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Reinterpreting Peterloo

Robert Poole

The Peterloo massacre is one of the best-documented events in British history. It was the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil.

At St Peter's Fields in central Manchester on Monday 16 August 1819, a rally of 50-60,000 people seeking parliamentary reform was violently dispersed by troops under the authority of the local magistrates. The meeting was the climax of a series of high-profile mass gatherings for parliamentary reform. It was transparently peaceful but the frightened magistrates, thinking back to an abortive rising in 1817, sent in the troops. Under the noses of the national press, eleven people were killed (a toll which later rose to seventeen) and over six hundred and fifty wounded, a quarter of them women, some of them children, many of them by sabre wounds.¹ 'This is Waterloo for you!' cried out some of the special constables in triumph, and the event was soon dubbed 'Peterloo' in the radical press. Middle-class and working-class reformers united in outrage, while for several months afterwards armed rebellion appeared to threaten from below.

Peterloo bears the same symbolic relationship to the movement for parliamentary reform as the Amritsar massacre to the movement for Indian independence or the Sharpeville and Soweto massacres to the South African liberation movement: a formative experience of repression on a long road to eventual success. "Peterloo" became a shorthand term for the political dark side of the industrial revolution. As one of the stations of the cross on the forward march of labour, its place in the historiography of modern Britain is secure. The recent debate about a proper Peterloo memorial for Manchester reached the national press and BBC news. A poster showing a scene from Peterloo was used to promote the early, historically-aware version of 'Citizenship' in schools.

As an exciting episode that seems to epitomise the distress and conflict of the early industrial revolution, Peterloo is a favourite in textbooks. Unfortunately, because it stands in for the debate about the vote, it tends to be presented as a battle between two sides. This leads to simplistic questions about which side was to blame, or whether the reformers were right to rebel. Yet all the evidence is that it was not a battle but a massacre—more Tiananmen Square than the battle of Cable Street.

Peterloo is also made to stand in for the suffering caused by the industrial revolution, and particularly the plight of cotton factory workers. This too is misleading. Although there is

room for debate about the proportions of Mancunians and 'country people' from the surrounding weaving districts, very few of those involved were factory workers unless unemployed—after all, like most mass meetings it took place on a Monday, when the factories were at work. It is misleading for another reason. Emphasising 'distress' as a cause of political activity leads to simple equation of agitation with hunger, and implies a crude economic model of political protest. Yet Peterloo was all about parliamentary reform, and the exclusion of ordinary people from the political process. Its organisers had a well-developed 'mass platform' strategy for bringing pressure to bear on government which deserves better respect than simply labelling it an eruption of 'distress.'

Two recent works exemplify the new political (as opposed to economic) thinking about Peterloo. My own article "By the law or the sword": Peterloo Revisited' (*History*, April 2006) argues that the government and the magistrates shared responsibility for the massacre, and that this emerged very clearly from the subsequent trial of the leaders. An argument with two sides should not be distorted into a battle with two sides. Michael Bush's *The Casualties of Peterloo* (Carnegie, 2006) analyses those who fell (whose numbers he revises upwards by nearly 50%). Here and in his associated article 'The Women at Peterloo' (*History*, 2004) Bush argues that women were *more* likely than men to be victims, and not just in the crush. The shocking implication is that the local volunteer troops went for the women, whose presence they found particularly obnoxious.

How should Peterloo now be taught? The patronising account of the simple conversion of economic distress into political unrest will not do. The misleading game of 'whose fault?' should be retired. Peterloo was undoubtedly a massacre, and it deserves to be discussed alongside other violent responses by authorities to demands for political rights—Soweto, Tiananmen Square, Amritsar. The other relevant theme is exclusion. What was threatening about the crowd at Peterloo was not that it was armed or disorderly, for it was neither, but the very fact that people with no recognised political rights were asserting their place in the political process—majorities were scary. What groups now lack the status of citizens, and why: migrants, young people under 18, women from some ethnic minorities? How would a mass rally by such people be received now? What about other countries which lack developed democracies—China or Iran for example? In the end Peterloo was not about 'distress' but about citizenship, and it is still one of Britain's most important lessons in citizenship as well as in history.

Designing enquiries to make pupils think about different interpretations of the Peterloo Massacre

A Level: 16 to 19 years

Presenting Peterloo

Getting Sixth formers to write KS3 or 4 textbooks is an interesting and a rigorous exercise (as well as a change from essay writing)—it raises lots of questions (what to include, how to frame the issue and so on). Assemble a collection of treatments from a range of KS3/4 textbooks and then (a) task pupils (having been primed on recent interpretations of Peterloo) to identify how textbooks approach the event (as a knife and fork question, through a debate about blame and so on) then (b) task pupils in groups to produce A3 textbook style spreads. Groups could be tasked to construct presentation and exercises which reflect, through the questions that they pose, a range of different ways of framing this event.

Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

How should Peterloo be remembered?

There is currently a campaign for a “prominent, accurate and respectful” memorial to the victims of Peterloo (see the Guardian references below). Explore how history is memorialized—there will no doubt be some local angles to follow as well as national and international ones. Edit some extracts from the contemporary debate on a Peterloo memorial—to frame the exercise and then engage pupils in some documentary materials on the event in order to help them form a view about what happened at St Peter’s Field in 1819. Task the class, in groups, to design a statue and to make a case for their design ensuring that it is anchored in an analysis of the event.



The Peterloo Massacre, 16 August 1819 — Manchester Observer print of 1819.
Image reproduced courtesy of the Manchester Archives and Local Studies

Further Reading

Bush, M. (2005) *The Casualties of Peterloo*. Manchester: Manchester Centre for Regional History

Bush, M. (2004) ‘The women at Peterloo: the impact of female reform on the Manchester meeting of 16 August 1819’, *History* 89, 2 (April 2004).

Poole, R. (2006) ‘The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Georgian England’, *Past & Present*, Number 192, August 2006, pp109-153

Poole, R. (2006) ‘By the law or the sword’: Peterloo Revisited’, *History* 91, 2, (April 2006)

The debate on a memorial to the Peterloo Massacre can be followed at:
www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,,2147433,00.html

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/politicspast/story/0,,2148759,00.html>

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/politicspast/story/0,,2152328,00.html>

There is a useful collection of sources and links at:

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/peterloo.html>

REFERENCES

1. The widely-quoted conservative estimate is eleven dead and over four hundred injured, but Michael Bush has authoritatively revised these figures (Bush (2004) and Bush (2005)).

This edition’s Polychronicon was compiled by Robert Poole, Reader in History, University of Cumbria.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.