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## *God & King & Law*

It was inevitable that the period 1815-1819 would sooner or later attract the attention of the Established School of History. For some years this School has been deploying its forces, rarely risking an open encounter on scholarly ground, but whispering in the corridors against the Webbs, smiling at the "sentimentalities" of the Hammonds, ridiculing historians of the Marxist tradition. Its forces are now garrisoned in a number of universities; they have entered several fields of working-class history in force; and where, twenty years ago, the historians in occupation were in the main attracted into **the** field by their profound sympathy with popular aspirations, we now find graduates anxious to acquire Ph.Ds.

And what a "seminal period" (that is to say, seed-bed for these) we find between 1815, the close of the Napoleonic Wars, and 1819, the year of Peterloo. Riot and arson, petitioning and political discussion: the march of the Blanketeers and the Pentrich Rising: the first female reform societies: the periodicals — Cobbett, Wooler, Hone, Sherwin. Carlile and the Deists: Hampden Clubs and Political Unions: the Cato Street Conspiracy. Mr. White surveys the whole period <sup>(1)</sup>, while Dr. Read concentrates his attention upon the background, circumstances and outcome of Peterloo <sup>(2)</sup>

It is, perhaps, unfair to couple these two books. Dr. Read's is a work of scholarship and adds to our knowledge. Mr. White, on the other hand, explains that his work "makes but little claim . . . to be a **work** of discovery. It may rather be described as a work of re-interpretation." It merits attention because it has been treated by reviewers as if it *were* seriously intended - receiving, for example, benevolent soggy notices in *Tribune* and (from Professor Asa Briggs) in *The New Statesman*. The Left has been prepared to surrender all this territory without a murmur in the face of the spirited canter of W. White of the Downing College Yeomanry.

Mr. White wins half his battle at the outset by dismissing the relevance of any moral judgement upon the actions of the Liverpool administration (Sidmouth, Castlereagh, Eldon and company). The Hammonds had matters seriously out of perspective when they compared this regime to an Asiatic police state:

Indeed, Lord Castlereagh and his fellow monsters of *The Masque of Anarchy*, tend to take on the life-size stature of country gentlemen. R. J. White, *Waterloo to Peterloo* (Heinemann, 18/-).

(2) Donald Read, *Peterloo* (Manchester University Press, 25/-—forthcoming),

men and industrious clerks in an age which has experienced Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and their legions (p. 9).

It is true that Shelley "in the most ghastly of his poems" saw in Peterloo symptoms of tyranny : but "the horrors of Shelley's doggerel almost match the ignorant injustice of his judgements." (p. 17).

On these grounds we may discount the judgements of contemporary victims and follow Mr. White into his chosen "framework of reference," by setting the period "against the past." For fifty and more pages we are told about "old England" : the method is that of impressionism : the strokes are deft - a piece of gossip here, a fact or two there. Here we have some Regency architecture, and there we have William Lovett's first view of London : here are some Arminian Methodists at Sunday School, and there the strange ideas of Robert Owen. There is no analysis of political, economic or social structure : "The melting-pot of Regency England bubbled to the brim. No attempt will be made here to separate out the constituent ingredients of this astonishing brew." (p. 54). Swept along with entertaining titbits of information the unwary reader finds himself half-way through the book, confronted by the desperate actions of Derbyshire stockingers and the slaughter of Manchester reformers without having been prepared by a serious discussion of a single grievance around which these actions were fought. Mr. White is as close as the grave; he gives nothing away. We hear nothing of the corruption of the Regent and his Court: of parliamentary or ecclesiastical corruption : of the incidence of taxation : of the penal code : of the Bridge-Street Gang and the assault on the press. The reader learns nothing of Britain's role in propping up bankrupt 'Legitimacy' in Europe. He is told that Castlereagh "grew up . . . among the beechwoods of County Down, a lovely Anglo-Irish island of eighteenth-century culture in the rough sea of native Irishry" (p. 80), but he is *not* told of the taint of encouraging the torture of Irish rebels which clung to this lovely Anglo-Irish islander and won him the name of Derry-Down Triangle (see, e.g. Hone's *Reformist Register*, 19 July 1817). He is told that Sidmouth eloped with an heiress when he was twenty-one, but he is *not* told of the crabbed and bloody-minded outlook of the ageing Home Secretary who instituted a special commission to pass capital sentence upon 34 Ely labourers in 1816 for rioting and breaking into the house of a clerical magistrate.

Instead, out of the blur of brush strokes there emerges a portrait of benevolent paternalism. We encounter the country gentleman who "lived on his land and by his land, he hunted over it, and he was buried beneath it." (p.44). These English country gents were "perhaps the most remarkable class of men that any society has ever produced anywhere in the world." (p. 40). They were "close to the

common life of common people" : "never far from ordinary humanity"; "riding to hounds" educated them in "qualities of courage and hardihood" (p. 41): "forthright," "empirical," "humane," and soon. Liverpool, Sidmouth, & Co. were "one and all, children of the older world of the Manor House, the Parish Church beside the village green." When faced by the problem of an industrial society, "it was very hard for them to change" (p. 14).

But one change around the Manor House and the Parish Church escapes Mr. White's notice altogether : the change implied by the enclosure movement, and the consequent changes in the country gentlemen's rent. At the outset of the Wars the cry among some of the "paternal" gentry was - we are told by one genuinely humane gentleman-farmer - "there wants a war to reduce wages" [*General View of the Agriculture of the West Riding*, 1799, Appendix, p. 13] : and Mr. White's broad objective view takes no account of such a sentimentalist as Byron in his *Age of Bronze* :

Alas, the country! how shall tongue or pen  
Bewail her now *uncountry* gentleman?  
The last to bid the cry of warfare cease,  
The first to make a malady of peace,  
For what were all these country patriots born?  
To hunt, and vote, and raise the price of corn . . .  
Their good, ill, health, wealth, joy, or discontent,  
Being, end, aim, religion \_ rent, rent, rent!

But if Mr. White had included these characteristics in his portrait of the country gentleman he would indeed have had some clue to the springs of hostility towards the insubordinate working class which motivated the members of the Liverpool administration. The Duke of Wellington, who entered the Cabinet in 1818, was in 1830 to play an active part in putting down the "revolt" of the labourers in the Southern Counties, and he later described his order of battle with relish :

I induced the magistrates to put themselves on horseback, each at the head of his own servants and retainers, grooms, huntsmen, game-keepers, armed with horsewhips, pistols, fowling pieces and what they could get, and to attack in concert. . . these mobs, disperse them, destroy them, and take and put in confinement those who could not escape. (*Wellington Despatches*, second series, viii, 388).

Hunting is certainly an English pastime and an aristocratic one. But it is difficult to follow the logic of Mr. White in the passage that immediately follows that this was a *good* thing for the people of England who were being hunted :

A people is preserved from the worst effects of disorder in times of rapid social transition less by its laws than by its conventions, by what have been called its 'Traditions of Behaviour.' Perhaps it is as well, after all, that the governors of Regency England were somewhat behind the times (p. 113).  
Indeed," we are told<sup>1</sup> on page 99, "it was the native conservatism

of Lord Liverpool that was to prove the best guarantee of the liberties of the country he ruled."

Indeed! *What* "worst effects of disorder" were the people preserved from between 1815 and 1819? And what "liberties" *did* Liverpool "guarantee" when he suspended Habeas Corpus three times, passed the Six Acts, and smashed almost all the popular press? What Mr. White *means* to say is that the Government prevented a revolution, although it might equally be argued that it very nearly provoked one. He lets the cat out of the bag when (p. 95) he discusses Liverpool's refusal to intercede for the life of Marshall Ney:

'One can never feel that the King is secure upon his throne till he has dared to spill traitors' blood,' Liverpool write, of Louis XVIII. It was one of those things that are best left unsaid, and it was unlike Lord Liverpool to have said it.

Mr. White tries hard to be objective. He can see why the Government governed as it did, and why some Radicals were Radicals: Sir Francis Burdett "was trying to do his hereditary duty as a landed gentleman every bit as sincerely as was Lord Liverpool" (p. 128). It is just that whenever he comes to the plebian Radicals and their leaders, his adjectives somehow get out of hand. Thus Hunt was a "hooligan," the Spenceans were "fanatics," "half crazy and half criminal," Thistlewood was a "gloomy ruffian," Major Cartwright was a "worthy and unimaginative old soul" among "half-criminal eccentrics" and "featherheaded Radicals." White-headed old Thomas Bacon, travelling delegate of the Derbyshire reformers, was a "pertinacious old fool": he did not have the advantage of Mr. White's Fellowship a century and a half further on in time, and when he saw his people near to starvation and without political rights, he allowed himself to be tricked by Mr. Oliver, one of Lord Sidmouth's most gentlemanly gentlemen, into complicity in a futile rising which ended in his getting a Government ticket to Botany Bay.

It is this affair - the 'Pentrich Revolution' of 1817 - which (Mr. White tells us) is the "pivot" of his book. He himself comes from the Peak country where Brandreth's rising took place, and it became for him "a necessity of the imagination, almost an obligation of the heart" to understand the matter. The reader is predisposed to find an imaginative treatment; he is even tempted to expect some depth of research.

But he is not to be gratified. The Pentrich Revolution was a small, pathetic affair; a few hundred stocking weavers and labourers gathered with assorted weapons under their 'Captain,' Jeremiah Brandreth, early in June 1817; marched through several villages; killed a man while they were searching for arms; and at the first sight of the military scattered in confusion. The points of historical interest are these: (1) under what particular hardships were the labourers in

this district suffering? (2) was the affair part of a plan for a general northern rising which mis-fired? (3) how far was it the direct work of Oliver the Spy? (4) how far was the Government directly implicated in the work of its *agent provocateur*? (5) what part did the subsequent trial play in the Government's overall strategy of Terror against the reformers?

Mr. White has little to tell us about (1). In his treatment of the other questions he is disingenuous in the extreme. "The notion that Brandreth went down to Pentrich to lead out the Derbyshire men on instructions from Oliver will not bear examination," he tells us (p. 165). But in fact this "notion" was the subject of very detailed examination at the time, and has since been developed by the Hammonds in Chapter XII of *The Skilled Labourer* - a work which Mr. White wishes to discredit, not by frontal attack but by imputation.

Mr. White does not, of course, deny that Oliver was busy prior to the Derbyshire affair instigating general plans for a northern rising: that the Derbyshire delegate, Thomas Bacon were present when these plans were made: and that subsequently Oliver was unmasked by the reformers in Yorkshire but not in time to send warning to Brandreth in the Peak District. What he does is to throw in ambiguities: Oliver *may* not have a hand in the Derbyshire business: he *may* have been trying to *prevent* the rising: Sidmouth was guilty not of using a spy system but only of inefficiency in employing such an "inept" agent in such a "casual" manner. He disregards the clear evidence of Denman, who led the defence for Brandreth, in the House of Commons in 1820 that "from the information which he had obtained . . . as counsel for the prisoners, and which he had subsequently followed up" he had "not the smallest doubt" that they were instigated by "Oliver who was employed by Government." (*Hansard*, New Series, i, 267). Nor does he mention the curious circumstances surrounding Brandreth's execution, the indecent manner in which the chaplain on the scaffold prevented Brandreth and Turner from addressing the crowd when *both* of them started to denounce

Oliver:

But in spite of all these schemes, out the names of CASTLE-REAGH and OLIVER come! Out they come; and every man knows *how to put other words before and after* these tremendous names! . . . We are told that these men were forewarned that they must *nearly dose their devotions before they went out of the prison*, because they would be allowed *but little time on the scaffold*. And *why? why? WHY? WHY? WHY?*

Thus Cobbett asked in the number of his *Register* (25 April 1818) which included letters which passed between Brandreth and his wife. But Mr. White's "obligation of the heart" does not lead him to ask such questions; still, after 140 years, he thinks it better that the name

" before and after " the name of Oliver should not be understood.

The case is clear enough : and only a modicum of imagination is needed to suggest the reasons for Brandreth's long silence and the conduct of the defence. For the first, Brandreth could not produce evidence of Oliver's complicity without incriminating fellow-reformers; moreover it may not have been until he was visited in prison by his wife that he himself learnt the whole story. For the second, there are two explanations: Denman himself declared that he called no spies as witnesses because under the rules of legal procedure he could not cross-examine his own witnesses : " they would, when cross-examination was impracticable, have thrown all the weight of their testimony against the prisoners " : moreover, to call Oliver to give evidence of " his conversations with Brandreth would only have proved that the plan of insurrection was more deeply laid than it was the prisoner's business to contend it was." (*Hansard, op. cit.*) The Radical press, on the other hand, argued with some colour that there was an understanding between the prosecution and the defence : Brandreth's case was hopeless from the start - the lives of his fellow-prisoners might be spared if the Defence played down the Oliver affair. (*Black Dwarf*, 12 November 1817: *Cobbett's Register*, 25 April 1818).

The Derby rising was certainly the work of Oliver, although it is true that some rising might have been attempted in the summer of 1817 even if there had been no spies and *provocateurs*. Oliver was certainly in close communication with Sidmouth and the Government, and in direct liaison with General Byng, commander of military forces in the North. (*Northern Star*, July 1817). It was certainly the Government's intention to make an example of some reformers, in the spirit of Liverpool's comment on Louis XVIII. Whether the Pentrich affair was cunningly planned or whether it was a mis-fire, the Government seized the opportunity with both hands. The ghastly assembly of God and King and Law was brought forth in all its black pomp : an affair which was little more than riotous assembly was transformed into a matter of High Treason : the jury was packed to the last man. It was only on the scaffold that the prisoners were able to voice their protests; and then there was a *chaplain* to interpose himself between their voices and the crowd. As Mr. White remarks, in a Downing College witticism, the execution of persons of such low degree for treason indicates that " another privilege of the aristocracy had been extended to the oncoming democracy."<sup>1</sup>

And so to Peterloo. Mr. White's apologetics in this final chapter are slight; if he is conversant with the more important contemporary sources on the Manchester massacre, such as Taylor's *Notes and Observations*, Prentice's *Historical Sketches*, and the Inquest on John

Lees, he is at pains not to reveal the fact in his text or his bibliography. Dr. Read's book, on the other hand, is the fruit of close, if uncritical, research; the author has thoroughly examined all Manchester sources, and his book will become a work of reference; it includes original and well-deployed material on the middle-class Radicals, the cotton masters, the magistrates and 'loyalists,' which rounds out our picture of Manchester in 1819. Dr. Read disappoints in other directions. His work bears all the marks of a written-up thesis, with the caution in judgement and respectability which this too often implies; history is chopped into compartments - " economic and social" here, " riot and disturbance " there, and working-class politics in yet another place; the inter-connections, relationships and causes which should become evident when history is set in motion are lost. He is altogether too parochial, both in matters of time and locality : the significance of Peterloo can no more be understood in terms of Manchester local politics in 1819 than that of Waterloo can be understood in terms of the battle-ground and orders of the day.

For example, Dr. Read's treatment of the economic and social background to Peterloo is too perfunctory by far. We are told several times that the handloom weavers were " distressed "; but we are not taken inside this hold-all term; we do not visit the families in " distress " or taste the potato diet of " distress "; above all, Dr. Read - his attention focused on Manchester - does not take us into the upland weaving districts from which the most numerous and most mature contingents of reformers were assembled. Here a generation of weavers had benefited from the lag in the application of power to the weaving processes; the vastly increased output of yarn from the spinning mills led to the " heyday " of the weavers, and - while we need not believe that there was a £5 note in every weaver's hat - the period 1790-1810 certainly brought clocks and china into the cottages, self-governing chapels into the villages, and a fair level of literacy. In the last years of the war their standard of living fell: at the close of the war it fell catastrophically<sup>(3)</sup>. The fall cannot be attributed to the power loom, whose competition was not yet a major factor; nor even to " depression," although unemployment added to distress in 1817 and 1819. It was due primarily to the severe competition among the masters, and the continual undercutting of wages by the manufacturers and contractors who put out the yarn in a cottage industry where trade union defence was exceedingly difficult. The weaver's first demand was for state protection - a legal minimum wage; it was the failure of repeated agitations to secure this which

(3) The price for weaving a cambric piece on a 6/4 loom in 1814 (a good year) was 24/-: in 1817 it had fallen to 9/-. (Detailed tables in John F i , *National Regeneration*).

convinced them that there was no remedy for exploitation, Corn Laws, and heavy indirect taxation but political reform. Since 1), Read confines his view to the three years, 1817-19, he can see little of this larger pattern; he does not tell us *who* was driving wages down, nor *how* it was done, nor does he show how this drastic fall in the standards of a self-respecting and once-prosperous class of workers imprinted its special character upon the Lancashire movement for reform.

But Dr. Read's failure to place Peterloo within the national political context leads him into more serious errors, and drives him, despite his ballast of scholarship, into the superficial courses of Mr. White. First, let us have a skeleton of the events of the day. The Manchester reformers called their demonstration (the culmination of a series of national rallies) for August 9th, one of its purposes being the "election" of Henry Hunt as popular representative for Manchester. Both magistrates and Government proclaimed this purpose illegal; the reformers changed the meeting date to August 16th, and deleted the proposal for an "election." The magistrates, with Government assistance, assembled a considerable force of military, yeomanry, and special constables, but allowed the enormous gathering - with its orderly disciplined contingents - to assemble. As soon as Hunt commenced speaking, the yeomanry were sent into the crowd to arrest him. This they did, wielding their sabres and scattering in pursuit of banners and caps of liberty on the way. When the yeomanry were thus dispersed in confusion over the field the magistrates gave the order to the regular cavalry (Hussars) to charge and clear the crowd. At least ten, were killed or died from wounds, between four and six hundred were wounded.

Ever since the confused butchery of that day contemporaries and historians have been asking questions. Was the massacre "accidental?" If so, to what degree? Was it premeditated? If so, by the Manchester magistrates alone, or by the magistrates in connivance with the Government? From all the explanations which have been offered, Mr. White (blithely) and Dr. Read (with more caution) pick out the least likely : that until noon on the 16th the magistrates *did not know* what action they would pursue : that they were struck with "panic" by the size and discipline of the crowd, and genuinely "believed" it to be insurrectionary in character (Read, p. 84). Only when the crowd was assembled did they "become convinced that they must take drastic action" (Read. p. 132). And, from Mr. White :

The fact that no attempt was made to arrest (Hunt) until the proceedings had already begun can only be attributed to the desire of Mr. Hulton and his fellow magistrates to wait and see . . . what the complexion of the meeting might be: a speculantly

English attitude on the part of the representatives of a peculiarly English government (p. 183-4).  
 feting on this peculiarly English conviction (how - one often thinks \_ it would stimulate the historical imagination of Dr. Read and Mr. White to see even the peculiarly English shape of a mounted police horse in Trafalgar Square!), they sent in the yeomanry to make the arrest; but (Mr. White explains) the yeomanry were not really English gentlemen at all, they were Manchester tradesmen on horseback. "Unfortunately, they had not properly learnt how to control their horses." Their employment, instead of the cavalry, was - thinks Dr. Read - a "misfortune" (p. 133). Both writers leave the reader with the impression that Peterloo was the result of a series of unlucky mishaps.

And neither writer tells the truth, the historical truth, about the events of the day. Whenever there is a conflict of evidence, they gloss over or suppress the evidence of reformers<sup>(4)</sup>, and weight the account with "respectable" witnesses or official papers. Dr. **Read** lingers over the fair-minded but bewildered evidence of the Rev. Stanley; he became a Bishop and is therefore an O.K. witness. But the evidence of two correspondents on the hustings, Tyas of the *Times* and young Baines of the *Leeds Mercury* is not drawn upon, perhaps because Tyas was arrested with Hunt (a thing inclined to arouse bias) and Baines, the mildest of reformers, never wavered from the view that "the military assault on that unarmed and peaceful multitude was a mad, savage, and wicked act." (*Life of E. Baines*, p. 107). Both Dr. Read and Mr. White prefer to draw upon the evidence of Lieut. Jolliffe of the Hussars, although his account was written twenty-eight years later, and was criticised by Prentice at that time; but Jolliffe had become a General with a knighthood, which is clearly an "objective standpoint." But even when drawing upon witnesses like this, Dr. Read manages to underwrite their accounts in paraphrase, to "bowdlerise" them of their most forceful description, and to omit significant and vigorous detail. Thus the Rev. Stanley, describing the entry of the Yeomanry onto the field, gives us this:

It has often been asked when and where the cavalry struck the people. I can only say that from the moment they began to force their way through the crowd towards the hustings, swords were up and swords were down. {*Three Accounts of Peterloo*, ed. F. A. Bruton, p.18).

And Dr. Read gives us this :

The Manchester Yeomanry however, unskilled as they were, soon got into difficulties in the crowd and began striking out (p. 133). Ascribing the treatment of Hunt after his arrest, another O.K. witness. J.B. Smith, says:

A dastardly attack was made upon him by General Clay, who<sup>(4)</sup> It is, perhaps, unfair to accuse Mr. White of "suppression" since his acquaintance with the sources **appears** to be so limited.



## VICTORY OF PETERLOO

A MONUMENT is proposed to be erected in commemoration of the achievements of the MANCHESTER YEOMANRY CAVALRY, on the 16th August, 1819, against THE MANCHESTER MEETING of Petitioners for Redress of Wrongs and Grievances, and Reform in Parliament. It has been called a **battle**, but erroneously; for the multitude was **unarmed**, and made no resistance to the heroes **armed**; there was no contest ~ it was a **victory**; and has accordingly been celebrated in triumph. This event, more important in its consequences than the Battle of Waterloo, will be recorded on the monument, by simply stating the names of the officers and privates successfully engaged, on the one side; and on the other, the names of the persons killed, and of the six hundred maimed and wounded in the attack and pursuit; also the names of the captured, who are still prisoners in His Majesty's gaols; with the letter of thanks-addressed to the victors, by His Majesty's Command.

george cruikshank & william hone In 'A Slap at Slop' (1822).

with a large stick struck him over the head with both hands, as he was ascending the steps to the Magistrate's house. The blow knocked in his hat and packed it over his face. (*Three Accounts*, p. 68).

This is reduced by Dr. Read to : " one prominent ' loyalist ' knocked Hunt's hat down over his face with a stick." ( p. 139). Such writing-down not only makes for dull reading; it also tends, in its cumulative effect, to efface realities. A two-handed blow with a stick becomes a knock; a massacre becomes a mishap.

And what about the non-O.K. witnesses? If we except some passages of somewhat " bowdlerised " Bamford, Dr. Read succeeds in writing an entire book on Peterloo without finding space for a single eye-witness account by a member of the crowd, out of the voluminous evidence in the inquest on John Lees, the trial of Hunt, and the subsequent action against Colonel Birley. Dr. Read belongs to that growing branch of established history which adopts an aloof pseudo-sociological approach to working-class history. It is this initial lack of historical sympathy which disqualifies so much of his study, and which makes his chapters on the reformers so thin and disappointing. It is difficult to follow the argument that an historical technique which screens all evidence, accepting O.K. witnesses and official papers but rejecting the evidence of people who were ridden down or sabred, is likely to turn out " scientific " or " objective " work. This is not just a question of the use of " colour " for inspirational or sentimental purposes; in the strictest historical sense, it is impossible to evaluate the significance of Peterloo, the odium attaching to Government and magistrates, the symbol which it became in the future, unless we are told something of the *actual bloody violence* of the day. Thus William Harrison, cotton spinner :

As I was running away three soldiers came down upon me one after another; there was whiz this way and whiz that way, backwards and forwards . . . and I, as they were going to strike, threw myself on my face, so that, if they cut, it should toe on my bottom. THE CORONER: You act as well as speak?

HARRISON: Yes: I'm real Lancashire blunt, Sir; I speak the truth; whenever any cried out ' mercy,' they said, ' Damn you, what brought you here.' (*Inquest on John Lees*, p. 70).

Dr. Read does not explain how it was that in this unpremeditated misfortune, almost every one of the numerous reform banners was captured by yeomanry or cavalry. Nor does he allow the reader to Set the feel of the confused field from such passages as this :

I picked up a Cap of Liberty; one of the Cavalry rode after me and demanded it; I refused to give it up. Two others then came up and asked what was the matter, when the first said, this fellow won't give up this Cap of Liberty. One of the others then said, damn him, cut him down. Upon this, I ran . . . One of the Cavalry cut at Saxton, but his horse seemed restive, and he missed his blow. He then called out to another, ' There's Saxton, damn him run him through.' The other said, ' I had rather not,

I'll leave that for you to do.' When I got to the end of Watson-street, I saw ten or twelve of the Yeomanry Cavalry, and two of the Hussars cutting at the people, who were wedged close together, when an officer of Hussars rode up to his own men, and knocking up their swords said, 'Damn you what do you mean by this work?' He then called out to the Yeomanry, 'For shame, gentlemen; what are you about? the people cannot get away; They desisted for a time, but no sooner had the officer rode to another part of the field, then they fell to work again (*Ibid*, p. 180).

Confusion there certainly was. Certainly the Yeomanry, who were drunk and were paying off old class scores, may have gone further than the authorities desired. Certainly the regular troops behaved with a greater sense of professional honour, although with no less deadly effect. But the troops knew well enough what they had been sent onto the field to do. And they knew that they would not be called to account if a few lives were lost .

Indeed, when a full view of the evidence is taken, it is scarcely possible to sustain for a moment the theory that the magistrates decided, on the spur of the moment, to ride down the crowd. The air was far too thick with rumours of the magistrates intention in the ten days preceding the day. There are far too many cryptic references in official documents to "preparations" and "arrangements" which had been made, "applicable to various circumstances" (*Hansard*, XLI, 259, 262). The entire tenor of events immediately before and during the attack indicate premeditation; although we cannot say whether it was the intention of the magistrates to disperse the crowd with bloodshed, or only to arrest Hunt in their midst with the maximum show of force.

The question of Government complicity is more difficult of solution. But Dr. Read sees few of the difficulties. He is greatly hampered by a reverence, amounting to gullibility, for the authenticity of official documents. These are available in two kinds : first, the Home Office papers: second, the *Papers* on the state of the country which the Government published in 1820. Dr. Read has searched the first and has discovered one new piece of evidence, - a letter written on the instructions of Lord Sidmouth to the magistrates twelve days before Peterloo advising them "to abstain from any endeavour to disperse the mob" (p. 120). Upon this letter his whole case hinges; indeed, it leads him to conclusions whose complacency calls to mind the views of Mr. White :

Peterloo, as the evidence of the Home Office shows, was never desired or precipitated by the Liverpool Ministry 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'. Any parallels between government policy in England and on the Continent after 1815 are false ones: there can be no smooth historical

generalisations about a European 'Age of Repression' after Waterloo (Read, 207).

One molehill is magnified, the mountains are ignored. Even supposing that Peterloo came as a surprise to the Government, it did all in its power to make itself an accomplice after the fact. Within a fortnight the congratulations of Lord Sidmouth and the thanks of the prince Regent were communicated to the magistrates and military "for their prompt, decisive, and efficient measures for the preservation of the public peace." Demands for an enquiry were resolutely rejected. Attorney and Solicitor-General were "fully satisfied" as to the legality of the magistrate's action. Lord Chancellor Eldon was of the "clear opinion" that the meeting "was an overt act of treason." Liverpool, Sidmouth and Eldon thrashed around for new means to put down meetings and to curb the "outrageous licentiousness of the press." The Government hoped to try Hunt for High Treason and desisted only for fear of an acquittal. In November Sidmouth, in the Lords, and Castlereagh, in the Commons, introduced the Six Acts, whose provisions included (in their first form) transportation for life for authors of seditious libel. The spy, Edwards, was set to hatch the Cato Street Conspiracy. Chancellor Eldon saw ahead "a shocking choice between military government and anarchy." Later, the Rev. Hay, Chairman of the Manchester bench and target for Cruikshank's satire, was rewarded with the £2,000 living of Rochdale. Dr. Read takes little account of such evidence in his smooth generalisations about the "spirit of Home Office policy." (Yonge, *Life of Liverpool*, II, p. 409; Twiss, *Life of Eldon*, II, pp. 337, 339-40).

And there is reason enough to suppose that the Government had determined upon a show-down with the reformers before Peterloo. At some point Old Corruption, faced by swelling demonstrations, a full-blooded Radical press, the election of national representatives, drilling (which was not *quite* as innocent as Bamford pretended), and threats to withhold taxes, together with ominous symptoms of a growing middle and working-class alliance, was bound either to retreat (as it did in 1832) or to resort to repression. Supposing they took the second choice, and intended Peterloo as a demonstration of Terror, Dr. Read is naive in the extreme if he expects Sidmouth to have left incriminating documents in the Home Office for historians - and, even more, for the Opposition when they came to office, to investigate. Such decisions (like the Suez decision) are reached and communicated verbally; in this case only the inner Cabinet, the magistrates, perhaps the Officer in command of troops and (partially) Nadin, the Deputy Constable, would be "in the know." Moreover, letter upon which Dr. Read places such reliance was written 12 days before the day; but if a "Peterloo decision" was made, it may



## THE CLERICAL MAGISTRATE

This is a Priest, who:

" Would indict, for Rebellion, those who Petition;  
 And, all who look peaceable, try for Sedition;  
 If the People were legally Meeting, in quiet,  
 Would pronounce it decidedly - sec. Stat. - a Riot,  
 And order the Soldiers ' to aid and assist,'  
 That is - kill the helpless, who cannot resist,  
 He, though vowing 'from all worldly studies to cease,'  
 Breaks the Peace of the Church, to be Justice of Peace;  
 Breaks his vows made to Heaven - a pander for Power;  
 A Perjurer - a guide to the People no more;  
 On God turns his back, when he turns the State's Agent;  
 And damns his own Soul, to be friends with the —."

George Cruikshank & William Hone in 'The Political House that Jack Built' (1819).

well have been made in the week prior to the meeting. The official *Papers*, the second source upon which Dr. Read places reliance, must be treated with the greatest care. Taken individually, each item has the appearance of authenticity. But the *Papers* were published by the Government *in order to prevent* any parliamentary enquiry: the information (Liverpool admitted privately) " may be laid safely, and much more advantageously, by Government directly rather than through the medium of any committee," (*Life*, p. 432). They were therefore selected and presented *for the official record*. Even so, there are curious passages. Suddenly, four days before the meeting, the Home Office is deluged with depositions from Lancashire testifying to the drilling of reformers, together with alarmist messages designed to give colour to measures of repressions: " It is impossible not to feel a moral conviction that insurrection is their ulterior object." (*Hansard*, XLI, 251, Norris to Sidmouth, 12 August). But drilling had been openly taking place for several weeks, in preparation for a meeting which was expected to take place on August 9th. Can it be that Sidmouth had *asked* for these depositions for the record? And the famous letter of magistrate Norris to Sidmouth, written at 11 p.m. on the night before the meeting, and again published in the official *Papers*, bears exactly the same construction: " I hope the peace may be preserved but under all circumstances it is scarcely possible to expect it, and in short, in this respect we are in a state of painful uncertainty." Of this letter Prentice, a middle-class Manchester reformer who speaks with great authority, asked:

Can it be that while thus writing to Lord Sidmouth, officially, there was a private resolution, perhaps directed by him, to allow the meeting to assemble and to disperse it with the swords of the yeomanry, notoriously known to have been sharpened for the occasion? (*Historical Sketches*, p. 158).

And can it be that Prentice had a whiff of the inside story, but was not at liberty to disclose his informant? No man was better placed to find out. At any rate, it is extraordinary that Dr. Read should pass these questions by without informing the reader that they were asked.

Well, Peterloo has now received 'the treatment,' and no doubt new textbooks will be written in which Lord Liverpool's difficulties are explained, and the problems of taking untrained horses into crowds is touched upon. The problems of human beings gaining their rights will be tidied away as a theme for the sentimentalist. It is strange that two historians so unlike in temperament should reach such similar conclusions. Mr. White is an unashamed romantic, who clearly does not himself take seriously his own pretensions to objectivity. He enjoys fighting Sidmouth and Castlereagh's battles over again. Had he lived in those days his talents would have flowered as a polemicist for Dr. Slope and the Bridge-Street Gang. In a final

burst of enthusiasm, he likens Thistlewood, the courageous Radical whose indignation at Peterloo led him to being entrapped by another of Lord Sidmouth's gentlemen in a conspiracy to assassinate the noble Lord and his colleagues, to an "atom-bomb traitor" assisted by "ruffianly guttersnipes." (p. 199). But these same "guttersnipes," who have already received a raw deal at the hands of other historians, faced death in court and on the scaffold with a firmness and dignity which amazed even their enemies, and brought comparisons with Sir Thomas More<sup>(5)</sup>. And yet, despite the violence of his epithets, Mr. White shelters behind the pretences of the non-committed observer. "They were one and all," he says, referring to oppressors and oppressed,

victims of a situation whose complexity not one of them could have been expected to understand. They made history, in the sense that they were the stuff of which the history of their time was made, and history handed out to them their haloes and halters with grim partiality. It is hardly the task of the historian to attempt a retrospective redistribution, (p. 161).

This is fine lecture-room stuff, to disguise the fact that Brandreth was not victim of a "situation" but of Oliver and Sidmouth, just as the massacred were victims of the magistrates and yeomanry. Moreover, it was not Dame History but Chancellor Eldon's lawyers who handed out the halters, and if haloes are attached to any of Liverpool's Government they were not put there by the British people :

Mr. Harrison then read the letter from Mr. Johnston: it was written in most humorous strains of irony upon the *humanity* of Castlereagh, the *wisdom* of Sidmouth, and the *honesty* of Canning, &c. which drew forth bursts of laughter and applause. (Account of reform meeting in Rochdale, *Sherwin's Register*, 7 August 1819).

One suspects that Mr. White's book, if published in 1819, would have met with a very similar reception.

And Dr. Read, who shares none of Mr. White's Regency gusto, gets round in the end to a similar thundering conclusion. The final comment must be "one of caution." When all factors are considered, "something must still be admitted as unknown" :

Even more than in the history of high politics, in the study of mass movements allowance must be made for the uncertain influence of the human factor. What made so many working-men march to St. Peter's Field . . . is as much a psychological problem as an historical one . . .

The examiners will have liked the portentous mock-humility of all this, especially when it is capped with an O.K. quotation from Sir Lewis Namier : "All we can do is to try faithfully to state discernible facts, pose problems, but be chary of drawing conclusions." But (5) Cobbett's *Register*, 6 May 1820. Also Cam Hobhouse's diary: "The men died like heroes." Ings, perhaps, was too obstreperous in singing 'Death or liberty,' and Thistlewood said, 'Be quiet, Ings; we can die without all this noise.' (Broughton, *A Long Life*, II, p. 126).

perhaps Dr. Read would have had less difficulty with the "human factor" if he had had more interest in human beings. He would then have understood that oppressive class relationships, exploitation, and suffering are *facts* of history and not subjective judgements *upon* history. The "human factor," the "psychological problem" of Peterloo is no more nor less than the character of a system of economic and political oppression, the way men and women reacted in this context, the way they thought and felt about oppression and struggled against it. True objectivity will lead the historian to the heart of this real human situation; and once he is there, if he is worth his salt, he *will* make judgements and draw conclusions.

It is unfortunate that neither writer was capable of doing this. The larger questions posed by Peterloo still remain unanswered. Why has the word echoed ever since in our history? How far was it a defeat, how far a moral victory? How far does it represent a turning-point, which forced the Whigs and the unrepresented middle-class to come forward as reformers "to rescue the multitude out of the hands of the Hunts and Thistlewoods," (*Life of Wilberforce*, V, 37). How far did the revulsion which it caused restrain Old Corruption from using the same tactics between 1830 and 1832? If it was a victory for repression, why was the victory not complete? What toughness was there within our democratic traditions which enabled them to withstand the shock of Oliver and the Derby beheadings, August 16th and the Six Acts? How was it, despite these Acts, that Gobbett continued to write, and reformers to organise and meet?

For Peterloo was not the last but one of the first of those tremendous, orderly and colourful demonstrations in which the British people in the nineteenth century laid claim to their rights. The girls in their white dresses, the men with laurel in their hats, the great embroidered banners, the women and children, the disciplined restraint of the great contingents with their stewards and leaders; these were the portents which chilled the blood of Old Corruption. Shelley was not so sappy, after all, when he made the refrain of his *Masque of Anarchy*. - "Ye are many, they are few." It was this note of maturity and confidence which was new : perhaps (on such a scale and for such a purpose) new in world history. These were not Wilkesite mobs one week, and Gordon rioters the next. The massacre aroused a hatred among the people which was mingled with contempt; Government, magistrates, yeomanry - all became targets for the ridicule Cruikshank and Hone. What a world of savage humour, contempt and confidence is packed into the word itself: "Peterloo!" The landed gentlemen who had met fear, servility or hatred with equanimity were now met with bitter laughter. Already Henry Hunt sensed this, when he faced the jeering special constables:

notwithstanding the blows he had received in running the gauntlet down the avenue of constables, I thought I could perceive a smile of triumph on his countenance. A person (Nadin, I believe) offered to take his arm, but he drew himself back, and in a sort of whisper said: 'No, no, that's rather too good a thing.' (Rev. Stanley, in *Three Accounts*, p. 21).

Strikers or agricultural labourers might be fair game; but never since Peterloo has authority dared to use equal violence on a peaceful British crowd. Even Bloody Sunday saw a violence which was carefully controlled; the real thing has been reserved for Amritsar or Nicosia. The most dramatic incident of August 16th, in its bearing on the future, took place not on St. Peter's Fields but some time later on the road leading out of Manchester. Samuel Bamford, after searching for his wife, turned homewards up the road along which hundreds were streaming in disarray to the upland districts. In Harpurhey he caught up with a great number of the Middleton and Rochdale contingent:

I rejoined my comrades, and forming about a thousand of them into file, we set off to the sound of fife and drum, with our only banner waving, and in that form we re-entered the town of Middleton. (Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, Ch. XXXVI).



FEROCITY EXEMPLIFIED, by COMPARATIVE ANATOMY; or, an Illustration of the Facial Line in Man and the Brute, showing the natural gradation from the ferocious to the human being, with the domestic habits of the Savage.

george cruikshank: the caricature in the centre is probably Lord Chancellor Eldon: from 'A Slap at Slop' (1822).