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FEATURE

Memories of a Massacre

It is the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre. How have the events of that day been remembered?

Katrina Navickas | Published in History Today Volume 69 Issue 8 August 2019



Obverse side of a medal commemorating the Peterloo Massacre, 19th century © Timothy Millett Collection/Bridgeman Images

On Monday 16 August 1819, 60,000 men, women and children gathered for a mass rally in Manchester. They had progressed to St Peter's Field on the southern edge of the town from the city's working-class districts and the surrounding textile weaving regions, including Rochdale, Oldham and Stockport. Monday was the traditional day off for handloom weavers and other artisan workers, and the marchers wore their best clothes and symbols to create a festive atmosphere. Samuel Bamford, leading the contingent from the village of Middleton, described the start of their procession:

Twelve of the most decent-looking youths ... were placed at the front, each with a branch of laurel held in his hand, as a token of peace; then the colours [banners]: a blue one of silk, with inscriptions in golden letters, 'Unity and Strength', 'Liberty and Fraternity'; a green one of silk, with golden letters, 'Parliaments Annual', 'Suffrage Universal'.

The main speaker, Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt, had travelled 200 miles north from London. Bamford and the other local organisers joined the charismatic speaker on stage to campaign for universal male suffrage and the reform of the parliamentary system.

The meeting was the culmination of several years of popular agitation after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Manchester had no representation in the House of Commons. Neither did most of the other expanding manufacturing centres that rapidly became the engines of the Industrial Revolution in 19th-century Britain. Only around seven per cent of the adult male population had the vote. Economic depression in the textile industries fuelled demands for political change. Such demands developed under the influence of both the French Revolution and the radical philosophy put forward in Thomas Paine’s two-volume *Rights of Man* (1792-93), which interpreted the potential for democracy in a British setting. Paine’s work inspired the first working-class movement for parliamentary reform. Local societies sprang up across the manufacturing towns and villages to debate, draw up petitions to Parliament and organise mass meetings.

‘By the law or by the sword’

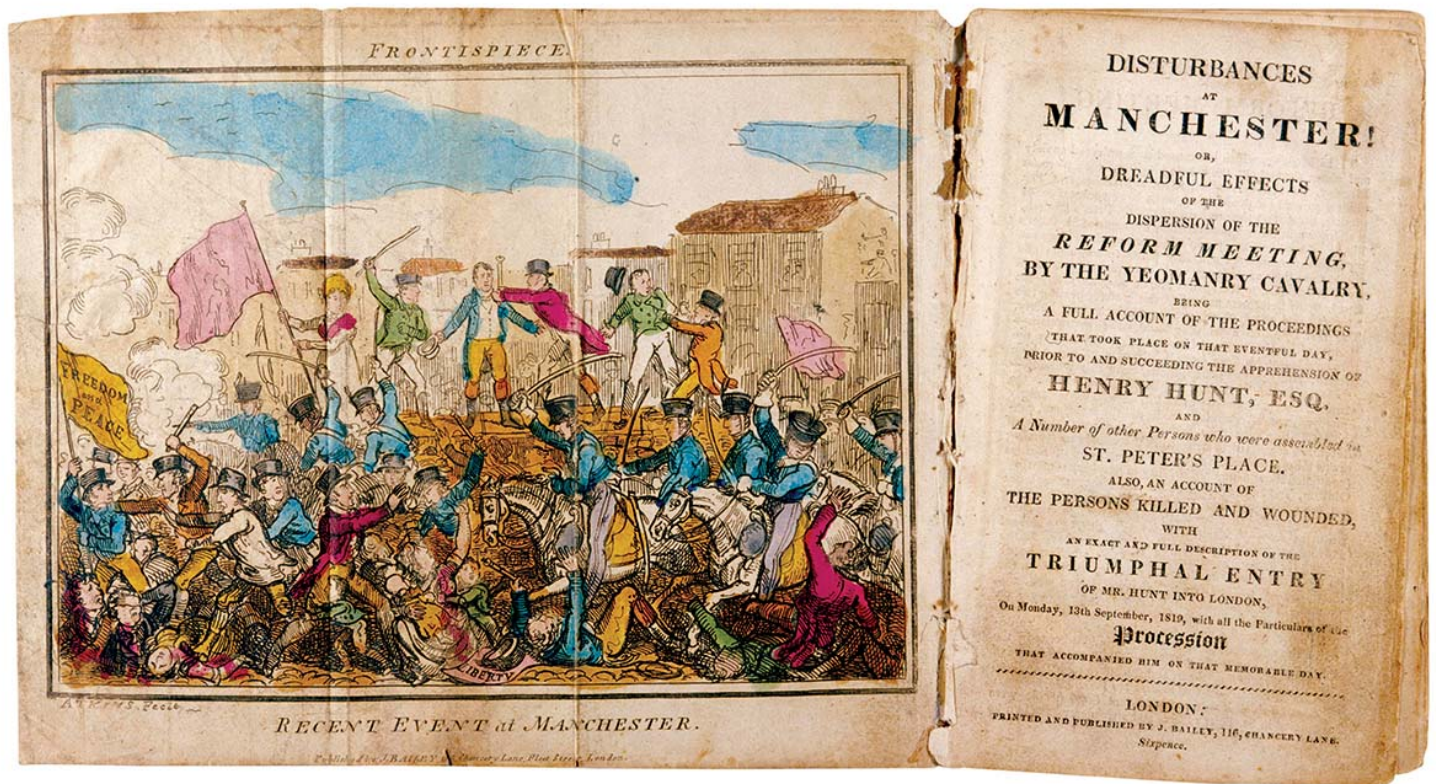
The bench of magistrates nervously observed the meeting at St Peter’s Field from an upper window of a house overlooking the site. They had been corresponding with the Home Office for months, as Hunt addressed mass platform demonstrations in London, Birmingham and other major centres, including Manchester in January 1819. In March, the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, had communicated that the authorities would be justified in suppressing reform meetings ‘by the law or by the sword’.

The Manchester organisers had originally scheduled the rally for 9 August, but had postponed it by a week after the magistrates warned that it was illegal. Following legal advice, the organisers carefully reworded the purpose

of the meeting as merely to ‘consider the means of adopting the most LEGAL and EFFECTUAL means of obtaining a reform in the Common House of Parliament’ and ordered the attendees to leave sticks, or anything that could be considered a weapon, at home. Though Sidmouth had hastily indicated caution to the magistrates during the weeks preceding the meeting, the justices’ anxious belief in the revolutionary potential of the movement determined their actions. Within minutes of Hunt beginning his speech, the magistrates issued an arrest warrant for him. They claimed to have read the Riot Act (though it is obvious that few people in the crowd could have heard this demand to disperse) and sent for military assistance to clear the way for the deputy constable to get to the stage. The inexperienced volunteers forming the yeomanry cavalry charged violently into the crowd, got stuck and were followed by the regular hussars, who attempted to clear the field. At least 14 people are known to have died and over 650 were injured, many severely cut by the yeomanry’s sabres. Samuel Bamford published the best-known account of the violence in his autobiographical *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1840-44):

‘Stand fast,’ I said, ‘they are riding upon us; stand fast.’ And there was a general cry in our quarter of ‘Stand fast.’ The cavalry were in confusion: they evidently could not, with all the weight of man and horse, penetrate that compact mass of human beings; and their sabres were plied to hew a way through naked held-up hands and defenceless heads.

Although Bamford was writing 30 years later, his testimony differs little from the one he gave at his trial in 1820 and the hundreds of eyewitness statements also given at the trials, in petitions to Parliament and at the coroner’s inquest into one of the victims, John Lees of Oldham.



Disturbances at Manchester!, illustration by Atkins, 1819 © Mary Evans Picture Library

Newspaper reporters quickly dubbed the event as the ‘Peterloo Massacre’, in reference to the Battle of Waterloo four years earlier. The response of Lord Liverpool’s Tory government was repressive. Refusing demands for an inquiry into the actions of the magistrates, the government pushed legislation through Parliament known as the ‘Six Acts’, severely restricting freedom of assembly and the press. Hunt, Bamford and the other leaders were tried at York Assizes in 1820 and sentenced, on a range of charges, to up to two years’ imprisonment.

‘The Spirit of Peterloo’

Political activists and historians have debated the causes and consequences of Peterloo ever since the evening of 16 August 1819. For conservative politicians, Peterloo represented an uncivil radical fervour that was rightly crushed by the forces of law and order. The majority of the ruling elite in

Britain associated democracy with revolutionary France and 'mob' rule well into the 19th century and worried about it accordingly. The moderate Reform Acts that eventually passed through Parliament in 1832, 1867 and 1884 redistributed seats but only extended the franchise gradually. It was not until the 1918 Representation of the People Act that the link between ownership of property and the vote was finally broken for men, although not for women over 30, who were also enfranchised.

With conservatives downplaying or ignoring Peterloo, democratic and trade union movements took up the cause of commemoration. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Chartist democratic reform movement and the Liberals each claimed to be the true successors of the Peterloo radicals. Both political groups emphasised the heroic role of individual radical leaders, especially Henry Hunt, who had entered the field to the refrain of 'see the conquering hero comes'. The Anti-Corn Law League was able to cement its connection with Peterloo, physically and symbolically, by erecting the Free Trade Hall on St Peter's Field in 1853 as a monument to economic liberalism. The Reform League claimed connection with its reformist predecessors at Peterloo during its campaign for the second Reform Act of 1867. Political interest in the massacre then waned, although it did appear in *The Manchester Man*, a widely read novel of 1876 by Isabella Banks.



Obverse and Reverse of a medal commemorating the Peterloo Massacre, 19th century © Timothy Millett Collection/Bridgeman Images

From the 1900s, the female suffrage movement revived the memory of Peterloo. The Women's Social and Political Union's newspaper, *Votes for Women*, regularly commented on how suffragette demonstrations in Manchester shared the 'spirit of Peterloo' and Emmeline Pankhurst made publicity capital of her paternal grandfather's attendance at St Peter's Field.

By the time of the centenary in 1919, Peterloo had become a key stepping stone in the development of the working-class movement. Conservatives controlling the city council downplayed its significance and did not countenance an official municipal commemoration. The timing of the centenary linked the economic and social conditions of demobilisation, unemployment and labour disputes following the First World War with the situation after the Napoleonic Wars. A coalition of the Independent Labour Party, the British Socialist Party, the Trades Council and the Women's International Socialist Council organised commemorations at Platt Fields Park to the south of Manchester. They sought to demonstrate the same

power of collective action shown at Peterloo by placing the massacre within a framework of the struggles of the labour and trade union movement against employers and the authorities. The narrative no longer focused on Henry Hunt and was replaced in prominence by the call to action, 'we are many; they are few', coined by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his protest poem *Masque of Anarchy*. It is a phrase still used by the Labour Party.

Class War

With universal suffrage achieved in the 1920s, Peterloo became a historical rather than contemporary reference point. Historians began examining the role of the magistracy, asking who was to blame. Donald Read's *Peterloo*, published in 1957, argued that the casualties were the result of panic and mistakes on the part of the magistracy rather than premeditated or planned violence.

E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, first published in 1963 with a second edition released in 1968, further set the tone of the debate. Thompson agreed with Read's interpretation, that the magistrates lost control on the day, but, he argued, 'it was the panic of class hatred'. In one of the more overtly Marxist statements in the book, Thompson continued: 'There is no term for this but class war. But it was a pitifully one-sided war.'

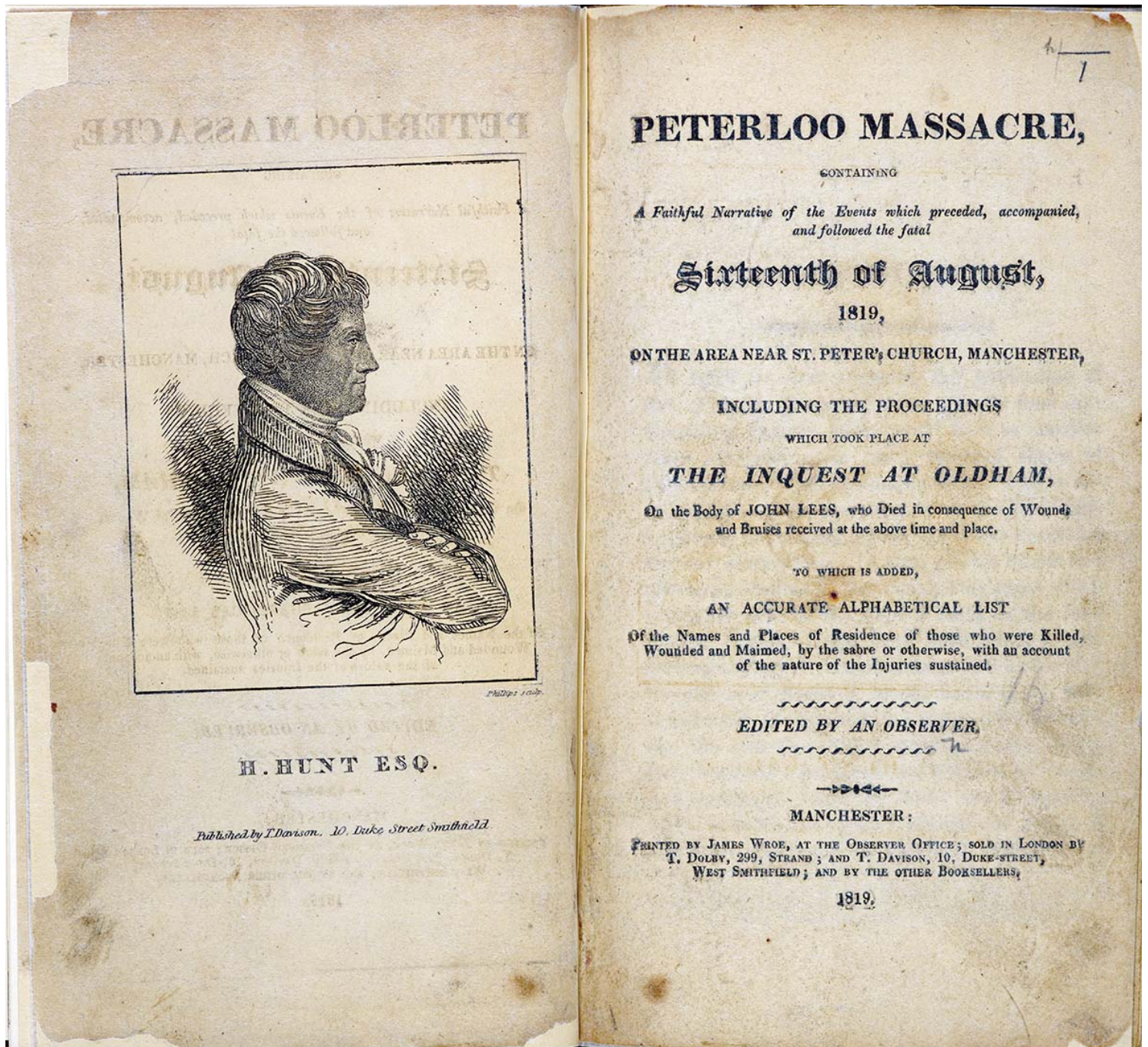
Thompson saw the actions of the magistrates and of the Home Office as premeditated, intent on crushing what they regarded as the revolutionary ambitions of the working class. Thompson's interpretation remains influential and his broader conclusions about the consequences of the massacre have been upheld. Middle-class reformers responded to working class organisation by combining more determinedly to prevent a reoccurrence in their campaigns for parliamentary reform in the 1820s and

1830s. Peterloo shook the confidence of the ruling elites in their ability to resist all calls for change, leading some of the more liberal Tories to admit the need for limited concessions. The sheer horror of the event led to a more careful consideration by local authorities of the need for military intervention at times of crisis.

New interpretations

The 150th anniversary in 1969 renewed popular interest in the massacre but created another round of contestation in civic politics. As in 1919, Manchester's Conservative city council did not organise an official municipal commemoration. The publication of *Peterloo: the Case Reopened* by Robert Walmsley restarted the debate about Peterloo's causes. Walmsley attempted to restore the reputation of his ancestor, William Hulton, head of the Manchester and Salford bench of magistrates. He claimed that the magistrates were the real victims, unfairly blamed, as he saw it, for doing their job against a seditious band of radical leaders agitating an armed crowd. The book's impact was mitigated by a more popular account of Peterloo, *The Peterloo Massacre*, by Joyce Marlow, a local actor and Labour supporter.

From the 1970s, feminist and gender history brought attention to the emergence of female-organised reform societies in early 1819. Mary Fildes, leader of the Manchester female reform union, took to the stage at mass meetings in July and August 1819, alongside other women activists distinctively dressed in white. Michael Bush has demonstrated that women were over-represented in the casualty list at Peterloo, suggesting that the yeomanry deliberately targeted the 'women in white', who were denigrated for boldly stepping outside their traditional domestic role.



Peterloo Massacre, containing a Faithful Narrative of the Events which preceded, accompanied, and followed the fatal Sixteenth of August, 1819, edited by an observer, with a portrait of Henry Hunt, 1819 © British Library, London/Bridgeman Images

Cultural and social historians have also made their mark on the study of Peterloo, considering how the protests were shaped by the rich customary traditions and local identities of the thousands of people who attended the reform meetings. Robert Poole, the leading contemporary historian of Peterloo, has demonstrated how the protesters from the surrounding weaving districts drew upon the regional custom of rushbearing (parades of

rushes on carts that took place annually in August) and Methodist cultures of dress and hymns. Poole has also challenged conservative interpretations (including Philip Lawson's 1988 essay in *History Today*, 'Reassessing Peterloo') that claimed the crowd was armed, therefore portraying the massacre as a pitched battle. Like most other recent interpretations, including those of Jacqueline Riding, the researcher for Mike Leigh's 2018 film *Peterloo*, Poole has shown how this view wilfully takes the loyalist authorities' evidence at its word and ignores the multiple reports from those injured and from independent witnesses. Poole's *Peterloo: the English Uprising* (2019), uncovers new evidence of over 70 previously unseen petitions to Parliament from victims detailing their injuries and calling for redress by the government. Poole justifies calling the massacre an 'uprising' in the radical definition of the working classes using their collective – but peaceful – power to defy a governing elite that they believed was corrupt and oppressive.

Peterloo today

In the build-up to the bicentenary of the massacre, research and community events have emphasised the role of memory and emotion. Following a 'memory boom' in First World War studies, historians are much more alert to how memory shapes political movements and the legacies of traumatic events. This attention to memory is reflected in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, established in 1992 to preserve the world's documentary heritage. It awarded one of its first UK entries to the Peterloo casualty relief fund book, detailing recipients of public subscriptions to help victims of Peterloo, now held at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. The general emphasis during the bicentenary has been on the crowd, seen as representatives of Greater Manchester. Commemoration activities have included local history societies helping to trace Peterloo ancestors and their

descendants in parish and census records, reflecting the growing popularity of genealogy in connecting people to major events through the lens of family history. The controversies over which political group can claim ownership to the memory of Peterloo have given way to a broader understanding of its role in the history of democracy.

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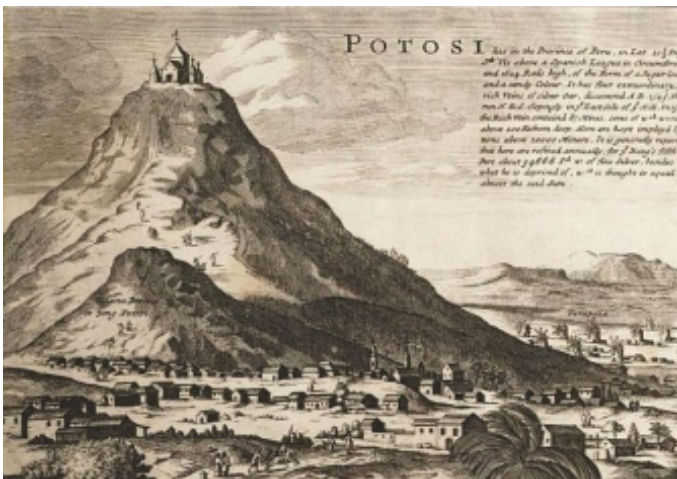
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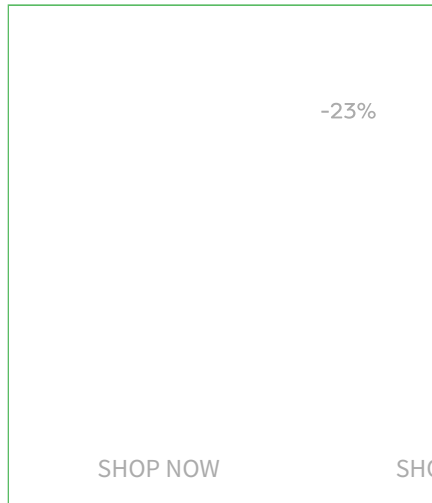
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