Reviews

The Peterloo massacre

Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (Head of Zeus, 2018); Polyp, Eva Schlunke and Robert Poole, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* (New Internationalist, 2019); Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford University Press, 2019)

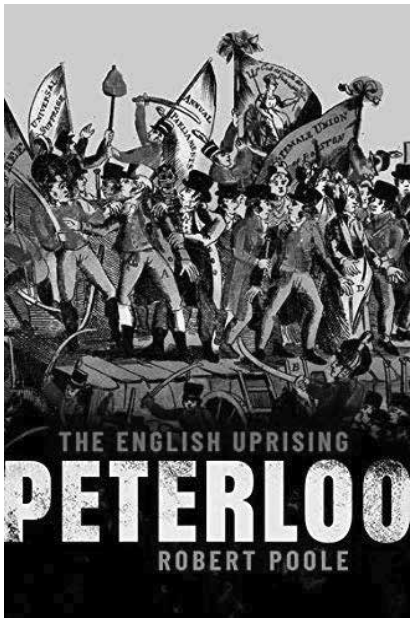
Review by **Ian Cawood**

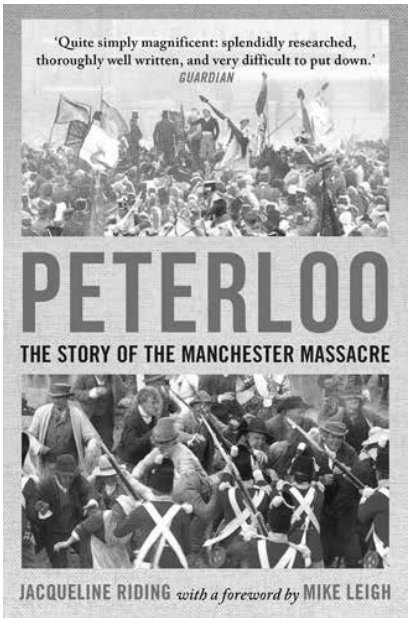
The violent suppression of a mass public demonstration in Manchester on 16 August 1819, first satirised as 'Peter-loo' by the radical *Manchester Observer,* has held a very ambiguous place in the historiography of Britain in the early nineteenth century.[1] Although it has remained a staple item in the teaching of modern British politics on A-level syllabuses and undergraduate history courses since the 1960s, largely owing to the influence of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* on the imaginations of a generation of history teachers, it rarely features in compulsory secondary school history lessons and there have been surprisingly few discrete studies of the event that Professor Robert Poole describes as 'the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil.'[2]

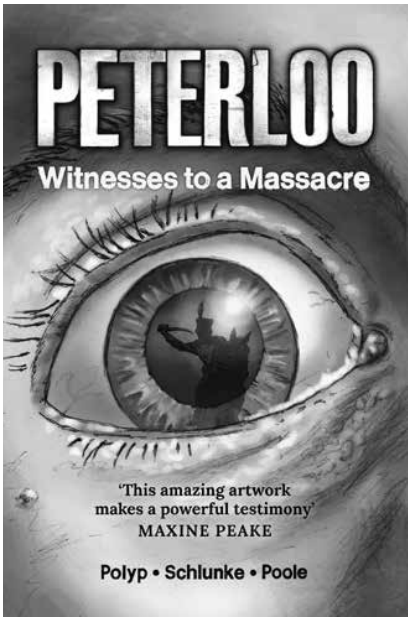
Thankfully none of the authors of the three most recent studies are interested in tired debates on who was responsible for the massacre. There is simply no question that the protestors at St Peter's Field themselves were in any way to blame and, in Poole's view, the events of Peterloo should be placed alongside other infamously violent responses by bankrupt regimes such as at Amritsar, Soweto and Tiananmen Square. Instead, the texts under review all concentrate on detailed archival research to present narratives of the events, characters and context of that summer Monday afternoon. They succeed in illuminating the scale of the horror of what happened at St Peter's Field in central Manchester and the impact of the completely unexpected violence on almost the full range of the political spectrum. However, as is common with so much academic and popular history written this century, they fail to add much to existing interpretations of the significance of the event. The most traditional popular interpretation, still perpetuated on educational websites such as that of the National Archives' 'The Struggle for Democracy' pages, is that Peterloo was a necessary stepping stone on the inevitable march to universal suffrage.[3] Although this has been repeatedly challenged by academic historians, it is this view that Jacqueline Riding perpetuates in her 2018 narrative account of 'the Manchester massacre'.

Riding sets out her position fairly openly, with George Cruikshank's illustrations from William Hone's pamphlet, *The Political House that Jack Built*, and his scurrilous newspaper, *A Slap at Slop*, reproduced as frontispieces for each chapter without any comment as to their partisan nature.[4] The meetings of radical Hampden Clubs, Patriotic Union and Female Reform Societies and the reports of the *Manchester Observer* are recorded sympathetically and in depth, but the views of loyalists and non-radical papers such as the *Manchester Chronicle*, genuinely afraid of the anarchy of the French Revolution being unleashed on Lancastrian Streets, are ignored or traduced. That said, her account is extremely powerful in illustrating the characters of the participants through anecdote and judicious quotation. There is no doubt that one is left with a huge sense of pity for the victims of the authorities' thoughtlessness which led to brutality, but Ridings seems unsure of what more to make of the event. In her nine-page final chapter, she claims that 'through the 1820s there were few significant advances' but, a few pages later, states that there was 'a shift in the attitude by the "middling sort" towards the plight of the disenfranchised labouring class' which seems both contradictory and unsustainable, given the 'modest nature' of the 1832 Great Reform Act and the viciously Malthusian Poor Law Amendment of 1834. She also asserts that 'when national or local government is judged to have run roughshod over the rights … of citizens … Peterloo is evoked' but in the next sentence describes the massacre as 'little known.'[5] One is tempted to conclude that if one needs to belong to a particular political position in order to have the right to invoke the name of Peterloo, it is not surprising that the average, apolitical citizen of twenty-first century Britain has never heard of it.

In 2019, alongside the release of Ken Loach's typically didactic film and the unveiling of Jeremy Deller's bathetic 'installation' in St Peter's Square, one relatively new form of history has actually succeeded in engaging with those outside the usual circles of socialist commemoration. This is the graphic novel, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre,* based on Robert Poole's research. Working with the Australian artist Eva Schlunke, the book is chiefly the work of the highly skilled satirist 'Polyp' (Paul Fitzgerald), who has been the cartoonist for *New Internationalist* magazine for nearly thirty years. Polyp has previously produced a graphic history of the Rochdale Pioneers, entitled *The Co-operative Revolution* in 2012, so he was the obvious choice for this new work. The artwork is startlingly vivid and tells the story of the events in upsetting detail. It carries references to the available sources (surely a first for a graphic novel), with a determination to be as factually accurate as possible. In the references section at the end of the novel, the authors state that 'everything in a white panel or speech bubble was written or said at the time' with two very minor exceptions which they scrupulously identify.[6] In the novel itself, there are odd moments of







humour, such as the case of John Saddleworth who was saved from a fatal sabre blow by the bread and cheese lunch he had placed in his hat. There are scenes which graphically depict the brutal violence that a sharpened sword can do to the human body. But most of all, there is a lingering sense that the poor people of Manchester were used as pawns, both by the radical agitators who sought a confrontation to provoke a wider uprising and by the authorities who sought to teach the common people their place by a show of paramilitary power. The book suggests that Henry Hunt was more interested in self-publicity than amelioration of the people's condition, that the army Hussars, deployed to rescue the yeomanry, intervened frequently to prevent the yeomanry attacking members of the crowd and that many Manchester shopkeepers and businessmen were repelled by the tactics used by the magistrates. Nevertheless, the book perpetuates the interpretation of an uncaring establishment, bent on keeping the starving subjugated and using spies, hunger and sabres to do so. It may not go as far as Robert Reid, who claimed in his 1989 text that England in 1819 was 'closer in spirit to that of the early years of the Third Reich than at any other time in history' but, at times, it comes close.[7] The fact that many politicians, some radicals and the bulk of the contemporary press, including *The Times*, had warned of the likelihood of this outcome if Hunt persisted in holding such large scale meetings, is ignored, as is standard in the left-wing's partial view of the massacre.

Although E. P. Thompson depicted the bloody event as part of a larger, proto-Marxist uprising which the aristocratic authorities in league with the bourgeois businessmen of Manchester were inevitably bound to attack, Robert Poole is more concerned with placing the events of 1819 in the context of a wider political debate on 'citizenship' which had been stimulated (and then suppressed) by the French Revolution.[8] He takes a less literary approach than Riding and offers a more rigorous analysis of events leading up to the fateful events of 16 August 1819,s in which he manages to align the motivations of both the authorities and the demonstrators in a manner which no previous account has achieved. He is also highly conscious of the local and regional context of the politics and economics of Manchester, at a time when an elite, educated group of workers, the handloom weavers, were facing an assault on their livelihoods and status from mechanisation of the weaving process. However, the role of religion, or rather Christian faith, dismissed by Thompson and other Marxists, needed more attention in Poole's work in order for that context to be fully established. The most effective attack on 'Old Corruption' (the radicals' nickname for the political system) was that mounted by critics both within and outside the Church of England. The way in which the aristocracy had captured the Church's hierarchy in order to enrich themselves had been exposed in the anonymous *Red Book*, published in 1816 and then developed by the journalist William Hazlitt in his essay ,'On the Clerical Character' in 1818.[9] This critique of the moral failure of the Church to address the spiritual needs of the newly urbanised populations of northern Britain, focused political, cultural and economic anger in a region where the nonconformist community represented a wider rejection of metropolitan values, morality and authority. Poole's work is nevertheless fastidious and highly detailed, with a command of the archival and printed sources that comes from a long career of research and scholarship. It is also written in a compelling and accessible fashion and one hopes that it will lead to a popular rediscovery of the massacre and enable its memory to be revived outside university seminar rooms and avowedly socialist networks.

Poole could also have considered exactly how Hunt and the *Manchester Observer* persuaded the working people of Manchester and the surrounding districts to support *his* tactic of demanding immediate universal manhood suffrage 'by great public meetings … peaceably but firmly conducted', in his otherwise excellent chapter on Hunt's visit to Manchester

in January 1819.[10] Although Poole claims that the enthusiasm in Manchester derived from a political tradition of demands for full citizenship which the workers believed they had won through their participation in the war against Franc, rather than from mere economic hardship, the case is not wholly established. His book is subtitled 'The English Uprising' but it is never made clear what this actually means. Is it a reference to the wave of popular demonstrations that culminated in Peterloo? In which case, one would have to question an interpretation which conflated the violence of the Spenceans and the Pentridge Rising with the peaceful approach of the Blanketeers and the crowds in Manchester in August 1819. The historians of Peterloo still need to decide if it was a peaceful protest which resulted in a 'massacre' or a popular revolt against unjust, corrupt and undemocratic tyranny which was met with implacable resistance by the government and English establishment. It suits neither narrative to suggest, of course, that the event was a terrible accident, which is probably far closer to the truth. The unfocused grievances of the poor were dangerously encouraged by unscrupulous, self-appointed radical 'leaders' and that these were then confronted by untrained, inexperienced local authorities who had no experience in handling such events and were given little guidance and support by a government keen to keep its own hands clean. If nothing else, the disaster of Peterloo makes one even more appreciative of the government's handling of later mass demonstrations, such as the 1848 Chartist meeting at Kennington Common, which passed off with no significant violence at all, despite the threats of the radical leaders, the deployment of the army under the hostile command of the Duke of Wellington and the arming of the middle-classes in the guise of 'special' constables.[11]

All the authors are, however, highly unconvincing on the aftermath of Peterloo, almost as if the horror of the event prevents them from confronting the fact that, in reality, it had little lasting positive impact. Although their careers came to a swift end, Nadin and the Manchester magistrates were never held to account for their actions. The trial of Hunt and the other radical leaders may have backfired as it exposed the incompetence of the Manchester magistrates and the complicity of the government in the violence that took place, but Hunt was still imprisoned and never achieved the same popular status again. Shelley may have poured vitriol on Liverpool's government (although his singling out of Castlereagh in 'The Mask of Anarchy' does appear to have been because it rhymed easily) but the Conservatives remained in office for another eleven years. Lord Sidmouth remained home secretary until 1822 and in the cabinet for two more years after that As Poole points out, the radicals failed to capitalise on the propaganda victory which the authorities had handed them and the momentum shifted to moderate 'liberal' Tories such as George Canning and reformist Whigs such as Henry Brougham, none of whom advocated substantial electoral reform. Other radicals, such as Hazlitt, Hone and John Wade, sought instead to use journalism to expose the abuses of the elite and thus convince the public to demand reform and shame the elite into granting it.[12] William Cobbett, then at the height of his fame, and with whom Hunt shared a mutual detestation, championed petitioning in order to achieve repeal of the Corn Laws and reform of the tax system; more achievable targets, which he felt would relieve popular suffering more swiftly than universal suffrage.[13] The strict Six Acts restricted print debate of the event and the loyalists' belief in the connection between radicalism and revolutionary violence appeared confirmed when Arthur Thistlewood and others were apprehended plotting the assassination of the cabinet in Cato Street. Many cultural historians actually believe that the 1820 Queen Caroline Affair did more to damage the government and respect for the Crown and the Church and that politicians soon came to regard Peterloo as a tragic, but highly un-British misfortune, caused by mistakes on the sides of both radicals and local authorities which would best be swiftly forgotten.[14]

The only historian who attempted systematically to analyse the aftermath of Peterloo was Donald Read in his classic 1958 study. Although Poole has claimed that Read 'blames the magistrates, but exonerates the government', that judgement, based on that of Robert Walmsley, is hardly fair.[15] Read found that the government had been highly unwise to trust the unrepresentative Manchester magistrates to cope with the crisis of 1819, but that their advice had clearly been to avoid violent confrontation where possible. The government's firm backing for the actions of the magistrates cannot be regarded as anything other than a grudging necessity in that they had little choice but to stand firm in defence of property or to risk the breakdown of authority across the country and the loss of resolve by local authorities in the north of England.[16] In early 1820 Robert Peel wrote to the secretary to the Admiralty that the consequences of repression meant that 'the tone of England … [now] is more liberal than the policy of the government' and he looked forward to 'some undefined change in the mode of governing the country' which no doubt included the demotion of hard-liners like Sidmouth, who was widely blamed for letting the crisis get out of hand.[17] This demonstrates that elements of the government recognised the limited effectiveness of repressive measures which would only retain popular support while there was clear evidence of an ongoing crisis of mass demonstrations and political violence and which would need to be replaced with a more emollient approach as soon as the danger passed (as it did by 1822). This hardly supports the depiction of the ruling elite as indifferent to 'public opinion' and bent on indiscriminate violent suppression presented in the books under review.

Read noted that narcissism of the reform leaders, chiefly Hunt, soon lead to equal disenchantment with them and their tactics on the radicals' side. As he put it, drily, 'only the most extreme depression had driven many of the weavers to Radicalism: when the depression eased a little [in 1820] they reverted to their distrust of all politicians.'[18] It was middle-class

reformers who capitalised on the revulsion for the event and a petition expressing anger at loyalist support for the massacre was signed by 5,000 inhabitants of Manchester (including 148 cotton masters). Henry Grey Bennet, the defender of chimney-sweeps, spoke in parliament in support of electoral reform as a means to 'avoid civil dissention' and in support of local government reform to prevent 'the shedding of English blood by English hands.'[19] The aldermen of the Common Council of London rebuked the prince regent for his swift congratulations to the Manchester authorities

> His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, through … the gross misrepresentations of others had been adduced to sanction, and not only to sanction, but to applaud and express his thanks for the conduct of the Manchester Magistrates and of the Yeomanry Cavalry – conduct which no dispassionate man could contemplate without feelings of indignation.[20]

The chance to seize the initiative by offering constructive criticism of the authorities, led to John Taylor's establishment of the *Manchester Guardian*, a paper which largely created the 'Manchester School' of liberalism and which was, in the words of its biographer, 'the most durable … outcome of the Battle of Peterloo.'[21] Read probably underestimates the way in which the Church of England's enthusiastic support for the actions at Peterloo helped to further discredit the established Church in the eyes of the urban communities of England. The symbolic promotion of the Reverend William Hay, who claimed to have assisted in reading the Riot Act that no one else heard that Monday, to the rectorship at Rochdale, one of the richest livings in the country, probably sealed the fate of the Church. From that point onwards and throughout the 1820s it was seen as a mere source of Tory self-enrichment by northern town-dwellers in particular and the Whigs and radicals in general. The collapse of any attempt by the Church's authorities at neutrality over the massacre ended any viable claim for it to be a truly national institution, harmed the Tory government who failed to reform it before 1830 and nearly led to its disestablishment (from which it only was saved by Robert Peel's neat but drastic invention of the Ecclesiastical Commission).[22]

The books under review and the left-wing discourse of 'tyranny' and 'massacre' which has, in general, dominated the historiography of Peterloo, fail, therefore, to demonstrate convincingly the ways in which middle-class and wider public opinion was inflamed by the event to such an extent that respectable urban professionals willingly participated in mass demonstrations during the crisis of 1830–32. Poole points out that the eyewitness reports of John Tyas, the *Times* correspondent, did much to convince even those fearful of revolutionary mobs that the authorities had gone too far this time and that such an event must never be allowed to re-occur. But he never develops this into a systematic analysis of the subsequent discourse of the press or the development of the liberal reform movement in the 1820s. The puzzling gulf between the violence of 1819 and the relative peace of the 'Reform Crisis' of 1830–32 remains unbridged by all these works. *The Times*'s accusations of the 'dreadful fact' of the massacre, bolstered by the reports from the *Manchester Gazette* and the *Manchester Observer,* Wade's enormously popular *The Black Book: Or Corruption Unmasked* and Hone's *The Political House that Jack Built*, marked the popular reaction against repression that Peel noted and which would, once the economy recovered, push the Canningite Tories to demand legal reform, relaxation of the Corn Laws and a further purge of expensive sinecures and reductions in the Civil List; the gradual rise of an irresistible liberal tide which would lead to Catholic and Nonconformist emancipation, the collapse of the Tory Ministry and the advent of 'the Age of Reform'.[23] This reviewer therefore hopes that any future study of Peterloo might examine the subsequent rise of popular support for the radical and liberal press of 1820s.[24] Only then might we understand why the Scots Guards, stationed in Birmingham in the 'days of May' in 1832, with swords sharpened and discipline firm, were told to remain in their barracks during the 'monster meeting' at Newhall Hill and, ultimately, why Peterloo happily remains the exception in the course of modern British political history.[25]

Dr Ian Cawood is Associate Professor in British Political and Religious History at the University of Stirling and Reviews Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

1 *Manchester Observer*, 28 Aug. 1819, p. 694.
2 R. Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 1.
3 www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/getting_vote.htm
4 After the popular success of Hone's pamphlet, Cruikshank took a bribe from the government in 1820 not to lampoon the prince regent again. V. Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth Century London* (Atlantic, 2006), p. 221.
5 J. Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (Head of Zeus, 2018), pp. 319–24.
6 Polyp, Eva Schlunke and Robert Poole, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* (New Internationalist, 2019), p. 110.
7 R. Reid, *The Peterloo Massacre* (Heinemann, 1989), p. 38.
8 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Gollancz, 1963), pp. 669–99.
9 K. Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 17.
10 H. Hunt to E. Blandford, 8 Jul. 1819, the National Archives, London, HO42/194. See John Belchem, *'Orator' Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (Oxford, 1985), ch. 2.
11 R. E. Swift, 'Policing Chartism, 1839–1848: The role of the "Specials" reconsidered' *English Historical Review*, 497 (Jun. 2007), pp. 677–8.
12 D. A. Kent & D. R. Ewen, 'Introduction' in D. A. Kent & D. R. Ewen (eds.), *Regency Radical: Selected Writings of William Hone* (Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 9–27.
13 J. Osborne, William Cobbett: His Thoughts and his Times (Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), pp.156–60.
14 R. McWilliam, *Popular Politics in*

A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

Liberalism in the United States

What is political liberalism in the United States? The original concept was the protection of people from arbitrary power, support for the free market and advocacy of religious tolerance. But that started to change in the early twentieth century, when American liberals joined with progressives in advocating government intervention in the economy and social legislation. The presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933 to 1945 confirmed that American liberalism would be based on using the market economy to deliver mass prosperity and active government to promote greater equality. FDR's version of liberalism became America's national creed and for three decades, the welfare state expanded massively.

But in 1981, the new President, Ronald Reagan declared, 'Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem'. Most Americans seemed to agree and, despite some interruptions, a powerful surge from the right has dominated American politics ever since. The word 'liberal' is now a term of abuse in the country's political discourse.

Discuss the origins, development and challenges of American liberalism with **Helena Rosenblatt** (Professor of History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York and author of *The Lost History of Liberalism*) and **James Traub** (journalist and author of *What Was Liberalism? The Past, Present and Promise of a Noble Idea*). Chair: **Layla Moran MP** (Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesperson).

6.30pm, Tuesday 6 July
Online meeting, on Zoom: register via the History Group website at **www.liberalhistory.org.uk**

Nineteenth Century England (Routledge, 1998), pp. 7–13; N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Clarendon, 1998), pp. 248–73; S. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 37–38, 132, 149, 154; J. Grande, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792–1835* (Palgrave, 2014), pp. 114–47.

15 R. Poole, '"By the Law or by the Sword" Peterloo Revisited', *History* 91:2 (Apr. 2006), p. 257; R. Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened* (Manchester University Press, 1969), p. 274.

16 D. Read, *Peterloo* (Manchester University Press, 1958), pp. 184–209. E. P. Thompson had to agree that 'there remained no alternative but to support them [the magistrates]'. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 684.

17 Robert Peel to John Croker, 23 Mar. 1820, in J. L. Jennings (ed.) *The Correspondence and Diaries of the late rt. hon. John Wilson Croker*, vol. i (John Murray, 1884), p. 170.

18 Read, *Peterloo*, p. 160.

19 R. Thorne, 'Bennet, Henry Grey (1777–1836)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2008)

20 *Manchester Observer*, 18 Sep. 1819.

21 D. Ayerst, *Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper* (Collins, 1972), pp. 19–25.

22 P. Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform, 1700–1840* (James Clarke, 1989), pp. 144–70.

23 P. Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption'* (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 182–96; *The Times*, 20 Aug. 1819; *Manchester Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1819; *Manchester Observer*, 21 Aug. 1819; Anon. [J. Wade], *The Black Book: Or Corruption Unmasked!* (John Fairburn, 1820); W. Hone, *The Political House that Jack Built* (William Hone, 1819).

24 Such as that which Ian McCallum offered for the period 1815–21: I. McCallum, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers: London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 152–80.

25 J. Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life, or a Chronicle of Local Events from 1741 to 1841*, vol. ii (E. C. Osborne, 1868), p. 616.