

A People Starved and Stabbed in th' Untilled Field *

The Manchester Massacre of 1819

Hugo Pezzini.

*Let the horsemen's scimitars
Wheel and flash, like sphereless stars
Thirsting to eclipse their burning
In a sea of death and mourning.*

Percy Shelley

The August 1819 *Peterloo* events in Manchester were one of the most momentous and important in the 40 year-period of struggle for parliamentary reform in England. The period extends itself roughly from early 1792, when Thomas Hardy founded the *London Corresponding Society*, to mid 1832, the date of the passing of the Reform Bill. It is during this period that the English workers came to realize that there was an "identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers" (Thompson 11).

Through five nights of the London Corresponding Society's first month of existence, the question "have we, who are Tradesmen, Shopkeepers, and Mechanics, any right to obtain a Parliamentary Reform?" (Thompson 18) was continuously debated. The consolidation of this conviction--to give every adult the right to a vote for a seat in the Parliament--launched the reformers in a campaign that would not stop until the signature of the Reform Bill.

The growing consciousness of "the people," expressed itself in acts consequent with their vision of being governed by a King in tandem with a corrupt, unrepresentative House of Commons, and a hereditary House of Lords who granted themselves privileges to eternity. On October 29th 1795, in a London where about 200,000 protesters roamed the streets, where "there was actual starvation and tempers were high;" the King, "going in state to open Parliament, was hissed, hooted, and his carriage pelted" (Thompson 144). The authorities responded with the immediate introduction of the *Two Acts*, legislation that, among other measures (many of them sanctioning various acts as treasonous and punishable with death) forbade unauthorized meetings of more than 50 people. The sanction of the Two Acts was the

first of a battery of repressive legislation that would assault the incipient working class' struggle for rights. Through these repressive measures, the government launched a widespread persecution of the reform movement, and quickly began to send reformers indiscriminately to prison, exile, and the gallows. In August 1803 The poet, printer, and engraver William Blake was indicted for supposedly uttering seditious words. He was finally acquitted.

The 1810's decade saw an escalation in revolutionary plots and insurrectionary attempts, often infiltrated by government provocateurs and spies. In 1817, Habeas Corpus was suspended. On January 28th of that year, the Royal carriage was mobbed again, this time, *returning* from opening the Parliament; riding on it was the Prince Regent . The reformers kept submitting their demands through written petitions to the Houses of Parliament and the Throne of England. Radical pamphlets, handbills, and papers flooded the main English cities (Cobbet's *Register*, and *The Black Dwarf* were the most important). Riots, crowded meetings in clubs and societies led the government to enforce with more and more rigor the anti-riot, anti-sedition, and anti-reunion laws.

Throughout most of 1818, the reform movement was terrorized and in disarray, but it was reawakened in great strength by the argument of *constitutionalism*: "Liverpool, Sidmouth, Eldon, and Castelreagh" (the Lords of the Tory governing party) "were seen as men intent upon displacing *constitutional rights* by despotic 'continental' rule" (Thompson 671, my emphasis). Under this new argument, the reformist forces suddenly soared: "The policy of open constitutionalism was proving more revolutionary in its implication than the policy of conspiracy and insurrection" (Thompson 682).

By 1819, the workers' struggle for real representation and defense of their interests and needs within the Parliament had achieved its highest point. Dozens of demonstrations and gatherings of workers confronted the ruling power: The reformers had found out that the loophole of constitutionalism allowed them to effect their meetings, and the success of each one continuously raised their morale. A meeting in Manchester, to be held in St. Peter's Fields, was being planned. It was to constitute the culmination of the newly found legal course of action of

constitutionalism.

On the day of the meeting, August 26th 1819, well over 50,000 defenseless marchers, who had concentrated in the field and were listening to the opening remarks by the orator, were attacked by sword-armed horsemen of the Yeomanry Cavalries. The Yeomanry were volunteer corps, sworn-in by local Magistrates whenever the need for such a force--in the view of the magistrates--arose. About 500 people were wounded and 11 were killed in Manchester's St. Peter's Field, and the event entered the pages of history with the tragic name of *Peterloo*, thus establishing associations between its bloody developments and the three-day savagery in the Belgian fields of Waterloo.

Two historical views began to shape themselves immediately after Peterloo: an official, government view, and a reform or radical one. Looking above and beyond the historical traditions originated by the "polarity of contemporary documentation which subsequent historical writing has dutifully mirrored" (Lawson 25), I will struggle to find some light in the conflicting accounts of the two existing views, solidified by official communiqués, extended by the loyalist and the radical press, and which still, after about 150 years, constitute a matter of discussion and disagreement among present-day scholars.

From the 1820's on, contemporary pamphlets and prints presented both sides of this case, encouraging the idea of rivalry which scholarship of the 1980's still perpetuates. It is a pattern of historical analysis in which two very differing, and adversarial views of Peterloo, can be discerned. In brief, one side argues that the reformers went too far in their protest or demonstration at St. Peter's Fields and that in the aftermath of Peterloo, support for the established order was reaffirmed by the mass of the population. On the other side there exists the view that a legitimate movement of popular constitutionalism ended in a massacre, betrayed on all sides by middle-class equivocation and a corrupt and repressive political system (Lawson 25).

By the time of the Manchester meeting, the working class had reached a point in the history of its struggle that the ruling class was not willing to allow it to surpass.

Confronted by this swelling power, Old Corruption¹ faced the alternatives of meeting the reformers with repression or concession. But concession, in 1819, would have meant concession to a largely working-class reform movement; the middle-class reformers were not yet strong enough (as they were in 1832) to offer a more moderate line of advance. This is why Peterloo took place (Thompson 683, my emphasis).

Thompson's central thesis, tries to rescue working-class history from its more moderate version, which insists that always and at every point the workers were only interested in reform, and that anything else was just a fabrication of spies and reactionaries. The ruling class was only willing to make concessions which permitted it to keep control of the situation. Whenever it felt its control threatened in any fashion, the ruling class would either retreat and play for time, or neutralize the threatening circumstances by any means, as had been done in various cases before. Given the "legal status" gained by the maneuvering of its organizers in the previous days (as it will be seen below), the authorities had run out of legal justifications to prevent the taking place of the reunion; but, the local rulers (and the Home Office) saw the St. Peter's Fields meeting as outright revolutionary and would not tolerate it. Thus, the meeting was interrupted at its very initiation by the intempestive action of the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry. Some saw this action as a concerted move by the ruling class to hinder the workers' consolidation of their increasing political potentiality, the most violent and desperate attempt by the rulers to prevent the enfranchisement of the working class. The official view held that by this action, a riot of bigger proportions was contained.

Thompson makes two crucial points:

1) "The actual bloody violence of the day" (685). Peterloo had indeed been a massacre that had not been accidental, but it had taken time, brutality, and the effort of the Yeomanry for it to happen in the way it did: "There is no term for this but class war. But it was a pitifully one-sided war" (686). The events had lasted much longer than the fifteen minutes accounted for by most

historians, most likely about an hour.

2) The importance of “the sheer size of the event in terms of its psychological impact and manifold repercussions. It was without question a formative experience in British political and social history” (687). Thompson shares with Messinger² a recognition of the speed with which the St. Peter’s Field bloody events were rushed to the national knowledge: “Within two days of Peterloo, all England knew of the event” (687).

Thompson's view is that Peterloo was a scenario of *class warfare*, where the active roll was played by “the Yeomanry-- the Manchester manufacturers, merchants, publicans and shopkeepers on horseback” (686). This ill-trained but well armed cavalry, was composed of members of the emerging loyalist Manchester bourgeoisie, fighting against an also emerging, but by then quite organized, new power (the radical reformers? the Radicals? the English working class? We will see below) that was trying to make a claim to political rights through as clear, explicit, and sincere demands as the legal artifices intended to prevent them allowed.

The magistrates were, on August 16th, 1819, in spite of their desire, *obliged* to respect (ultimately they did not) the careful legal course followed by the articulators of the meeting. Because of a paradoxical, special condition created by the various acts enacted to prevent meetings and riots, and the loopholes in them, the magistrates found themselves unable to use any legal mechanisms that could totally prevent the--between 60,000 and 100,000³ --marchers' gathering at St. Peter's Fields. The magistrates' fear of a mythical *instantaneous revolution*, their desire to stop the always increasing popularity of Mr. Henry Hunt (the main orator of the meeting), as well as their intention to use this event to *teach the reformers a lesson*, led to the tragic chain-reaction that ended in the bloody actions of the Yeomanry Cavalry, and later on in the day, the shootings by the 15th Hussars Regiment at New Cross.

What had allowed the reformers to gain such power in 1819 had been the fact that the government had become isolated and the ruling class divided, while the reformers had found the device of *constitutionalism*, thus requesting rights that could not be denied if the spirit of British law was to be respected. The working class had traditionally been submitted to the ideological

manacles of *deference* and *fear*. Their intimacy with Dissent, and with the practices inspired by Methodism had weakened these ideological tools that had been of so much service to the ruling class. Without the restraint of deference, the reformers were in a position to request rights they recognized as their own, and which they deemed necessary to achieve a dignified position in society: The right to politically organize themselves, the respect of the freedom of press, and the right to public assembly. The workers had become mature enough to realize that their only chance of having their demands satisfied--any demand satisfied--was through organization. They had arrived at a point where they were aware that they had evolved from their original *mob* identity to a level of political existence as a movement: The root *mobile* from which the pejorative "mob" originated, now served again to signal the new situation of the workers. The working class was finally a *class*, and by the time of Peterloo, had achieved its *point of no return*: The mob no longer existed.

Several factors make me suggest that the St. Peter's Fields events developed their tragic course of action because of the (intentional) lack of specific, clear instructions along a chain of command that should have originated in the British government, passed on through the Manchester local magistrates, ending with the military chiefs who should have had a greater (or, at least, some) control over the Manchester and Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalries, as well as over the regiments stationed in the vicinity of St. Peter's. Supposedly, they were there to support and complement the means to ensure the safe and peaceful enactment of an authorized, thus legal, political meeting.⁴

Both the government and the reformers were deeply aware of the charged symbolism that this meeting held in itself, and indeed the meeting was a symbolic action on both sides, despite the final body-count. The magistrates' intention was to assert control, while the reformers were coming fully loaded with the symbols of their existence and intentions: banners, the bugle, the drums, the Cap of Liberty, the white caps, etc. Thus, I must emphasize the remarkable awareness and recognition by both conflicting sides of the existence, presence, and use of

symbols charged with meaning that could instantly elicit feelings and synthesize ideas and situations . The forces of the establishment showed not only inability to stop or prevent the magnification of these symbols that the realization of “the biggest reformist gathering ever in the Kingdom” would cause, but, with their blood-spilling action at St. Peter’s Fields, contributed to create the reformers’ richest symbol.

The reformers could also be called radical reformers, or constitutionalists, or working-class constitutionalists, or radicals, or Radicals, if you wish. I have intentionally used all these terms as synonyms to provide an example of how contemporary hypersensitivity allowed the use of these words in contexts that changed their meaning. This meaning would be, oftentimes, charged with a heavy political symbolism and, if sometimes these words could be used as interchangeable synonyms, at other moments their special use by either side represented different postures or opinions: the word “radical” in a reformer’s mouth had a different meaning than in a magistrate’s. By the alteration of their literal meaning, these words would oftentimes even become vicious epithets preceded by nasty adjectives: any time I repeatedly ran into the headline *Radical Reformers* in the pre-Peterloo issues of *The Times*, I could not help but having the sensation that it represented an editorial condemnatory comment in itself. Until a few days after these bloody events, the newspaper had been the *voice* of the ruling class. In sum: the St. Peter’s Fields events provided reformers with the grandest-sounding symbol of their oppression, unrepresentativeness, and victimization: *Peterloo*.

The quick arrest, at the moment when the meeting was just at its beginning, of Hunt, Johnson, and some other important figures who were sharing the hustings⁵ with him, had among other objectives, the purpose of preventing the fiery orator from delivering his speech. From the magistrates' point of view, no doubt, this arrest should have been done in the least violent fashion the circumstances allowed: the magistrates must have been smart enough to understand that the creation of a martyr of the reform cause had to be avoided at any cost. By arresting Hunt, the magistrates also wanted to put a stain on this meeting, frustrate its

realization, and make it clear for once and for all that these meetings would not longer be tolerated. But, by that time the central government had become aware that the old practice of plain and arbitrary suppression of the *lower orders'* public expression was no longer possible. Repression now needed some sort of justifying legal appearance: The authorities seemed somehow aware that the cost of violent repression was higher than the results obtained by it.

The magistrates' decision to form a mounted military force from members of a class that had the most interest in keeping *Old Corruption* at work, and who held the most grievances against the reformers' protests (were not some of them, for example, the owners of the looms that the reformers had destroyed in the years of Luddism⁶?), was a very unhappy one. The real desire of the central government and of the local magistrates had been to neutralize the reformers' organized actions, to keep the *status quo*. But, by the time of St. Peter's, a need had arisen for more sophisticated means of doing so, and that is what both the local magistrates and the Home Office were trying to devise in their eager communication during the days previous to the Manchester meeting. The magistrates' specific ambition was to keep the reformers under control at any cost. Since the central government had--as I said above--demanded some appearance of legal procedure, and the former had run out of legal reasons to forbid the meeting outright, they had to find a mid-course of action.

The original date for the meeting, August 9th, had been changed to the new one of August 16th, after the first planned gathering of the reformers had been declared illegal through an advertisement published by the magistrates in the *Manchester Observer* of July 31th: ". . . (A) PUBLIC AND ILLEGAL MEETING is convened for Monday, the 9th day of August next, (. . .) do hereby caution all Persons to abstain AT THEIR PERIL FROM ATTENDING SUCH ILLEGAL MEETING" (Marlow 103).

The Times of August 10th, 1819 informed readers that the meeting that was to be held on the 9th had been declared illegal due the stated purpose of "electing a representative to serve in Parliament for the unrepresented." The magistrates had based themselves on the interpretation of a Royal Proclamation, and "perhaps on the opinion of Counsel." The newspaper said that,

given this warning, the reformers had set the second date (August 16th) for another meeting where “Parliamentary Reform generally” (*The Times* 10 Aug. 1819) would be considered. After the reformers reformulated the original terms of their meeting, it had become legally acceptable, or better, it had become impossible for the government to declare it illegal.

The legality of this second meeting (and of the reformulated purpose) had been confirmed by the authorities’ refusal to arrest Hunt--who they knew was in Manchester to be the main orator of the meeting--when he, in a smart preemptive movement, had turned himself in at the New Bailey Court House on August 14th. On this issue, it is interesting to observe that the desire of the government had indeed been to arrest Hunt *before* the meeting, but the popularity of both the meeting and the orator were such that the magistrates could not do it without paying too high a price:

Another idea which was being mooted by the magistrates was to arrest Hunt before the meeting. On this subject the Home Office had given its usual qualified advice: ‘His lordship thinks that if you find good ground for issuing a warrant it will be advisable not to forbear from doing so in the expectation of his giving you a better opportunity, unless some other reason for forbearance presents itself.’ In the end the magistrates chose to forbear, though Hunt himself presented them with a golden, if double-edged, opportunity on August 14th, by offering to surrender himself to them.

Hunt’s explanation for going to the New Bailey, where the magistrates were, was that having heard of their plans to arrest him, he wanted to clarify the situation. Either they could arrest him, which he surely thought most unlikely, as the public reaction, although an unknown factor, would undoubtedly be a noisy and immense one (. . .); or they could state that they had no charge against him. The latter was what happened. (. . .). So, off Hunt drove, back to Smedley Cottage, ‘conscious of having performed an important public duty by depriving the authorities of every fair pretence for interfering with the meeting’ (Marlow 115-6).

When finally the road for the reformers to realize their meeting at St. Peter’s was cleared, the concern of the magistrates was directed to the control and restraint of the attending mass. The

fear the loyalists felt of the reformers had been greatly increased in the previous weeks by the organizational skills displayed by the latter in their open-field drilling. The semi-military maneuvers of the workers had awakened in loyalist and moderate minds a fear of a revolutionary explosion which could very well start exactly at the Manchester meeting.⁷

Thus, the magistrates had decided that the reformist *armies* that would march on August 16th to St. Peter's could only be controlled by a strong military presence. Notwithstanding, Marlow maintains that the military intervention in St. Peter's Fields was an excessive measure: The Peterloo "dress rehearsal" of January 18th 1819 (the protest meeting for the repeal of the "Corn Law") had been a clear proof that people's marches and meetings could happen without disturbance and without military intervention. The January meeting had had 10,000 people in attendance, Hunt as a main speaker, and an organized crowd marching to the rhythm of bands with display of banners. Then, the magistrates had "behaved with good sense and restraint." (. . .) "(A)lthough they had troops standing at the ready in barracks on the 18th they did not call upon those troops. Thus the meeting dispersed peaceably" (Marlow 84).

But, if the January meeting had constituted a test by the reformers to "prove their growing strength" (Marlow 82), by the time of the August meeting, this strength had grown in the magistrates' eyes to a point where it justified their measures: an extensive set of military and paramilitary formations would surround the field, guard its exits, and be stationed at considerable distance from it. It is interesting to notice how the meaning of the reformers' drilling was interpreted by the loyalists, and what the reformers really intended to achieve by their essays of precise displacements about Manchester. Samuel Bamford, a veteran of the 1817-21 reform movement who was intimately involved in the preparations, and recorded his experiences two decades later, explains the drilling:

It was deemed expedient that this meeting should be as morrally (*sic*) effective as possible, and, that it should exhibit a spectacle such as had never before been witnessed in England. We had frequently been taunted by the press, with our ragged, dirty appearance, at these assemblages;

with the confusion of our proceedings, and the mob-like crowds in which our numbers were mustered; and we determined that, for once at least, these reflections should not be deserved,--that we would disarm the bitterness of our political opponents by a display of cleanliness, sobriety, and decorum, such as we never before had exhibited. In short we would deserve their respect by shewing that we respected ourselves, and knew how to exercise our rights of meeting, as it were well Englishmen always should do,--in a spirit of sober thoughtfulness; respectful, at the same time, to the opinion of others.

“CLEANLINESS,” “SOBRIETY,” “ORDER,” were the first injunctions issued by the committees; to which on the suggestion of Mr. Hunt, was subsequently added that of, “PEACE.” (. . .) Order in our movements was obtained by drilling; and peace, on our parts, was secured, by a prohibition of all weapons of offence or defence; and by the strictest discipline, of silence, steadiness, and obedience to the directions of the conductors (176-77).

But these "quasi-military" drillings “provided panic suction (*sic*) for even the moderates.” (. . .) “(W)hat could the participants possibly be doing except training for insurrection, armed of course, with their pikes stuck somewhere up their jerkins?” (Marlow 93). “The drilling parties increase VERY EXTENSIVELY, and unless some mode be devised of putting this system down, it promises to become a most formidable engine of rebellion. I expect the operation of the Watch and Ward Act⁸ will have a great effect in this instance.” (The magistrate J. Norris, in a letter to Lord Sidmouth. Bamford 183-84).

One of the many commonplaces to describe history is to say that, in history, nothing happens too early or too late, nothing that has happened could have not, and nothing that has not happened could have been made to happen. History only *is*, and it is so at its own time, which is always the *right* one. Marlow devotes a good deal of her work to trying to analyze which alternatives--if realized--could have prevented Peterloo from happening. So I will just briefly refer to them, not to support Marlow’s imaginative attempt at historical fiction, but--through

commenting on her listing--to find some of the reasons why Peterloo *did happen*.

* Had, during the Lancashire strikes of 1818, the masters acceded to “placating the slumbering giant” by conceding the weavers’ demands of an increase of 7s a week, “there would probably have been no Peterloo” (Marlow 70). The failure of this strike is what sent the majority of the weavers, previously apolitical, in the direction of the Radicals. Once politicized, the weavers “provided the backbone” for Peterloo.

* Lord Sidmouth was, by the time of the Peterloo events, a tired and frustrated man who wanted to retire, but remained in his post; preventing his replacement by an eventually “stronger, clearer minded, more liberal Home Secretary” who could have “changed the magistrate system within six months.” This “more liberal Home Secretary could have given the necessary clear directives to, and left less in the hands of, the magistrates” (Marlow 80).

* The last offer by Sir Oswald Mosley--the Lord of the Manor--to sell his manorial rights as a consequence of various scandals (“unearthed by the radicals”) had brought about the sentiment that it was time for the creation of a corporation in Manchester. Lord Mosley had made an offer to sell his rights for 90,000 Pounds, but the deal did not go through given the sabotaging actions of the oligarchy “working on the fears of the small shop-keepers and loyalists.” (. . .) “Thus ultimate control of Manchester remained in the Magistrates’ hands” (Marlow 81).

Thompson mentions another historian, Donald Read, who in a study on Peterloo also establishes one more item that could have prevented the massacre from happening. Concerned to “place the event in its local context”, Mr. Read says:

* “Peterloo, as the evidence of the Home Office shows, was never desired or precipitated by the Liverpool Ministry, the government in office at the time, as a bloody repressive gesture for keeping down the lower orders. If the Manchester magistrates had followed the spirit of Home Office policy there would never have been a ‘massacre’ ” (Thompson 683).

Some major points about the combination of explicit facts that led to Peterloo surface from

the above short list: a Manchester that had been anachronistically kept in submission to a Medieval manorial structure, while other less important centers had already been transformed into corporate towns; an always increasing mass of underpaid workers who had no choice but to turn towards the radicals in search of a solution for their economic grievances (this would lead to their political indoctrination); and a group of reactionary magistrates holding all the authority. Lastly, there was little effective communication among the central government, the magistrates, and the people over whom they ruled.

The tremendous political strength of the array of forces displayed by the workers in the gathering at St. Peter's Fields could have also been realized at other points of Great Britain at the time. The working class was mature and ripe for this kind of political statement. Also, it must be said that the forces of the government would probably have found the means to repress the gathering in any other place that the workers had chosen for the meeting. In spite of that, I would like to add another item to the list above:

* The fact that “police in the modern sense did not exist until 1829 when Sir Robert Peel established the Metropolitan force in London” (Messinger 28). The keeping of the civic peace was the task of a few constables; this allowed the magistrates to swear in more constables or even form special forces, i.e, the Yeomanry, and to call for military regiments to perform police work whenever the need arose. To establish when this need indeed existed was also the function of the reactionary magistrates. The increased exchange between the Home Office and the Manchester magistrates in the days before the August 16th meeting was intended to determine this need.

The reasons given to the government by the magistrates to request authorization for the creation of these special forces are profusely documented in Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical*. There, appears a collective statement by the magistrates J. Sylvester, R. Wright, W. Marriott, C. W. Ethelston, and J. Norris addressed to Lord Viscount Sidmouth. Its last paragraph upholds my assertion as to the magistrates' inability to legally prevent the realization of the meeting, as well as their eager request for an authorization to form the special force:

We believe, on Monday next, a meeting will be held at Blackburn, and on the following Monday, at Manchester, at both of which Sir Charles Wolseley is to preside. AS THE LAW NOW STANDS WE CANNOT INTERFERE WITH THESE MEETINGS, NOTWITHSTANDING OUR DECIDED CONVICTION OF THEIR MISCHIEF AND DANGER. We are most anxious to do every thing in our power to preserve the peace of the country, but UPON THIS MOST IMPORTANT POINT WE ARE UNARMED (Bamford 182).

The request had been presented dated July 1st, 1819. By July 16th, the Chairman of the Committee to “Strengthen the Civil Power,” John Bradshaw, communicated a resolution to arm and equip a maximum of one thousand men. The number of armed forces available for Lieutenant-Colonel Guy L’Estrange, the officer commanding the Manchester district, to use at St. Peter’s Fields was composed of “four squadrons of cavalry of the 15th. Hussars, comprising about 600 men, with several hundred infantrymen in the whole of the 88th Foot and several squadrons of the 31st Foot. (. . .) (A) detachment of the Royal Horse Artillery, Major Dyneley’s regiment, with their two six-pounder guns. (. . .) (T)he amateur Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry at full strength with eight corps, at least 400 men, and three troops of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry Cavalry, two of which, comprising 120 men were actually used” (Marlow 126).

The communiqué neither acknowledged any need for uniforms, nor for drilling, “as it is considered only necessary that the most simple parts of military discipline would be required by such Association” (Bamford 182-83). This conceptions embodies a good deal of *class arrogance*: The members of the Yeomanry would have to deal with the *rabble*, so just the toting of the weapons by the horsemen would be enough to keep the rabble under control. The Yeomanry, on the other hand were not so sure that that would be enough, or had their own reasons to expect (or their own motives to want) their weapons to be used.

Even though the deliberations on the formation of the Yeomanry, its arming, and its lack of training are known by the historians, the final directions given by the Home Office to the magistrates, as well as the orders given to the Yeomanry and military commanders by the

magistrates are still obscure. It is worth mentioning another of Thompson's points:

Mr. Read places great weight (. . .) on a letter of Sidmouth's twelve days before Peterloo, advising the Manchester magistrates to "abstain from any endeavour to disperse the mob". But if any "Peterloo decision" was reached by Sidmouth and the magistrates it is likely to have been reached privately in the week before the meeting. And it is highly unlikely that any record would have been left in the official Home Office papers for subsequent inspection. The "Private and Secret" correspondence between Hobhouse and Byng and Norris (. . .) is curiously ambiguous. Several letters (which have the air of being "for the record") deprecate "hasty" or forcible action against the crowd (. . .); but there is an air of anticipation without precedent, a private address is given to Norris (Chairman of the Manchester Bench) for correspondence (. . .), and two days after Peterloo Hobhouse records Sidmouth's satisfaction in the judgment of Colonel L' Estrange in "his employing the Yeomanry in the Van, agreeably to the Plan on which I know you intended to act (. . .). My opinion is (a) that the Manchester authorities certainly intended to employ force, (b) that Sidmouth knew--and assented to--their intention to arrest Hunt in the midst of the assembly and to disperse the crowd, but that he was unprepared for the violence with which this was effected (Thompson 683, my emphasis).

Thus lack of specific orders confused both sides of the conflict, but the intention of the authorities in keeping this *hazy environment* is clear: while the Yeomanry organized itself for the massacre,⁹ Hunt published a letter in *The Times*, August 16th 1819, which in part said: "Our enemies will seek every opportunity by the means of their sanguinary agents to excite a riot, that they may have a pretence for spilling our blood, reckless of the awful and certain retaliation that would ultimately fall on their hands." Conservative revisionists such as Philip Lawson can not avoid stating that the potential for catastrophe was present at St. Peter's:

The argument today swings back and forth across the ideological spectrum much as it did then, and it is worth highlighting two points in particular, that scholars of Peterloo always raise to reinforce their case. First, were

participants in the reform meeting ready and armed for confrontation with the policing forces, and, second, did the authorities from Home Office down, concoct a plan to deliver a smashing blow to the reform impetus in North West England? (. . .) (It seems apparent that everyone and his dog carried some sort of weapon at Peterloo. The Yeomanry had sabres, the regulars swords and firearms, the special constables batons and staves, and those in the crowd nearest to the speakers shouldered sticks or even pistols (Lawson 27-8).

It is clear that there were open threats for both sides looming over that day's meeting, but, Hunt advised attendance to "(c)ome, then, my friends, to the meeting on Monday, armed with no other weapon but that of a self-approving conscience; determined not to suffer yourselves to be irritated or excited, by any means whatsoever, to commit to any breach of the public peace" (Lawson 27-8). It is possible to suppose that the people armed with sticks or even pistols nearest to the speakers were, most likely, the bodyguards of Hunt and other prominent members of the reform movement. It would be unthinkable to imagine a man both as flamboyant and as threatened as Hunt to go to the meeting without a personal guard. [An example of this custom is provided by Bamford (169-70) in his account of the request by Hunt for him to provide a guard to stand by on the occasion of Hunt's attempt (finally frustrated) to attend for the second time a show at the Manchester theater]. Since "(t)he leaders of the contingents had warned their followers to ignore all provocations,(,) (m)any staves --or 'walking-sticks'-- had been left behind" (Thompson 685). Again the weight of the responsibility for the deaths and injuries caused by weapons falls on the side of the government. It is evident that the authorities expected that the armed forces would end up exerting some violence on the protesters, but the lack of written orders--the lack of a *paper trail*--would provide the government with infinite ways of excusing itself of any responsibility for any happening at St. Peter's: The government was *washing its hands*. Since the ultimate decision to transform the meeting at St. Peter's Field into *Peterloo* was left within the hands of the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry, it is worthwhile to take a look at how the Cavalry is seen by scholarship: The most circumspect

historians, in books that tangentially touch Peterloo, as Messinger does in *Manchester in the Victorian Age*, see the Yeomanry as just another victim caught up within a weird *accident*.

Suddenly a struggle began between parts of the crowd and parts of the Yeomanry. Some of the Yeomanry became isolated. Then, for reasons which have caused puzzlement to the present day, panic erupted. Men and women screamed, sabres flashed, and a full-scale riot ensued. When the dust settled and the sun began to dry the blood on the ground, some six to eleven persons had been killed and another one hundred to six hundred seriously injured (Messinger 28).

This is a radically different picture of the Manchester Yeomanry from the one painted by Marlow. Marlow tells of Hugh Hornby Birley, the Commander of the Yeomanry, entertaining the Yeomanry with drink at nearby public houses to provide them with *Dutch courage*. "There is no evidence that any other troops, amateur or regular, were drunk, but that many members of the MYC were by the time they finally took up their positions is indisputable. It was considerably to add to the disaster of the day" (Marlow 127). Some people could even use such a detail to justify the action of the Yeomanry as the irresponsible acts of drunken horsemen. A better light on explaining the reasons behind the Yeomanry's actions is shed by Thompson's account. He best describes the imbalance between the mood of the working class attending to the meeting, and the disposition of the Yeomanry:

The presence of so many women and children was overwhelming testimony to the pacific character of a meeting which (the reformers knew) all England was watching. The attack was made on this multitude with the venom of panic. But the panic was not (as has been suggested) the panic of bad horsemen hemmed in by a crowd. It was the panic of class hatred. It was the *Yeomanry*--the Manchester manufacturers, merchants, publicans, and shopkeepers on horseback--which did more damage than the regulars (Hussars). In the Yeomanry (a middle class reformer testified) "there are . . . individuals whose political rancour approaches to absolute insanity." These were the men who pursued the banners, knew the

speakers by name and sought to play off old scores, and who mustered and cheered at the end of their triumph (Thompson 686-87).

Thompson's emphasis on the presence of women, something that Bamford elaborates with visible pleasure in his *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, brings me back to the importance of understanding the symbols shared by both parts of the Manchester conflict. Another symbol--feminine presence, which was intended to reinforce the meeting's festive and peaceful character--was to constitute still another element to incense the passion of the Manchester Yeomanry. The irritation of the ruling class at the presence of women in political protest went as far back as the 1790's repulsion of the elites for the ideas promulgated by the French Revolution. Women had been in popular protest before; but by 1819 their presence in the politics of radicalism was formal: women voted, were officers in associations, held their own meetings, presented addresses (Epstein 100-01). At the summer 1819 Blackburn meeting, the women of the Committee of the Blackburn Female Reform Society had played an active role by delivering a cap of liberty to chairman John Knight.

The *New Times* immediately proclaimed the ladies of the Blackburn Female Reform Society "worthy followers" of the women of the French Revolution: "(t)he Poissardes of Paris, those furies in the shape of women, who committed so many murders, and were foremost in so many scenes of horror". The Manchester Exchange Herald recorded its "repugnance at this "most disgusting scene" of women presenting a cap of liberty, noting that the women "mixed with the orators" and remained in the hustings for the rest of the day: "The Public scarcely need to be informed, that the females are women well known to be the most abandoned of their sex". The *New Times* left no doubt about the character of the "lady" who presented the Society's address: "for we cannot conceive that any but a hardened and shameless prostitute would have the audacity to appear on the hustings on such an occasion and for such a purpose" (Epstein 103).

At their August 16th meeting in Manchester, the reformers pursued a romantic, poetic, and

pacific gesture--and an egalitarian one as well--with their opening the march with a *battalion* of white clad women. The Yeomanry, however, perhaps thought that they were in the hateful presence of the “harpies:”

The role of the market-women of Paris during the French Revolution offered the quintessential image of a total inversion of natural order, an image enhanced by the close association of female radicals with the *Bonnet rouge*. The dramatic entry of women bearing the symbol of revolution on to the public platform underscored the threatened reversal of all relations of social and political authority. It is at least possible to imagine that some members of the Manchester Yeomanry saw “harpies” rather than mothers amid the confusion on St. Peter’s Field. Lists of those wounded suggest that there was little attempt to spare the lives of women (Epstein 104).

In my research on *The Times* I found the accounts that follow, surprising because they are written in a medium that had been traditionally the expression of the ruling class, thus always echoing the government view. What follows marks an important switch in the most powerful journalistic publication in England. The account of the actions of the Yeomanry in *The Times*, August 19th 1819, describes their advance towards the hustings “at rapid trot,” with “their ranks in disorder.” Interestingly enough, *The Times* says that, while the cavalry directed itself to the hustings “(n)ot a brick was thrown at them--not a pistol was fired during this period; all was quiet and orderly, as if the cavalry had been the friends of the multitude, and had marched as such into the midst of them. A bugle-man went at their head, then an officer, and then came the whole troop.” But, it seems that the orderly fashion was only necessary until they could secure their intended prey:

As soon as Hunt and Johnson had jumped from the wagon, 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 wagon, 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 till this act had been committed that

any brick-bats were hurled at the military. From that moment the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry lost all command of temper (*The Times* 19 Aug. 1819).

And so the massacre happened. Let us proceed directly to the aftermath. Hunt, Bamford, and others were tried and sentenced: Hunt was given two and a half years prison, and he had to provide a security deposit of 2,000 pounds that the government would keep if he broke the law afterwards. Bamford, and two others were sentenced to a year in prison; Bamford's security proviso was established at 1000 pounds (Bamford 156). But, Thompson says that "(i)f Peterloo was intended to curb the right to public meeting it had exactly the opposite consequences. Indignation provoked Radical organization where it had never before existed, and open-air demonstrations were held in regions hitherto under the spell of 'Loyalists' " (Thompson 690).

The repercussions of Peterloo immediately acquired national and international dimensions, as both Thompson and Messinger have said. The animosities brought about by the excesses of the troops were recognized even by the, until then, loyalist *The Times*: "there was no pretext under heaven for applying force to the meeting at Manchester which might not have been as plausibly brought forward to excuse a similar indiscretion in the case of the Smithfield assemblage." Still further, *The Times* focuses the nature of the disturbances within the frame of *class warfare*:

The Magistrates are, we have been informed, with scarcely one exception, of the class of master-manufacturers. They have the power consequently in their own hands; and it is wonderful, that men so situated should employ it for the benefit of their own party, than for that of the multitude, whom they consider "the common enemy". So the Manchester Cavalry are of that class of society who sympathize with the masters against the men, and whose prejudices and antipathies have, throughout the whole manufacturing contest, been engaged on that side of the question, which would lead them to consider a military movement against a meeting of Reformists (composed exclusively of the class of labourers) as tantamount to an attack upon "the common enemy" (*The Times* 21st Aug. 1819).

The Times' strong criticism of the events and its sudden journalistic accuracy is highly significant. At this point *The Times* was probably starting to distance itself from *Old Corruption* and to recognize itself as having different interests from it. By 1832, *The Times'* voice already echoed the middle-class.

Naturally, in the following days, months, and years, the images of Peterloo would feed the collective imagination, and its victims would become heroes.

Hero(e)s of Manchester, all hail!
Your fame the astonish'd world shall know;
Th' immortalizing bard can't fail
To sing the deeds of Peterloo!¹⁰

In the same fashion in which the bloody field of St. Peter's was a fertile ground to cultivate the myth of Peterloo's popular heroes, it also produced Peterloo's instant fiend:

You have heard of the far-renoun'd Waterloo plains,
Where the sun, horror struck at the slaughter, declin'd;
Where courage to frenzy abandoned the reins,
And liberty fell 'midst the tears of mankind.

But a scene still more dreadful remains to the story,
Where the blood of the helpless in wild torrents ran;
When women, and children, and grandsires hoary,
Fell beneath the fierce sword of the *Peterloo Man!*¹¹

Percy Shelley, using the voice of Nature, of Mother Earth, delivers the definitive words inspired by the Peterloo massacre:

"Men of England, heirs of Glory,
Heroes of unwritten story,
Nurslings of one mighty Mother,
Hopes of her, and one another;

"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."¹²

* The title is a line from Percy Shelley's poem *England in 1819*.

¹ *Old Corruption* was the widespread reformist sobriquet identifying the unrepresentative Parliament.

² "Before the day was over, news of these events was on its way to London, to England, and to the world" (Messinger 28).

³ *The Times* 18 Aug. 1819. ". . . the mob altogether amounted to more than 40,000 persons--some say 60,000--collected from all the neighboring districts (.)"

⁴ This statement, though, is already in jeopardy if one considers the conflicting views held immediately before and after the meeting: If there was the expectancy on the part of the magistrates that incitement to violence, the committing of illegal acts, the proffering of libelous statements, or even the plain incitement to the overthrowing of the established government could happen during the course of the meeting, it *would*--at some point--become illegal. Some sources claim that the Riot Act was read as soon as the gathering took shape, much before the main orator (Henry Hunt) had even arrived to the hustings (other sources, on the other hand, say that the Riot Act was never read). Also, to complicate even more the views on the legality/illegality of the meeting, it has been argued that--had the meeting been illegal--it could have been interrupted and the crowd dispersed without any need of reading of the Riot Act, just by recourse to "common law."

⁵ The hustings were a makeshift device "consisting of two wagons pushed together." (Marlow 128-9)

⁶ Luddism: framework-knitters underground movement; between 1811-13 realized acts of power-loom destruction in order to protect their trade.

⁷ Thompson's main concern in *The Making of the Working Class* is not to discuss the claims of the reformers, but to analyze if at any time in the history of the working class movement a generalized revolutionary action had ever been feasible and/or imminent. My opinion is that, if, undoubtedly, there were revolutionaries within the Manchester attendance, under no circumstances a revolution would have started that day. The general spirit of these gatherings was indoctrinating, strength-displaying, and political-gesturing, not a belligerent one. It is enough just to pay some attention to the reformers' concerns with orderliness, cleanliness and peacefulness.

⁸ The Radical Reformers, *The Times* 13 Aug. 1819: "It is expected that the Watch and Ward Act which comes into operation on Monday next, will be a means of checking, if not of entirely preventing, these practices."

⁹ "At the first taste of power, on receipt of the letter from Lord Derby, the MYC leapt into action. They sent their sabres to be sharpened. (. . .). No other Yeomanry corps sent their sabres to be sharpened. The MYC had never sent theirs to be sharpened before, only to be cleaned. So what prompted the action other than hopeful bloody use of the sabres?" (Marlow 98).

¹⁰ R(ober) S(horter)., The Bloody Field of Peterloo! A New Song (Scrivener 218).

¹¹ (N.A.) The Peterloo Man (Scrivener 266).

¹² Percy Shelley, The Mask of Anarchy. Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Donald H Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), P. 305.




