A Peaceful Slaughtering in a Age of Reformation

The Peterloo Massacre, on 16 August 1819, was a political uprising and by far the bloodiest in England in the nineteenth century.¹ It stemmed from many factors, but one of the biggest was the end of the Napoleonic Wars in June 1815. Its finale helped to spell disaster for the people of England, especially with the passing of the Corn Laws later that same year. Backed by the support of tens of thousands of people, the Peterloo Massacre marked a beginning for a call to reform in Parliament, of universal suffrage, and for a repeal of the dreaded Corn Laws that had wreaked havoc on the English economy.

The Napoleonic Wars were devastating, not only to France, but also to the British economy. Shortly after the wars ended, Parliament enacted the Corn Laws over England to ensure that wheat and corn trade stayed exclusively inside of England.² All it wanted was to secure the English market, but the law had devastating consequences. As a result, the price of food went up substantially and wages simply could not compete. It did not take long for working class attitudes to began to simmer. The British people were under the impression that, after the war, things would get better and plenty would follow. However, corn prices grew high, people were starving and, as a result, the demanded better representation in Parliament to ease their grumblings.³ Donald Read, professor at the University of Leeds, notes two reasons for political reform during the summer of 1819. First, “it was a protest against distress – against low wages,

high prices, and unemployment; and second, it was the assertion of a theory of fundamental rights.\textsuperscript{4} The protest against distress points to the 1815 Corn Laws which had pushed corn and wheat prices so high, wages could not keep up, and unemployment was on the rise. It was also for the idea of human rights – that a man is born free and should have the freedom to choose. These were not the only reasons the radicals fought for, for there were many underlying causes leading up to Peterloo, but they are the most notable and ones that provide the main focus of this subject.

Because of the unrest, reform associations started forming by 1816, mostly in the manufacturing districts, in an effort to encourage Parliamentary reform. By 1817, many associations popped up in and around the origin county of Lancashire in Western England. Through the meetings of reform groups, members decided the most important things to fight for were universal suffrage and annual Parliaments alongside the quest to repeal the Corn Laws.\textsuperscript{5} When Parliament heard about the establishment of the reform groups, it appointed spies to keep an eye on the people. They were afraid that the groups wanted nothing more than to overthrow the government and spread the ideals of the French Revolution: human rights.\textsuperscript{6} The Radicals scared the government, both local and at the Parliamentary level. In order to combat the issue of radical thinking, the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended in 1817, which stated that any person arrested unlawfully could be tried before a court of law. Repealing this act meant that reformers could be arrested and jailed without having to stand trial. While this worked for a while, tempers flared and in January of 1818, Habeas Corpus was reinstated. Unfortunately for the paranoid

\textsuperscript{4} Donald Read, Peterloo: the "Massacre" and Its Background (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), 40.
\textsuperscript{5} Bruton, Three Accounts of Peterloo, 62-63.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, 63.
government, reform membership spiked significantly, leading to a new campaign at the beginning of 1819.\footnote{Bruton, \textit{Three Accounts of Peterloo}, 63-64.}

The year 1819 was filled with political gatherings in and around the Lancashire and Manchester area. These political gatherings would eventually peak into the bloody Manchester meeting in August.\footnote{H. Bruxton Forman. Introduction to \textit{The Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester}, by Percy Bysshe Shelley (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 1.} Plans were underway for a gathering in Manchester. Popular orator and champion of the people, Henry Hunt was appointed to speak. He was an enthusiastic speaker but was fond of peaceful gatherings of people, which he made a specific demand for when he accepted the task.\footnote{Bruton, \textit{Three Accounts of Peterloo}, 64.}

Henry Hunt was born in 1773 to a family of respectable standing. He wanted to become a farmer like his father but his parents disagreed with this. They sent him to grammar school from where he went on to Oxford and became a Loyalist.\footnote{John Belchem. "Orator" Hunt: \textit{Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism}. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 14-15.} By the early 1800s Hunt abandoned loyalism for radicalism because he had been denied services in the King’s army and thus became a popular political leader.\footnote{Ibid, 23-24.} He was popular among the people because he was described as having a “clear and bell-like voice.” He was also very tall and had an “imposing personal appearance.”\footnote{Read, \textit{Peterloo}, 35.}

As reform rumblings started in Lancashire near Manchester, it was an obvious choice for a political gathering. Manchester had become, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, the second biggest town in England by 1773 and had a population of about 108,000 by 1821. Early in the nineteenth century, Manchester had already established itself as a center for civil disturbance –
violence was an expected part of life.\(^{13}\) Because of the Industrial Revolution, Manchester had become a business district and relied heavily on the cotton trade as the “principle occupation of the inhabitants.”\(^{14}\) Cotton manufacturers as opponents to the Corn Laws did not want high food prices because that would cause wage increases and no competition on the world market for consumer goods, like cotton.\(^{15}\) Weavers, too, in Manchester had seen their standard of living decrease drastically in the years leading up to Peterloo. They fought hard for a set minimum wage to no avail. The government seemed keen on continuing to ignore the demands of the people in a time of need. Thus, several turned to the Radical Reformers in an attempt to have their opinion known to Parliament.\(^{16}\) In order to relieve the public of any economic stress, the Reformers taught that “all men are born free, equal and independent of each other. The only source of all legitimate power is in the People, the whole People, and nothing but the People (sic).” They believed, fundamentally, that the government had forgotten about its people’s rights, and indeed, they had every right to believe that. Thus, the solution lay in the government – they must do 3 things: have annual Parliaments, have universal suffrage, and they must repeal the Corn Laws.\(^{17}\)

By July, fears of the Radicals were mounting and Loyalists, especially in Manchester, thought they wanted to overthrow the government. Local Manchester activist Joseph Johnson was perhaps the most active in Manchester. He owned part of the *Manchester Observer*, the radical newspaper and began printing information to encourage the Radical movement, much to the dismay of the magistrates.\(^{18}\) The reform meetings around Manchester made the authorities

\(^{13}\) Read, *Peterloo*, 1-2.
\(^{14}\) Ibid, 3-5.
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 11-12.
\(^{16}\) Ibid, 12-24.
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 40-41.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 35-36.
nervous because they feared the meetings were only setting up for a revolution. This is the reason for the disaster that happened at Peterloo.\(^{19}\) According to Read, the loyalists panicked because of “the Radical drilling and arming, the marching, the Union Societies, the series of meetings, the wide-spread network of agitation.” By noon of August 16, they were keen on not wanting to see the full outcome of the gathering – they were scared of the events leading up to they day, not of the day itself.\(^{20}\) They were familiar with other peace gatherings considering the same proposals and did not seem to have much of a problem with them. But other factors, such as the drilling and marching, concerned the authorities enough that they felt like they had to act. The drilling Read is referring to are the gatherings of reformers in surrounding cities and doing, what looked like, military drills with pikes like they were getting ready for an attack. The more the authorities heard about what was going on in and around Manchester, the more panicked they became, thus the basis for them to lose their heads in a time of peace.

The leaders of Manchester were called Magistrates. During 1819, there were 18 total appointed judiciary officials and were either retired businessmen, members of the clergy, or wealthy landowners. They were severely out of touch with public opinion by the time August rolled around, mostly because only one of the 18 was a permanent member of Manchester.\(^{21}\) Those most noteworthy were James Norris, W.R. Hay, C.W. Ethelson, and William Hulton.\(^{22}\) Norris, during the forthcoming of the gathering, grew increasingly paranoid about the resenting feelings among the people. He wrote many warnings to Parliament informing them of the matters at hand, but they seemed to go unheard. Hay, on the other hand, received the whole parish of Rochdale after the massacre, which was “one of the most valuable livings in England”

\(^{19}\) Read, *Peterloo*, 83.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 84.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 74-75.  
worth £1730 a year. He never wrote or discussed his actions at Peterloo that day.\textsuperscript{23} Ethelson was probably the one most manipulated by this gathering. He grew so paranoid that he hired his own spies to investigate the proceedings at St. Peter’s field.\textsuperscript{24}

That a reform meeting should be held in Manchester had already been decided. The original day set to meet was August 9 at St. Peter’s field, but this date was postponed to August 16 because the Manchester authorities declared it illegal to gather, so they had to find alternatives under which to meet.\textsuperscript{25} That being done, the city laid in wait and anxious anticipation for what the authorities feared was the start of another revolution and what the reformers saw as a beginning to an end – that someone will finally listen to their pleas and make a change for the betterment of English mankind.

A few days before the August 16 meeting, Hunt arrived in Manchester amid the shouts and acclamations of the crowd. He was welcomed like a hero and shown the greatest respect by the people of Manchester. They played true to Hunt’s desire for peaceful gatherings and The Times reports that there was nothing to worry about – the peace was not soon to be disturbed by this group of assembled people, large though they were.\textsuperscript{26}

Hunt spent the next few days traveling around Manchester visiting the surrounding cities. Two days before the Peterloo Meeting, however, Hunt made a trip to the magistrates to surrender himself. He had heard there was a warrant out for his arrest and he was not opposed to going to prison, so long as the peace was not disturbed the following Monday at the meeting. The magistrates said they had no idea what Hunt was talking about so he left.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Read, Peterloo, 77.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 113.
\textsuperscript{26} Shelley, Mask of Anarchy, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{27} “We learn from Manchester, that HUNT made his triumphal entry into that town on Monday; and though we…” The Times August 11, 1819, 2E.
\textsuperscript{27} Read, Peterloo, 123.
As has been previously mentioned, Hunt was fond of the peaceful mob gathering. It stands to reason, too, then, that he was also opposed to the idea of weapons at the gathering. Hunt had specifically stated that no weapons were to be brought. Here is one of the controversial points of the Peterloo issue – the issue of weapons. Depending on who one talked to at the end of the day dictated whether or not the mob had indeed brought weapons with them. One thing is clear, though: the mob never raised a finger against any of the conflicting forces there until they themselves were being attacked.

The Monday of August 16 dawned bright and hot. By 9 a.m., reformers had already started gathering on St. Peter’s field. Over the course of the next few hours, tens of thousands of people marched into Manchester, waving banners, singing, and generally having a wonderful time. Truly one of the most unique characteristics of this meeting was the number of women I attendance. Sources vary but the general consensus is that women made up about 1/8 of the population of men at the meeting. These women were pushing for universal suffrage – they were called to be the helpers of men in every way, including in politics – and the number of women’s organizations that made an appearance showed that they were not going away any time soon. Indeed, Peterloo marks the beginning of women’s role in politically organized British activity.

An important eye witness to the event, Samuel Bamford, led a contingent of about 6000 people from the city of Middleton, 6 miles to the north of Manchester. They came armed, not

---

29 Ibid, 127.
33 Read, *Peterloo*, 128
with swords, pikes, rocks, or clubs, but with flags and banner and song.\textsuperscript{34} These banners, however, became a hot issue among the magistrates of the town. They said things like “Unity and Strength,” “Liberty and Fraternity,” “Parliaments Annual,” “Suffrage Universal,” “Equal Representation or Death,” “No Corn Laws,” and “Unite and Be Free.”\textsuperscript{35} Middleton was not the only other town to show up in Manchester. Indeed, every town in the immediate surrounding area had some contingent to represent them.

Since the number of towns that showed up neared the 20 mark, it is no wonder the authorities were getting nervous. Tens of thousands of people were making their way to Manchester to participate in a meeting that had previously been called illegal, they were marching in military form and they were entirely too peaceful and happy to be up to a simple peaceful gathering of thousands. Numbers vary on the number of people who showed up to the event. Some accounts say there were as few as 30,000 people, others wager as high as 153,000.\textsuperscript{36} However, the general consensus seems to be between 60,000 and 80,000 people in attendance – men, women and children. Yet, even with that many people crowding in one city, the fact that they remained peaceable is one that many eyewitnesses, such as Bishop Edward Stanley, point out in their narratives.\textsuperscript{37} First Chairman of the Anti-Corn Law League, John Benjamin Smith, points out that one of the reasons he could tell the meeting was going to be peaceful was because mothers had brought their children along with them.\textsuperscript{38}

About 1 o’clock, Henry Hunt began to make his way through the city. Lieutenant Jolliffe of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Hussars who later caused a scene, remembers seeing Hunt’s carriage being pulled by

\textsuperscript{35} Read, Peterloo, 128-129.
\textsuperscript{37} Bruton, Three Accounts of Peterloo, 1, 21.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 66.
people as it came up to the hustings (speaking platform). The people cheered Hunt as he approached and the magistrates, who were watching the scene from a nearby building, started getting anxious. Their paranoia got the better of them, when, in a panic, they got 30 loyalists to sign a warrant for Hunt’s arrest. As soon as this was done, messengers were sent out to alert the military, who had been on stand-by and were perched all around the city at various places, that action needed to take place. If it is not already apparently obvious, the magistrates did not have a set plan to follow to get rid of what they saw as a political rebellion. They made a very sloppy effort to arrest Hunt, who had appeared before them only 2 days previous hoping to avert this kind of situation. He was perfectly willing to be arrested then as long as the meeting went off still took place.

Having sent out the messengers to alert the waiting troops, all the magistrates had to do was sit back and watch. Lieutenant-Colonel L’Estrange was the first to receive the message from the magistrates to take action. L’Estrange was in charge of all of the military that was in Manchester that day and led the Yeomanry and Hussars towards the field and towards the impending doom of the peaceful reformers in St. Peter’s field.

While the military was setting up and closing in on the field, Hunt arrived at the hustings to a great many cheers and shouts. Hunt mounted the hustings in his white hat that came to symbolize radical reform supporters and calmed the crowd down to begin his speech. He had hardly been speaking for two minutes when the Yeomanry and the 15th Hussars appear on one side of the field. Even though the crowd sees the military, they are not alarmed. Instead, they

---

42 Read, *Peterloo*, 127, 133.
   Read, *Peterloo*, 133.
cheer them on and welcome with shouts. Hunt believed he had nothing to fear, but soon, his worst fears were brought into reality. The Yeomanry entered the crowd and arrested Hunt as well as everyone else on the hustings with him. They were then supposed to disperse the crowd, but when they failed to do that, the 15th Hussars, of whom most of them had fought at the Battle of Waterloo, charged the crowd on horseback brandishing their sabers and hacking at anything in their way. If this seems like a harsh and hasty decision, that is because it was. Several sources cite the fact that the Hussars had, in fact earlier in the day, been to a pub and had a little too much to drink. This would certainly explain their getting out of hand in terms of dispersal of the crowd.

What is interesting to note is that the crowd never provoked the military into a frenzy. Quite the contrary, actually. Eye witnesses Lieutenant-Colonel Jollife, and Bishop Stanly both point out in their narratives that the crowed was peaceful until the attack. Only as the Hussars were trampling and stabbing people did the crowd start throwing brickbats and stones at them, as Jolliffe notes.

It took a moment, but once the crowd understood what was happening, they rushed in thunderous confusion, screaming, away from St. Peter’s field with the Yeomanry close behind, leaving the speared and trampled dead and wounded in heaps upon the ground. The only other things left behind were bloody articles of clothing, bonnets, hats, broken and torn banner and poles, and silence as the once peaceful gathering had been ambushed and sent fleeing for their lives.

---

46 Ibid.
lives in all directions.\textsuperscript{50} Despite the great number of people (about 80,000), it took a surprisingly short amount of time to clear the field – 10 minutes.\textsuperscript{51}

Because of the great number of women in the crowd, it stands to reason that there were quite a few women who were casualties of this event. While the numbers are sketchy, at least one women was killed and several others wounded in the ensuing onslaught. Those left on the field had been stabbed or trampled on by either man or horse.\textsuperscript{52}

As Bishop Stanley watched in horror the crowd scramble for their lives, he made a note that “hundreds were thrown to the ground in confusion.”\textsuperscript{53} But the field did not account for all of the dead and wounded that day, nor do the numbers. The Yeomanry chased the crowd away from the field still slashing and slaying those within reach of their sword. While many were taken to infirmary, many more simply did not take the initiative to get help. They feared that if they did, they would be punished for their attendance at the field.\textsuperscript{54} Numbers range on this fact, too, about the casualties. Wounded is usually estimated between 600 and 800; killed usually between 10 and 30.\textsuperscript{55}

While he never go to see the ensuing onslaught of people, Hunt was taken on his own journey. After being arrested, he was escorted to the New Bailey prison in Manchester where he awaited trial for treason along with several others who had been arrested with him.\textsuperscript{56} Eventually, the treason charge was dropped but Hunt was still sentenced to prison for two years.\textsuperscript{57}

The name Peterloo appeared about two days afterwards in the \textit{Manchester Observer}. Peter was taken from the St. Peters’s field in which the people were gathered and murdered.

\textsuperscript{50} Carey, “Samuel Bamford.” In \textit{Eyewitness to History}, 301.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 300-301
\textsuperscript{53} Bruton, \textit{Three Eye Witness Accounts}, 17.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 72-73.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 73.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 73.
‘Loo’ was taken from the Battle of Waterloo, in which many of the Hussars had fought and which was still prevalent in the minds of English men since it was the incident that ended the Napoleonic wars in 1815.

It is increasingly difficult for some to justify the actions of the magistrates. That most evidence points to a peaceful gathering of thousands with no intention to start a revolutionary war leaves one to wonder how the magistrates justified their actions. Since the magistrates never published the details of the day according to them, we may never know. But it seems as though they wanted to take their credit in silence and not further infuriate the common people.58

Most everyone who heard about the Peterloo Massacre shortly after that was infuriated by the actions that had taken place. When word reached author and poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, he was outraged. He felt deeply for those who had suffered. His wife wrote of Shelley in this way:

“He was a republican and loved a democracy. He looked on all human beings as inheriting an equal right to possess the dearest privileges of our nature, the necessaries of life, when fairly earned by labour, and intellectual instruction. His hated of any despotism, that looked upon the people as not to be consulted or protected from want and ignorance was intense. [He longed] to teach his injured countrymen how to resist.”59

As a response to the Massacre, Shelley wrote the lengthy poem “The Mask of Anarchy”. His intention was to teach his countrymen how to resist. The powerful last stanza states:

“Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number –
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are many – they are few.”60

59 Shelley, Mask of Anarchy, 5.
60 Ibid, 5, 78.

While Shelley wrote this in 1819, it was not published until 1839. Looking back, Shelley said that he was glad “Anarchy” had not been published in 1819 because he would not have wanted to deal with the unintended consequences, whatever they would have been.\textsuperscript{61}

While the gathering at St. Peter’s field was put down, there were many riots and radical gatherings around England, most notably in Leeds and even in Scotland in Glasgow. Even though the requests at the Peterloo meeting were ignored for the most part, they never went away. For years after that, Englishmen had to deal with the Corn Laws with even more digression in English economy. It was 1839 before things got so bad and the economy so strained that the feelings towards the laws were again taken into consideration. Tempers, again, started flaring towards the hated laws because a series of bad harvests that left the people with less food than ever. In 1841, the Anti-Corn Law League, started a few years earlier, finally made the feelings of the people clear to authorities. Richard Cobden, a Member of Parliament for Stockport and the leader of the League, was influential in getting the laws repealed. He traveled around the country speaking out against the Corn Laws and forever in the shadow of those in London. The economic depression helped League membership spike all over England. Then, in 1845, the original Corn Laws were repealed due to the famine in Ireland and the mass starvation that followed in its wake. A new Law was put into effect on oats and barley that reduced the duty significantly.\textsuperscript{62}

Reform in England also took place, but much later in the century, but, unfortunately, it was not a popular action. In 1832, a Reform Bill was passed in Parliament that gave boroughs in England voting rights that had not been previously represented in government. However, only men were allowed to vote (against universal suffrage) and they had to have at least a yearly net

worth of £10 per year. They also had to be landowners. Nor was each borough equally represented in Parliament. Thus, less than 20% of Englishmen gained voting rights. On speaking of the Reform Bill, reformist leader Samuel Bamford who led the 6000 Middleton reformers to Manchester remarked that even though the Reform Acts were headed in the right direct, it still did not solve the problem of mismanaged government. He said in 1849, “We have now been at peace thirty years, and the multitude is still here, many-headed – loud-tongued – as of yore, but where is the loyalty? Here it is absolutely not…Assuredly there has been great mismanagement somewhere.”

Even though Peterloo did not stir authorities into taking charge of the situation immediately, it was not done in vain. Although it took many years for anything major to become accomplished, the Peterloo Massacre marks a new beginning in reform history in England. James Epstein remarks that Peterloo “came to represent a seminal moment in the struggle for the rights to free public assembly and political expression.” It was a time to question the authority of Parliament and whether or not they were really competent enough to run the country. Known as the bloodiest uprising in the nineteenth century, with a huge death toll of about 25, Peterloo started the new reform that included women for the first time ever. A lot of conflicting stories have been written, even among eyewitnesses, so it is hard to pinpoint exactly what happened. In a time of much needed political reform, Peterloo was the beginning answer to many of the problems that plagued English government.

---

Bibliography

**Primary:**


*The Times.*

**Secondary:**


Abstract: Used as first point of reference.

Abstract: Used as first point of reference.