing the Riot Act to be read, and thus commencing "hostilities" after Hunt's arrest, reflected a similar sad recognition of the difficulty evident in crowd control measures of the time. Mounted regulars received no training in such procedures, nothing appeared in their training manuals to give guidance in these situations.¹⁰ The horsemen could certainly be used to intimidate civilians, but the main purpose of cavalry in this era was to gallop across the open fields of Europe as part of shock tactics in a full scale military engagement. The Yeomanry offered even less hope of keeping the peace in mass gatherings. Formal training of any sort for these troops of horse proved minimal, and discipline in most Yeomanry regiments, including the Manchester and Cheshire, was of poor standard. In this light, little surprise should be expressed at the scene of terror which developed after Hunt began his speech. The Yeomanry knew that they wished to snatch Hunt from the platform but had not the expertise to do it without trampling, killing and maiming as they went. After raising the ire of those surrounding and protecting Hunt, they then had to call on the ill-prepared regulars for assistance. In the ensuing *mêlée* the constables suffered the same fate as some of the reformers, and panic reigned supreme.

As a concluding and connected point on Mutrie's evidence about arms and armed force, it might be helpful to return to the condescension issue, through his observation that some of the reformers carried "monstrous clubs" or "pistols" as they assembled on St Peter's Field. The question of whether or not the reformers were armed has become central to many narratives and interpretations of Peterloo, and it is not difficult to see why. For those favouring the view that this was a peaceful gathering that included women and children, the thesis that the action of the authorities represented premeditated brutality, oppression and even class war, appears cut and dried. On the other side, those who accept the view that armed troublemakers in the crowd were looking for a confrontation can interpret these actions as a natural outflow in early nineteenth-century England of recalcitrant citizens meeting head on with a legitimate policing authority. The only common factor in these extremities are the unedifying consequences from the "hostilities".

Much of this debate has clearly become an act of faith, and the real value of Mutrie's description is that it injects some timely realism into the over abundant posturing and mythology surrounding Peterloo. Though he expressed regret at the fact, it did not shock Mutrie to see the reformers, especially those nearest the platform, carrying some means of defending themselves or marching in



The Radical Arms

The Radical Arms. Etching by G. Cruikshank.

military order onto the Field. Mutrie's account admits a degree of control by the reformers over their destiny on 16 August that modern scholarship, obsessed with apportioning blame, tends to overlook. This contemporary witness clearly recognized that ordinary citizens were capable of seizing the initiative on reform, even if the odds were not stacked in their favour. In this instance, the people appeared determined to make their will known and defend Hunt's right to speak on these vital reform issues. They had done it before and would do so again. The crowd, as Mutrie observed, was not some homogeneous entity. It contained all sorts, from ardent and armed reformers, organizers, committed radicals to interested bystanders. Of these, many were obviously willing to stand and suffer for their beliefs whatever the consequences to troops, horses, constables, comrades and the innocents, young and old, in the throng. That these events brought forth some remarkably brave people cannot be questioned after reading Mutrie's account of the mopping up operation after the crowd dispersed. Nor can the fact that the inhabitants of Manchester uninformed in the reform gathering must have been terrified of the street battles, and desperate for the authorities to bring them under control. Mutrie did in fact exhibit a sensitivity to all these facts, avoiding the new condescension so readily visited by historians on the "many a poor devil" caught up in that most "dreadful day". All in all his account provides a most welcome new window by which to view this important episode in England's past.



Peterloo jug (Saddleworth Museum).

Robert Mutrie's letter to Archibald Moore

MANCHESTER
THURSDAY EVENING
too late for post

My Dear Sir,

. . . It was a dreadful day Monday — I was at my post with them keeping an open passage betwixt the House where the magistrate was stationed and the Hustings from which the Great men addressed the people — In witnessing such a multitude of poor deluded people coming on the green in regular military order with monstrous clubs over their shoulders I felt much for them, for I was well aware that if not dispersed by the Military from that green, then, when dispersed of their own accord they would end their days work by murder and expire at night on the way home when perhaps many more lives would have been lost.

As it was, the Yeomanry came on the grounds gave three cheers and charged — not very quick, and using only the backs of their sabres — the constables were close behind them when the 15th Dragoons made their appearance and without previous knowledge of what was done they mistook us constables with our batons for the Reformers with pistols (I suppose) for in one moment upwards of 100 of us are laid on our backs — I was down but got up by laying hold a horses rein without being hurt — I was afterwards, struck on the head with a sabre of the 15th and then by the Cheshire Troop. Fortunately neither of them hurt me much — I got to the Hustings and in the scuffle for plunder I got hold of a very grand cap of liberty from off one of the standards — I thought I could have secured this in my pocket, but unluckily it was red cloth lined with Tin so I could not squeeze it together.

After the rough usage I had received I did not much like the idea of trusting myself on foot among the soldiers again, so I ordered my charger whose back I never left from 2 o'clock afternoon till 3 o'clock next morning. — being

employed riding up and down the streets all the time with Mr. Norris the Magistrate and the Military — whereon the Military went and constable Mr. [illeg.] with them — I got one troop of the 15th to attend to with some foot soldiers — if you look at your map you will find that the most notorious part of the Town New Cross is in your neighbourhood — well on this delightful station I took my place — we charged and cleared the streets 50 times without using either swords or guns, but all to no purpose for the people came out again as soon as we retreated to the Cross.

The officer, Capt. Booth who commanded the troop of the 15th after we had been exposed to the pelting of stones for an hour or two got into the most furious passion and swore to Mr. Norris if he did not immediately read the riot act he would order his men to their quarters.

Mr. Norris was very averse that we should commence hostilities and with great reluctance gave his consent that it should be read. The moment it was read Capt. B. ordered the Infantry officer to form a hollow square in the centre of the Cross, we all took shelter in the square when the word was given to fire in all directions — the square then opened and the horse charged every way upon the crowd — my mare grew quite mad and carried me over the back of many a poor Devil. — two people were shot in the first charge just opposite my room window. You may be sure I was (as well as my Mare) very thankful to get relieved at 3 o'clock in the morning. I got very little sleep at all that week, as being in the very heart of the disturbances, I was liable to be called on every hour in the night. Hunt has got out on bail and returned from Lancaster here the night before last — he has taken up his residence at his friend Mr. Johnston's cottage. I think he will not venture to call another meeting but I am much afraid we shall have more disturbances in the neighbourhood — there is a very bad disposition yet left in the people which nothing but blood will satisfy — they continue to meet in the night-time for Military Exercise — this does not look like peace.

NOTES

1. The polarization of opinion at the time of Peterloo can be found in reports like that in the *Manchester Mercury* of 19 Aug. 1819, which attacked the reformers and the one in the *Manchester Observer* of 28 Aug. 1819, which supported them. Similar ideological divides can be seen today in the works like, R. Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened* (Manchester, 1969), which displays little sympathy for the fate of the reformers, and E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1968), which, in turn, presents official action in the most unflattering light.
2. J. Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism (Oxford, 1985), p.113, and J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), p.359, respectively.
3. Bute Mss. 373, Mounstuart, Scotland. I am indebted to the Marquess of Bute and his archivist Mr. Alexander Hunter for permission to use this manuscript. All quotations taken from Mutrie's letter refer to this source.
4. *History Today*, vol.38, March 1988, p.26.
5. Hunt himself had feared that the participants might behave provocatively, see Belchem, *Hunt*, p.106.
6. 6 March 1988.
7. 29 Feb. 1988.
8. *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York, 1965), p.132.
9. See, for example, the letters published in *History Today*, vol.38, June 1988, p.60.
10. I am grateful to the P.F.R. Mileham for references on this matter which he drew from his own work on yeomanry regiments and related topics.