

# THOMPSON ON PETERLOO

## E.P. Thompson

In 1969 an anonymous review of Robert Walmsley's, *Peterloo : The Case Reopened* appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It subsequently transpired that the writer had been E.P. Thompson. We reprint this review as an important contribution to the debate over Peterloo. Apart from some slight editorial amendments this is as it appeared at the time. We are grateful to Mr. Thompson and the *T.L.S.* for permission to reprint

The 150th anniversary of the massacre at St Peter's Field in Manchester, August 16 1819, saw the appearance of three new publications, two of which may be described as occasional. The first is a well presented folder of plans, prints and broadsides prepared by the Manchester Public Libraries. The second is a popular account ("the first book for the general reader" . . . as the blurb has it) by Miss Joyce Marlow. Miss Marlow offers some general background to explain what led up to Peterloo, this is second-hand and generally over-simplified; but her narrative of the events of the day itself is closely observed, well-written and deftly employs a little original material. On this account her book deserves to find some readers; although the *first* book for the general reader must remain, as it has always been, Samuel Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical*.

Bamford's evidence is not, of course, privileged and beyond reach of examination. He was one of the crowd ridden down by Yeomanry and Hussars — a thing likely to induce bias in the victims. And he was later found guilty before a special jury at York Assizes for "assembly with unlawful banners at an unlawful meeting for the purpose of inciting the subjects of our lord the King to contempt and hatred of the government", and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. This clear decision in an impartial court of justice suggests him not only as a biased but also as a compromised witness. No matter such as this escapes the watchful eye of Mr. Robert Walmsley.

Mr. Walmsley's *Peterloo : The Case Reopened* is not so much occasioned by the anniversary: it is, in itself, an occasion, and is — the blurb tells us — "the fruit of half a lifetime's research". The 585 pages of this fruit swing from the impeccable bough of the Manchester University Press. Mr. Walmsley, a Manchester antiquarian bookseller, first had his interest in Peterloo aroused some thirty years ago during the course of research into the family history of the Hultons of Hulton. William Hulton (1787-1864) was chairman of the magistrates who overlooked the field of Peterloo and gave to the Yeomanry the fatal order to advance. In the course of his researches Mr. Walmsley became convinced, not only that William Hulton had been unfairly treated by historians, but that he and his fellow magistrates were the victims of nothing less than a Radical conspiracy to falsify the events of that day — a conspiracy fostered by Hunt, Bamford, and Richard Carlile, furthered by Archibald Prentice (author of *Historical Sketches of Manchester*) and John Edward Taylor (before he sobered down and founded the *Manchester Guardian*), and in which John Tyas (the correspondent of *The Times* who witnessed

events from the hustings), the Rev. Edward Stanley, and dozens of others were witting or unwitting accessories — a conspiracy so compelling that even Donald Read, in his sober and by no means radical study of *Peterloo* (1957), failed to detect it.



*Samuel Bamford in old age.*

It is necessary to make clear what Mr. Walmsley's book is not, as well as what it is. It is not a general interpretative account of Peterloo within its political or local background. Nothing is said of radicalism or reaction before January, 1819; very little is said about the government of Manchester in 1819, or to explain the character, role, or reputation of such important actors as Joseph Nadin and Henry Hunt before they emerge on the 1819 stage. This is not a book for the general reader, unless he has taken the precaution of reading (at least) Bamford — or Prentice — and Dr. Read beforehand. Nor is it, altogether, a book for the scholar, although it has competent scholarly apparatus, adequate footnotes and bibliography, and a very good index. It is not based on extensive newly discovered evidence, although Mr. Walmsley introduces interesting new material from the Rev. W.R. Hay (the prominent clerical magistrate) and from William Hulton himself. In particular there has been no new search of Home Office, legal, or military papers in the Public Record Office.

Such new material as there is relates largely to the Hultons of Hulton. We learn not only that there was a Ranulph Hulton who was sub-deacon at Manchester Collegiate Church in 1465 but (more interestingly) that William's mother's horse "Church and King" won the Kersal Moor races in 1794; and we are given a most revealing view of William himself, addressing the anniversary dinner of the Manchester Pitt Club two years before Peterloo, proposing the toast, "The Pride of Britain and the Admiration of the World — Our Glorious Constitution", and rolling around the room the unabashed and unalloyed clichés of the British ancien régime:

*Under this vast aegis repose our liberties, encircled with wisely-ordained laws, and blessed with the sanction of a pure religion . . . Shall we then, sell the black-letter volumes of our great charters for any spurious editions printed with type of the National Convention, for Cochrane, Burdett and Company?*

If Mr. Walmsley had confined himself to writing a brief biography of William Hulton he would have served historians well. It would have seemed somewhat quaint and provincial, smelling of fine vellum and reverence; and in such a work an exculpatory chapter on Peterloo would have passed without remark. But this chapter has expanded to become some 500 pages of Mr. Walmsley's text, and it cannot pass without remark. Nor has it. One of the book's more ecstatic reviewers (in the *Daily Telegraph*) has declared that Mr. Walmsley's "massive research challenges the accepted version", his book "leaves no fact unchallenged and uncorroborated, no document unread *in full*, no source unchecked", and that it "utterly discredits" the accounts in Prentice and Bamford. Not very many readers, perhaps, will struggle their whole way through the book; and of those who do even fewer will follow, point by point, its exceedingly repetitious, but at the same time involuted apologetics. But all — or nearly all — will come from it with a bemused impression that, in all this turning and wheeling around a few points, something must have been proved, somebody must have been exposed. And as such the book will enter the folklore of history.

Mr. Walmsley is interested, chiefly, in the events of the day of Peterloo, and even more closely in the events of one half-hour of that day — between 1.15 and 1.45 p.m. — from the time when Henry Hunt arrived on the hustings to the time when the field was empty of all but shawls, bonnets, sticks, and cavalry adjusting their saddle-girths. Obsessively he rides up and down that field and its environs, obsessively he rides up and down the five or ten minutes between the arrival of the Yeomanry at the edge of the field and the dispersal of the crowd, summoning witnesses in the newspaper press of the weeks following, dragging them back by their collars, making them pace over the yards before and behind the hustings, cross-examining reminiscences and confronting them with conflicting depositions, galloping off into the suburbs of the twentieth century to interrogate suspicious stragglers, like F.A. Bruton, the author of the careful *The Story of Peterloo* (1919).

At the centre of his obsession is this: what happened on that day was unintentional, and the crowd (or part of it) was the first aggressor. The magistrates in their house over-looking the hustings were justly alarmed by the proceedings, both by tumults which had preceded August 16 and by the radical rhetoric and military array of the crowd on the day. With a nice sense of legalistic propriety

they waited until Hunt and his fellow speakers were on the hustings and then ordered the constables to arrest them; this Joseph Nadin, the deputy-constable, refused to do without military aid; the magistrates sent for Yeomanry and Hussars, and the Yeomanry arrived first, fortuitously; the Yeomanry were ordered to support the constables in the execution of the warrant, and they advanced in reasonable order and without aggressive intention or action into the crowd; but the crowd then closed in upon them in a menacing manner and the Yeomanry were assailed, at some point close to the hustings, by brickbats and sticks hurled by a portion of the crowd; most of the Yeomanry kept their heads until Hunt and his fellows had been arrested, and then, increasingly assailed by brickbats and hemmed in on all sides by a threatening crowd, were forced to beat off their attackers (with the flats of their sabres) in self-defence. The magistrates, observing their predicament in the midst of a threatening multitude, were forced to order the Hussars to come to their rescue and to clear the field. All followed on. And the radicals have made party-political propaganda out of their own aggression ever since.

One needs a book like this, every now and then, to recall that the patron saint of historians is St. Sisyphus. Before we enquire what facts he has actually adduced, Mr. Walmsley must be acquitted of one charge. He is certainly not guilty of wilful suppression or distortion, although there are many inconvenient facts unmentioned and others which are bludgeoned into unrecognizable pulp. He could not have written this book unless he believed in its truth, obsessively. No one but a true Church-and-King believer, an authentic descendant and vindicator of the shopkeepers on horseback who made up the Manchester Yeomanry, could have cantered, brandishing his sword of polemic, into so many blind alleys of argument as he has. The printed — and, to historians, long known and readily available — documents which he quotes, he quotes repetitiously and in full.

Yet the fact is that Mr. Walmsley has *no* new facts to adduce about this half-hour. His book is a sustained essay in special pleading about minutiae, in which he is very much disposed to believe that A did happen and very much disposed to believe that B did not happen. Such a conviction, sustained over 500 pages, is bound — whatever the press of defenceless facts against it — to reach the hustings in the end and to cut down the "radical" flags. Nevertheless, let us follow Mr. Walmsley on to his chosen part of the field.

Did the Yeomanry ride quietly up to the hustings to effect the arrests, or did they (as "radicals" mythologize) begin to strike out with their sabres from their first entry into the crowd? Were they attacked, before they reached the hustings, by sticks and brickbats? The overwhelming majority of witnesses to these events may be suspected of "prejudice", as parties to the event, since the greater part belonged to the crowd who were ridden into, and the remainder belonged to the magistracy, special constables, and the Yeomanry who did the riding. Their evidence is not therefore worthless, since they were subject to cross-examination in the courts, and betrayed the customary signs of veracity or inconsistency. However, historians, from 1819 until 1969, have attempted to simplify the extreme difficulties of sifting this evidence (and the reports of partisan newspapers, on either side) by looking for witnesses who cannot be accused of belonging, in any obvious sense, to either contesting party. There *are* a few such observers: uncommitted and merely curious

spectators on the fringes of the crowd: householders whose windows overlooked the field: and (notably) several press reporters who were afforded places on the hustings — John Tyas of *The Times*, John Smith of the *Liverpool Mercury*, Edward Baines of the *Leeds Mercury* — and the Rev. Edward Stanley, a clergyman who had private business on that day with Mr. Buxton, who owned the house which the magistrates chose as their headquarters, and who stayed on to observe the whole affair from a window directly above the magistrates.

Mr. Stanley, in a careful account written within a few months of the affair, was unequivocal. On the brickbats, for example: "I indeed saw no missile weapons used throughout the whole transaction, but . . . the dust at the hustings soon partially obscured everything that took place near that particular spot." Mr. Walmsley seizes upon this honest statement as merely negative: Stanley could not see the brickbats because of the dust. (He does not notice that, if he accepts Stanley's testimony here, he must for the same reason question Hulston's testimony at the trial of Hunt: "When the Yeomanry advanced to the hustings I saw bricks and stones flying" — since Hulston's viewpoint was almost identical to that of Stanley, and magistrates must peer through the same dust as clergymen). Uncommitted witnesses, however, can be found on the hustings, beyond the rising dust. Thus Tyas, who was reporting from the hustings, on the Yeomanry's approach to the hustings: "Not a brickbat was thrown at them . . . during this period." Mr. Walmsley gets around this by quoting Captain Birley, the scarcely impartial witness who commanded the Yeomanry on the field, to the effect that the first attack was made upon his men at the rear of the hustings, which Tyas could not observe. Mr. Walmsley does not report the evidence of Smith (at Hunt's trial) who was over six feet high and had a good viewpoint to the left of the hustings:

*I saw no stone or brick-bats thrown at them; in my judgement, if any stones or brick-bats had been thrown I was in a situation likely to have seen it, my eyes and countenance were in a direction towards the military up to the moment of their reaching the hustings.*

The question of the manner in which the Yeomanry approached the hustings is much the same. Smith declared in a letter to the Earl of Derby written two days after Peterloo that they "rushed upon the people, cutting right and left", and repeated the same general testimony in *Redford v. Birley* three years later. He did not attest to the fact during the intervening trial of Hunt, presumably because, as he was led by counsel through his evidence, he was not asked this question; but Mr. Walmsley finds the omission so significant as to be sinister and to discredit his whole evidence — he "thought fit to modify" his "first impressions" when under oath.

The Rev. Edward Stanley receives very much the same treatment. His testimony (which influenced the accounts of those two "radical" writers, F.A. Bruton and Dr. Read) was plain:

*It has often been asked when and where the cavalry struck the people. I can only say that from the moment they began to force their way through the crowd towards the hustings swords were up and swords were down, but whether they fell with the sharp or flat side, of course I cannot pretend to give an opinion.*

Mr. Walmsley demolishes this by showing that, three years later, in the action of *Redford v. Birley*, "Stanley's



*William Hulston.*

testimony under oath was not the testimony given in his narrative":

*Did you watch the advance of the cavalry from their place up to the hustings?*

*I did.*

*Did you see either sticks, or stones or anything of the kind used against the cavalry in their advance up to the hustings?*

*Certainly not.*

*Did you see any resistance whatever to the cavalry, except the thickness of the meeting?*

*None.*

*Do I understand you to say you saw them surround the hustings, or not?*

*Surround I could not say, for the other side of the hustings, of course, was partially eclipsed by the people upon it.*

*But you saw them encircle part?*

*Encircle part.*

*Did you see what was done when they got there? . . .*

*I saw the swords up and down, the orators tumbled or thrown over, and the mob dispersed.*

Mr. Walmsley — and it must be insisted that this is a fair example of his method — is seized with the misapprehension that the juxtaposition of these two passages of Stanley's amount to an astounding discrepancy ("Bruton appeared quite oblivious that these discrepancies existed"), and he canters about the pages with it like a captured Cap of Liberty:

*In his printed narrative the "swords were up and the swords were down" on their way up to the hustings: On oath, Stanley testified he saw "swords up and down" when they got to the hustings.*

But — oh, St. Sisyphus! — there is no discrepancy here at all. Stanley, being led by counsel, had to reply as exactly as he could to the exact question asked, which is, in this case, what he saw done at the hustings. And he uses the identical phrase which he had used in his earlier narrative because, being an accurate man (he was later a president of the Manchester Statistical Society), he was describing what he could actually see through rising dust at a distance of some hundred yards — the swords rising and falling.

Mr. Walmsley allows that there were one or two other witnesses who shared Stanley's illusions, but he implies that the evidence is slender and unsupported. Such a conclusion is made possible only by the cavalier way in which Mr. Walmsley passes by the evidence adduced in the inquest on John Lees of Oldham, at which at least nine witnesses testified to seeing the Yeomanry cut at the people on their way to the hustings:

*Coroner: At what pace did they come?*

*Jonah Andrew (cotton spinner): I think it was a trot. It was as fast as they could get, and the constables were making way for them.*

*Q. Did you see them striking any one?*

*A. Yes; I saw them striking as they came along, and they struck one person when they were about twenty yards from me . . . they squandered to the right and left before they came to me . . .*

*Q. Well: What then?*

*A. Why they began to cut and hack at the people like butchers.*

\*

*William Norris Buckley (merchant, and nephew to one of the active magistrates): There was a complete convulsion when the soldiers rode their horses among the multitude, and they seemed to be laying about them with their swords, in their way to the hustings; and when they arrived there, they cut down the people that held the flags.*

\*

*Coroner: Do you know anything of the death of John Lees?*

*Elizabeth Farren: No, I do not.*

*Q. Then why do you come here?*

*A. Because I was cut.*

*Q. Where were you cut?*

*A. On the forehead (Here the witness raised her bonnet and cap, as also the bandage over her forehead, and exhibited a large wound not quite healed).*

*The Coroner: I don't mean that woman. Where were you at the time you were cut?*

*A. About thirty yards from the house where the Justices were, amongst the special constables . . .*

*Q. Were you cut as the Cavalry went to the hustings, or on their return?*

*A. I was cut as they were going towards the hustings. I had with me this child (showing the child she held in her arms). I was frightened for its safety and to protect it, held it close to my side with the head downward, to avoid the blow. I desired them to spare my child, and I was directly cut on my forehead.*

*Q. What passed then?*

*A. I became insensible . . .*

None of this, or similar, evidence at the inquest on John Lees is cited by Mr. Walmsley. The witnesses, and in particular the last one, were clearly highly prejudiced. The counsel for the family of the deceased offered to bring any number of further witnesses to prove the same facts, but were prevented by the coroner; the counsel for the Manchester constables brought forward several witnesses (including Joseph Nadin) who contradicted this evidence (and who saw the controversial brickbats) and could no doubt have brought forward others. All that can be said is that the witnesses for the former appear to be more various in their occupations and commitments and to offer more authentic testimony.

This is relevant to Mr. Walmsley's large claim to have dispersed from the field all previous historians, since his neglect of the evidence presented at this inquest is in striking contrast to the exceptional weight which he places upon the evidence presented for the defence in *Redford v. Birley*. The Oldham inquest, upon a victim who died, most probably of injuries sustained at Peterloo, was a turbulent and ill-conducted affair, at which the reformers sought to bring forward evidence leading to a verdict of "wilful murder" against the Yeomanry. But it was held within weeks of the event, when neither the authorized nor the unauthorized versions had congealed; the testimonies have authenticity and freshness, and the very breaches in legal formality lead to scores of revealing polemical encounters. *Redford v. Birley*, on the other hand, was held three years after Peterloo; it was a civil action for damages by one of the injured against the commander and several members of the Yeomanry. In the interval there had been the trial of *Hunt*, press outcry, parliamentary debates, demands for enquiry; memories had dimmed and the evidence had been many times rehearsed; and the Manchester authorities offered for the first time a unified and well-drilled defence of their actions. Mr. Walmsley has a touching faith in the absolute historical verity of legal decisions (when they confirm his own conclusions), and the fact that the jury found against *Redford* appears to him to substantiate at every point this tardily mounted official version and, moreover, to brand *Prentice* and *Bamford* — who continued to pass on their own version — as wilful deceivers of posterity.

This is central to his argument. The 580 pages of the Oldham inquest are "interminable proceedings"; which may be largely discounted; but the 632 pages of three-year-chewed cud in *Redford v. Birley* are commended as providing a "cloud of witnesses" to prove that it was not the Yeomanry at all but the crowd which attacked. But it is characteristic of Mr. Walmsley's polemical method that he never does settle down, in any systematic way, to examine what *Redford v. Birley* did, or did not, "prove".

In fact, an analysis of the trial gives these results: on the first of Mr. Walmsley's disputed points, twenty-nine of *Redford's* witnesses swore that they did not see brickbats, stones, or any form of resistance by the crowd to the Yeomanry before they reached the hustings, whereas seventeen of Captain *Birley's* witnesses swore that they did. Among *Redford's* twenty-nine witnesses were seven weavers, one fustian-cutter, one carver and gilder, two cotton manufacturers, one pattern-drawer, one Church of England clergyman (*Stanley*), one dissenting minister, one Quaker surgeon, three gentlemen, one salesman, four journalists (including *Tyas*, *Baines* and *Smith*), one chemist, two householders over-looking the field, and one member of the Manchester Yeomanry. Among *Birley's* seventeen were the Deputy-Constable (*Nadin*), two of the committee of magistrates (*Hulton* and *Hay*),

one merchant's agent, one calico-printer, one policeman, two lawyers, one gentleman, one farm steward, and at least six special constables. The former would appear to be the more representative group, with the greatest number of independently placed witnesses.

On Mr. Walmsley's second disputed point — whether the Yeomanry struck out with their sabres on the way to the hustings — the honours are more even: rather more and more various — witnesses said they did than said they did not. The fact that the jury (which was a special jury) found for Birley does not, in any case, indicate anything about their judgment on these parts of the evidence, since they were directed by the judge "that if the defendants were acting in the legal discharge of their duty, being called upon by the magistracy to act, the verdict ought to be for the defendants". Since the fact that the magistracy ordered the Yeomanry into the crowd is one of the few facts about Peterloo which was never disputed, the jury had no alternative; but a verdict reached on such a basis can have no binding power on the judgment of posterity.

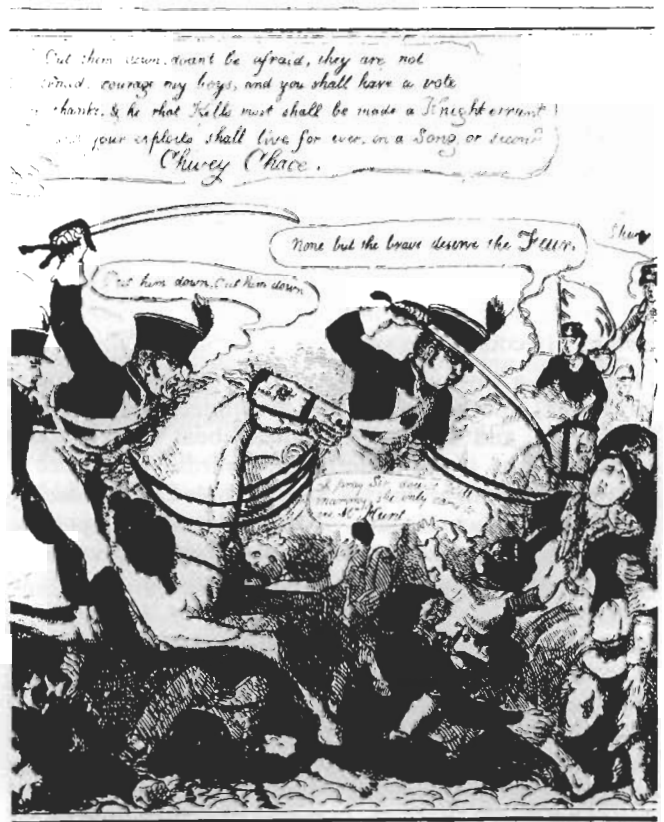
In contrast to his faith in the "cloud of witnesses" in *Redford v. Birley*, Mr. Walmsley evidently found the more authentic evidence given at the Oldham inquest too painful to read with precision. His few, selective references to it are generally inaccurate. Here is an example. He writes that one witness

*testified that he heard one of the Yeomanry say "there is that villain Saxton; run him through." which in the printed report of the proceedings is italicized, apparently to make it clear that it corroborated John Tyas's report in The Times. It did. The words were almost identical. Tyas had written: "There is that villain Saxton; do you run him through the body." This passage has been cited in modern times [footnote citing E.P. Thompson] as convincing testimony, without adding the information that this witness, "muttering to himself", was dismissed from the courtroom as an incredible one.*

The passage deserves detailed criticism, as exemplifying Mr. Walmsley's pursuit of imaginary molehills and his ignorance of tangible mountains. The suggestion that the words quoted were italicized to indicate that they corroborated Tyas's report is pure attribution; it is very much more probable that they were italicized to distinguish quoted matter from the witnesses' own words. If Mr. Walmsley had been discussing evidence supporting the Yeomanry he would probably have found that two witnesses corroborating each other offered final proof; in this case he suggests that corroboration suggests collusion. The witness, it is true, is reported as withdrawing, muttering, but there is nothing in the report to suggest that he was dismissed as "incredible"; he was dismissed because the coroner was out of patience, was seeking to abbreviate the proceedings, and was refusing to take evidence which did not bear directly upon the wounding of John Lees by the hustings; and the witness was muttering because he was not permitted to relate all the facts about the Yeomanry which he knew:

*Coroner: Do you mean to state, that you saw these two people, Harrison and Shelmerdine, wound any body?*

*James Walker: I don't know that I saw Harrison wound any body, but I saw him attempt to wound both me and Mr. Saxton; and if I had not jumped back, I am sure he would have cut me. I saw Shelmerdine inflict a wound upon a person*



## MANCHESTER HEROES

Detail from *Manchester Heroes*.

afterwards.

*Q. Near the hustings?*

*A. No.*

*Q. Then this is the conclusion of your evidence, that you neither saw Shelmerdine or Harrison wound any person at the hustings? Which was it that attempted to strike you?*

*A. Harrison:*

*The Coroner: That is all I ask you.*

*The Witness: But I have not stated all I know. I saw different men wounded after that.*

*The Coroner: You are told, that is not evidence. Go about your business.*

*(The Witness withdrew, muttering.)*

The witness was not, in any case, the witness cited by E.P. Thompson, unless Mr. Walmsley has access to an edition of *The Making of the English Working Class* which is unknown to us. Mr. Thompson cites Nathan Broadhurst, who appears some 300-odd pages earlier in the inquest, and who also testified (collusively?) to the attack on Saxton, using the words: "There's Saxton, damn him, run him through." This witness was not dismissed, nor accused of incredibility, nor did he mutter.

This, then, is Mr. Walmsley's method. He batters away so remorselessly at every piece of evidence accusatory of the Yeomanry that the reader, out of sheer tedium, is inclined to submit. The crowd attacked the peaceable Yeomanry (behind the hustings, where no one but Captain Birley could see it) and all followed on:

*All the actors in that tragedy were victims. The radicals on the platform, the militants in the crowd, the peaceable in the crowd, the Yeomanry, the constables, the magistrates in their room, the captives in the New Bayley, were each and severally as much*

*the victims of the tragic chain of circumstances as the dead special constable lying in the Bull's Head, the wounded in the infirmary, and Mrs. Partington, crushed to death, lying at the bottom of the cellar steps.*

If a case is constructed largely out of negations, it is logical that at the centre of it there will be, not a fact, but a hole. Mr. Walmsley is well aware of this hole — who *did*, then, attack the Yeomanry? — and he would have been wisest to have left it empty; but he could not resist the urge to fill it, and it is here, at the heart of his thesis, that his special pleading becomes excessive.

There was a row, in February, 1819, at Sandy Brow in Stockport, where some cavalry attempted to seize a Cap of Liberty, and where the Radicals beat them off and crowded about it for months afterwards. Therefore it follows, as the night the day, that the hole can be filled by the Stockport contingent. The evidence? They were behind the hustings. That is all: a mountain of speculation labours to produce this poor, moulting mouse of uncertain evidence. No one, at the time or later, noticed what Mr. Walmsley, now that 150 years of dust has settled, can now see; not even Captain Birley.

Moreover the mouse is dressed up as a lion. First Tyas of *The Times* is pressed into service. He mentioned at Hunt's trial that, while the crowd were cheering the Yeomanry on their first arrival at the edge of the field, "Mr Hunt desired that some persons on the waggon [hustings] might be removed, as they were neither speakers or writers, and were creating a disturbance." To Mr. Walmsley this incident suggests "a disruptive element in the crowd actively opposing the Huntean mode of proceeding — that of passive resistance". Well, does it? It seems to

suggest an overcrowded stage and people jostling for place. But then, continues Mr. Walmsley, how to account for the sinister evidence of George Swift, himself a radical speaker:

*Hunt ordered the people to stand fast. "If they want me," said Mr. Hunt, "let me go — don't resist, don't rush," — pointing to a place near him, "If them fellows won't be quiet put them down and keep them down" . . .*

More evidence of a "disruptive element". And then there is the "remarkable" fact that James Moorhouse, the Stockport leader who accompanied Hunt to the hustings, was nevertheless not on the hustings during the action. What was he doing? And why did Hunt huff and puff so much about all this at his trial? In fact the reasons for this are ludicrously simple: first — Miss Marlow points out this one — Moorhouse had injured his hand in the door of the barouche and retired for medical attention; second, Crown witnesses swore to his presence on the hustings when it was simple to prove that he had been absent, and in all the contentious evidence this was one point at which they could clearly be faulted and even accused of perjury.

But we are allowing ourselves to fall, headlong, into the trap which Mr. Walmsley has spent half a life-time baiting. For of course these disputed matters do not affect, centrally, an understanding of Peterloo, even if Mr. Walmsley's liberal criticisms of Prentice, Bamford, Bruton and Read, do invite a little of his own kind of correction in reply. Marshalling his thin case in support of the brickbats, Mr. Walmsley avers:

*That attack on the Yeomanry, if made, is to be considered as the "flashpoint" from which stemmed the inevitable explosion. Anything could happen after that; and in fact did.*

This is the "heart of the matter", because "the success or failure of the radical version of Peterloo pivoted on whether this fact of striking the first blow could be pinned on the Yeomanry or not". But this is not the case. If a meeting of some 60,000 people is surrounded by cavalry and foot-soldiers and penetrated by hostile special constables, if Yeomanry are then sent into its midst to arrest its most charismatic orator, and if a member of the crowd then throws a brick at a yeoman (which is not proven), are the crowd then guilty of being ridden and sabred off the field?

Even by the infinitely nice legalisms of Mr. Walmsley's own game, the military do not resort to instant and massive retaliation at the moment when one of their members is assaulted. What Mr. Walmsley has almost succeeded in making us do is to distract our attention from the actual attack on the crowd, and the nature of that attack. Give or take some emphasis this way or that, the events that preceded this attack are as follows.

A peaceable and fairly good-humoured crowd was assembled, and Hunt began to address it. Immediately the magistrates sent for the Yeomanry to assist the civil power to arrest the speakers in the midst of the assembly. The Yeomanry — local shopkeepers, dealers, dancing-masters and the rest (several of whom were probably drunk) — rode fast towards the hustings, fanning out in disorder among the crowd as they came into it. As they reached the thickest part of the crowd the more disciplined or more humane probably only brandished their swords to make the crowd give way, but others struck out, and not only with the flats. The evidence of any brickbats &c., being thrown at them until at least several minutes after they had reached the hustings is

TO THE

# Inhabitants

OF THE

## Hundred of SALFORD.

**IT** having been proved, upon oath before the Magistrates, that **LARGE BODIES** of MEN assemble in various Places within the Hundred of Salford, for the purpose of **TRAINING** and **PRACTISING**

# Military Exercise,

which, in many instances, has been connected with **Seditious & Treasonable Purposes:**

We, the undersigned Magistrates, do declare that such Assemblies and Practices are **CONTRARY to LAW:** And we hereby strictly enjoin all Persons hereafter to **ABSTAIN** therefrom.

And we charge all Constables and others, on their Allegiance, to **GIVE INFORMATION** of the Districts where the Practices aforesaid prevail; and against all such as may be concerned therein.---Given under our hands, this 17th. August, 1819:

WM. HULTON,  
W. R. HAY,  
R. WRIGHT,  
TRAFFORD, TRAFFORD,  
H. D. BROUGHTON,  
THOS. WIL TATTON,  
J. NORRIS,

WILLIAM MARRIOTT,  
WM. C. BAGSHAW,  
C. W. ETHELSTON,  
J. SILVESTER,  
R. A. FLETCHER,  
JAS. WATKINS,

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*Magistrates' response the day after Peterloo.*

excessively thin. Hunt — who until that moment had exerted himself for order and to prevent panic — was then arrested. Up to that moment the situation had still not passed beyond control, but simultaneously with that moment (Hunt disappeared as if he had been shot, said one witness) the cry went up from the Yeomanry — “Have at their flags!” — and the Peterloo Massacre really began. Some feeble attempts were made by the crowd to defend the costly embroidered banners and Caps of Liberty which the female reformers had worked over so carefully, and which the reformers had carried so many miles to the meeting. The Yeomanry struck out right and left and the special constables, not to be deprived of their share of trophies of the field, joined in. The magistrates, seeing the Yeomanry in “difficulties”, ordered the Hussars to clear the field. On the edge of the field, some of the people, finding themselves still pursued, made a brief stand.

Mr. Walmsley, who has so much to say about unidentified Stockport militants, has almost no comment to offer on this — a moment of unrestrained aggression which cannot by any special pleading be offered as self-defence. Nor is there much conflict of evidence about this, the real “flashpoint”. Scarlett, who led the prosecution against Hunt, remained unconvinced about any attack upon the Yeomanry until this moment, and declared in a subsequent parliamentary debate: “Had they [the Yeomanry] stopped then no real damage would have been done, but they then began to attack”. Tyas reported:

*As soon as Hunt and Johnson had jumped from the waggon a cry was made by the cavalry, “Have at their flags”. In consequence, they immediately dashed not only at the flags which were in the waggon, but those which were posted among the crowd, cutting most indiscriminately to the right and to the left in order to get at them. This set the people running in all directions, and it was not until this act had been committed that any brickbats were hurled at the military. From that moment the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry lost all command of temper.*

Not even Captain Birley disputed the fact of this attack on the flags. His account (through the medium of Lord Stanley) declared that, when the magistrates’ warrant had been executed,

*considerable tumult prevailed, and a struggle ensued between the constables and those persons in the cart, who wished to save the caps of liberty, banners &c. Some of those who resisted were taken into custody, and the soldiers cut with their sabres. In doing this, it was possible that some persons had been hurt, but not intentionally.*

It would perhaps be legalistic to point out that the magistrates’ warrant was for the arrest of Hunt and not of a Cap of Liberty. We are bereft of independent witnesses to describe the sensation of being “hurt, but not intentionally”, since neither Tyas (who himself had been arrested, in error) nor the Rev. Edward Stanley was fleeing the field. We must, perforce, supply the hiatus in Mr. Walmsley’s account, by drawing upon the evidence of some of these biased victims to describe the temper of these moments:

*William Harrison (cotton spinner): . . . We were all merry in hopes of better times.*

*Coroner: Were you not desired to disperse?*

*Harrison: Only with the swords — nobody asked us*

*to disperse — only trying to cut our heads off with their swords.*

“The soldiers began cutting and slaying”, went on Harrison, “and the constables began to seize the colours, and the tune was struck up; they all knew of the combination.” Amidst such music, few paused to distinguish between flats and sharps:

*Coroner: Did they cut at you near the hustings?*

*Harrison: No; as I was running away three soldiers came down upon me one after another; there was whiz this way and whiz that way, backwards and forwards . . . and I, as they were going to strike, threw myself on my face, so that, if they cut, it should be on my bottom.*

*Coroner: You act as well as speak?*

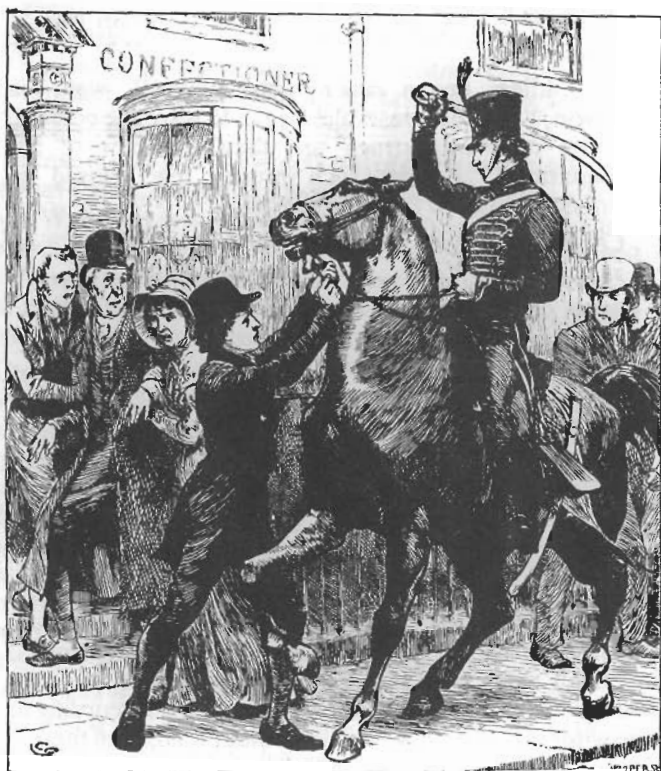
*Harrison: Yes; I’m real Lancashire blunt, Sir; I speak the truth; whenever any cried out “mercy”, they said “Damn you, what brought you here”.*

Another witness related how a special constable jumped on the hustings, “took up the President’s chair, and beat it about those who remained”. Some of the crowd, hemmed in on all sides by Yeomanry, crawled under the carts which formed the platform for the hustings. According to one witness, John Lees (who later died) was one of these:

*Jonah Andrew (cotton spinner): I saw several constables round him, and beating him with truncheons severely. One of them picked up a staff of a banner that had been cut with a sword, and said, “Damn your bloody eyes, I’ll break your back”.*

This “self-defence” was pursued by Yeomanry and specials to the edges, and beyond the edges, of the field. Hunt, as he was taken to the magistrates’ house, ran the gauntlet of special constables’ batons. Even in the side-streets around the field the cavalry pursued the people, cutting at them and saying, “Damn you, I’ll reform you; — You’ll come again, will you?” Outside one house in Windmill Street, “special constables came up in great triumph, before my door, calling out, ‘This is Waterloo for you! This is Waterloo’.”

Mr. Walmsley is of course wrong to suppose that the sober accounts of Peterloo by Bruton and Read represent, even if unwittingly, a perpetuation of the “radical” myth. A radical interpretation of the day, derived in part from witnesses such as those just quoted, would be far more savage than anything published since Bamford and Prentice. It would see it as a clear moment of class war. Nor were the warriors only on the side of the magistracy. If Mr. Walmsley had examined the Home Office papers he would have found evidence that both before the day (among those drilling on the moors) and afterwards (among those threatening vengeance) there were indeed most unpacific “militants” among the reformers. Bamford was — at least after Peterloo — very probably among them, although he gives himself a more sober character in his reminiscences. If the report of a spy is to be credited, he was still, three months later, venting his feelings in revolutionary rodomontade, and giving in a tavern the toast: “May the Tree of Liberty be planted in Hell, and may the bloody butchers of Manchester be the Fruit of it!” As late as April, 1820, there was a fierce tavern brawl in Oldham between soldiers and townsmen, when one of the latter proposed the toast: “May the skin of every loyal man be taken off his back and made into parchment to beat the Reformers to arms!”



A Peterloo incident as depicted in Mrs. Banks's  
The Manchester Man.

Undoubtedly among the huge crowd which assembled on that day there were some who felt obscurely that something large might come of it, and come suddenly to the raising of the poor and the throwing down of the rich. As one of the contingents marched in that morning they passed Roger Entwisle, an attorney and clerk to the race-course, and later a witness against Hunt: "Thou hast got a good coat to thy back", one of the marchers shouted, "but I shall have as good a one as thee before to-night is over".

All this was around, before and after Peterloo, but on the day itself the vast crowd was, definitely, under Hunt's control and subjected to his egotistical but emphatically constitutional strategy. He had spent the previous week in Manchester, seeing some of the leaders of contingents, and ensuring that his orders for peace and discipline were understood and would be obeyed. They were obeyed, and women and children came with the men upon the field. Hence Peterloo was not only a massacre, but a peculiarly cowardly one. Miss Marlow has discovered letters of Major Dyneley, who commanded the two field-pieces which were held in readiness in the wings on the day: "The first action of the Battle of Manchester is over", he wrote, "and I am happy to say has ended in the complete discomfiture of the Enemy." He had been "very much assured to see the way in which the Volunteer Cavalry knocked the people about during the whole time we remained on the ground; the instant they saw ten or a dozen Mobbites together, they rode at them and leathered them properly".

A radical interpretation, however, would re-examine with the greatest scrupulousness those parts of the received account which exonerate from blame in these events, not only the government, but also the magistracy; or which assume that the magistracy were guilty only of panic and ill-judgement, and that once they had sent the Yeomanry upon the field, all happened fortuitously. Both Prentice and J.E. Taylor offered powerful arguments against this at the time. The official *Papers Relative to the State of the Country*, published by government in

November, 1819, and offering a selection of letters of magistrates to the Home Office, depositions, &c., should be regarded as being just as much a party statement — and should be examined as scrupulously — as any radical account. Historians have not, generally, done this; although the *Papers* were selected and published in order to prevent any parliamentary enquiry: the information (Lord Liverpool admitted privately) "may be laid safely, and much more advantageously, by Government directly rather than through the medium of any committee". Many of the questions asked by John Edward Taylor in his brilliant and scathing *Notes and Observations, Critical and Explanatory on the Papers Relative to the Internal State of the Country* (1820) have never found a satisfactory answer.

These questions are of the order most difficult to resolve: questions of intention — did the magistrates intend beforehand that an armed dispersal should take place? — and of complicity — did Sidmouth assent to, or know of, any such intention? Mr. Walmsley himself quotes important passages from a private, justificatory account which the Rev. W.R. Hay drew up for Sidmouth on October 7, 1819, and which was hitherto unpublished. In this he described the actions of the select committee of magistrates which was in almost continuous session in the days leading up to August 16:

*The Committee continued to meet, and did so on Saturday, [August] the 14th, Sunday, and Monday. Prior to the Saturday, different points had been discussed as to the propriety of stopping the Meeting and the manner of doing so. They were of opinion that Multitudes coming in columns with Flags and Marching in military array were even in the approach to the Meeting a tumultuous assembly; and it was for a little time under consideration whether each Column should not be stopped at their respective entrances into the Town, but this was given up — it was considered that the Military might then be distracted and it was wished that the Town should see what the Meeting was, when assembled, and also that those who came should be satisfied they were assembled in an unlawful manner.*

"Being satisfied", the account continues, "that in point of Law [the Meeting] if assembled as it was expected, would be an illegal Meeting, we gave notice to Lieut.-Col. L'Estrange . . . of our wish to have the assistance of the Military on the 16th".

This is a clear enough statement of the magistrates' intention, although it does not amount to proof. It is abundantly evident that magistrates and military had a contingency plan for dispersing the meeting; and, at the very least, it would appear that Sidmouth was informed of this plan, from a letter in the Home Office papers dated August 18, in which Sidmouth conveyed to General Sir John Byng his satisfaction in the judgment of Colonel L'Estrange, the military commander on that day: "His Judgment has in Lord S.'s mind been evinced by his employing Yeomanry in the Van agreeably to the Plan on which I know you intended to act". A contingency plan, it is true, does not amount to a fully-proven intention, even when the first part of it — the assembling of the military forces — is put into effect. But there is altogether too much circumstantial evidence, as well as rumour, circulating on the Sunday and Monday morning, to allow one to discount the possibility of such a fully-formed intention: the clearing of the field by the authorities, early on Monday morning, of all stones; the industrious preparation by the magistrates of depositions from

*Peterloo veterans  
photographed in 1884*

David Hilton (79)  
Thomas Chadderton (81)  
John Davies (78)  
Thomas Ogden (81)  
Jonathan Dawson (82)  
Susannah Whittaker (81)  
Mary Collins (83)  
Catherine McMurdo (88)  
Richard Waters  
Thomas Schofield (81)  
Alice Schofield (79)



prominent citizens that they were alarmed by the banners and military array of the crowd; the rumours such as those which reached the ears of J.E. Taylor:

*... early in the forenoon of August 16th persons supposed to be acquainted with the intentions of the magistrates distinctly asserted that Mr. Hunt would be arrested on the hustings, and the meeting dispersed. I myself was more than once told so, but could not conceive it possible. . .*

The intention was expressed, the contingency plan was prepared, the military forces were assembled, the rumours and more-than-rumours were circulating; and yet we are *still* invited to believe that the dispersal of the crowd was fortuitous, and that the magistrates determined to send cavalry into the midst of it to arrest the speakers because one Richard Owen, a pawnbroker, swore an affidavit that Hunt had arrived and that "an immense mob is collected and he considers the town in danger". (The affrighted Richard Owen, in his alternating role as a special constable, is supposed to have signally distinguished himself on the field by capturing the black flag of the Saddleworth contingent — "Equal Representation or Death" — the mere sight of which so many official witnesses at subsequent proceedings testified as having thrown them into consternation and alarm.)

There is a simpler explanation than Mr. Walmsley's for Peterloo. There was a plan. It was put into operation. The magistrates knew, for some hours, and perhaps days, before Hunt arrived on the hustings, what they intended to do; the special constables were expecting the arrival of the Yeomanry; the Yeomanry did, on the field, very much what was expected of them, although neither as efficiently nor as decorously as the authorities might have wished; and the regulars performed a part in which their officers (like Major Dyneley) were well versed.

This case has not been established, but it seems, at the least, open to enquiry. If established, it would not necessarily exclude the authorities from any larger historical defence. The magistrates were faced with a new phenomenon of which they had no understanding. The crowd was not attending a Whitsun walk nor even a miners' gala. Its size, its discipline, its high morale, were ominous to the old order. Neither in the magistrates' room nor in the crowd did men look forward complacently to 1832 and all that; it was more natural, in 1819, when two incompatible social forces confronted each other, to remember 1789.

Some such historical defence might be offered. Mr. Walmsley, however, would not wish to offer it. His zealous partisanship is, in a serious sense, worthy of the Peterloo tradition; and his book, which has turned over the ground freshly, will certainly join the enduring literature of the event. **But he cannot allow** a line of investigation, nor even of defence, which must also show that Hulton of Hulton (who denied that the magistrates had any prior intention of dispersing the crowd) was a liar. But Mr. Walmsley, in his zeal, has provided evidence for this as well. William Hulton had some sort of stiffening about him which some of his fellow-magistrates lacked — an absence of humanitarian cant and a contempt for general opinion. He offered no maudlin apologies for Peterloo; indeed, he later recalled it as the "proudest day" of his life, and many years afterwards he kept a Cap of Liberty, captured upon the field, in his study. A gentleman of Hulton's breed and station does not lie; he merely has so great a hauteur, so great a distance between himself and the seditious plebs, that it is a matter of utter indifference to him whether this or that is true of them or not.

Twelve years after Peterloo, and after fact upon fact had been disputed for as long, Hulton could throw off a public letter containing a manifest farrago of mis-statements about the day — "two people were killed in St. Peter's Field — one, a woman, who having personated the Goddess of Reason, was trampled to death in the crowd . . . On the succeeding day, an old pensioner was beaten to death with portions of his own loom, because he had expressed a loyal attachment to the King". He was as inflexibly convinced, in 1831 as he had been in 1817, that the defence of "this vast aegis" of our liberties required the hunting of Jacobins and the sharpening of swords. The defeat of the Tories in South Lancashire in the Reform election of 1832 led only to an adjustment of tactics. "A few despondent individuals", Hulton of Hulton later recalled, then met in a common pot-house in Newton-le-Willows: "It occurred to them that it was their duty to call up every friend to the monarchy and the Church to counteract the machinations of the enemies to both". As a result of that meeting "the foundations of the South Lancashire Conservative Association were laid . . . and from that stem at Newton, Conservative associations have branched out all over Her Majesty's dominions". It is well to remember that British conservatism has not only been made by the great, the well-endowed, the fluent. It has also had its stubborn provincial grass-roots.