

Review: Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 480pp. ISBN 978-0-19-878346-6, £25.00.

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ON 16 AUGUST 1819, approximately 40,000 people descended upon St Peter's Field, Manchester, to attend a meeting regarding parliamentary reform. Led by the radical orator Henry Hunt, this mass demonstration was designed to further a national campaign for universal male suffrage, vote by ballot, and annual parliaments. However, shortly after the meeting had begun, local magistrates ordered the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry Cavalry to arrest Hunt and his compatriots. A shambolic charge followed, leaving at least eighteen dead and seven hundred injured. The 'Peterloo Massacre', as it would soon be known, sent shockwaves around the country and was the 'bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on British soil'.¹ Unfortunately, modern academic historians have generally concurred with E.P. Thompson's assessment that there was no need for an 'hour by hour account' of Peterloo.² Despite a growing body of literature examining related developments, such as Peterloo's impact on popular memory or radical culture, the events of 1819 have remained worryingly disconnected from their local contexts.³ As Professor Poole laments in his opening chapter, Peterloo is 'often invoked but rarely examined.'⁴ This monograph, therefore, seeks to reassess the massacre by incorporating new evidence and theoretical developments.⁵ Concomitantly, Peterloo provides an opportunity to shift the locus of early nineteenth-century radicalism from London to Manchester, which remains

¹ Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) pp.1-2.

² Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1968) pp.750-3.

³ For example, see: Joseph Cozens, 'The Making of the Peterloo Martyrs, 1819 to the Present', in *A History of Secular Martyrdom in the British and Irish Isles: From Peterloo to the Present*, ed. by Keith Laybourn and Quentin Outram (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) pp.31-58; Robert Poole, 'The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Georgian England', *Past and Present*, 192 (2006) pp.109-53.

⁴ Poole, *Peterloo*, p.4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

a 'little-recognized realm of the past.'⁶ The intense scrutiny that surrounded Peterloo allows for an unprecedentedly detailed study of socio-political conflict in northwest England between 1815 and 1820. As Poole notes, 'hardly anything political seems to have happened in 1819 that was not written down somewhere.'⁷

Consisting of sixteen chapters, this monograph provides a comprehensive examination of the political struggles that gripped late-Georgian Manchester. Building upon his extensive experience studying nineteenth-century radicalism, Poole commits himself to a 'holistic' examination of both Peterloo and northwest England. Indeed, while five chapters analyse the events of 1819, the majority of this book centres around the political, industrial and social movements that preceded Peterloo. For Poole, this focus situates the massacre within its 'proper context'.⁸ Rather than aligning early-nineteenth century radicalism with a teleological 'model of progress' culminating in the Reform Act of 1832, Poole argues that Peterloo was the 'political endgame of the long eighteenth century'.⁹ Moreover, incorporating previous protests allows for a nuanced understanding of the local politics within Regency Manchester. In his introduction, Poole criticises 'history from below' as an approach that 'can never be more than half the picture.' Instead, the 'weight of explanation must lie on the perpetrators rather than the victims.'¹⁰ Subsequently, throughout this book, Poole reveals how radical protests had a formative effect on Manchester's ruling classes. Without excusing the atrocity that occurred, Poole demonstrates how the practices and cultures of authorities, loyalists and reformers evolved through combative political discourse.

In his initial three chapters, Poole criticises the economically deterministic narratives that have presented early nineteenth-century radicalism as a simplistic battle between rich and poor. Although the upheavals of the industrial revolution inevitably influenced popular protest, Poole states that Peterloo 'was not about wages or industrial conditions [...] it was about democracy'.¹¹ The 'white heat of

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

war' had transformed the British state into a confident, proactive and repressive vehicle for the aristocratic establishment.¹² In Manchester specifically, Poole reveals how a 'secretive network of High Tory officers, magistrates and clergy' provided locals with 'a practical lesson' in socio-political inequality.¹³ Crucially, by examining Manchester's decrepit local power structures, Poole demonstrates how issues such as food shortages or high taxation were envisioned as the inevitable consequences of an unreformed parliament. Countering the materialistic arguments of historians such as Thompson, Poole details how radicals traced economic deprivation back to a corrupt political system that 'stole from the productive classes and gave to state parasites'.¹⁴ Consequently, Peterloo was not the result of an abstract or universal "class warfare". Instead, it was the 'jarring combination of economic laissez-faire and political authoritarianism' that allowed radical parliamentary reform to become the popular solution to Manchester's economic maladies.¹⁵

These arguments are reinforced by case studies, which reassess the radical movements that emerged between 1815 and 1817. Titled 'Reformers', 'Petitioners' and 'Rebels', chapters four, five and six reveal how previous protests provided Peterloo with its material and cultural foundations. Poole shows that through new organisations, such as the 'Union Society', local unrest was 'swept up and given constitutional bite by a national petitioning campaign'.¹⁶ Controversially, Poole states that this 'home-grown radicalism owed nothing to the French revolution'.¹⁷ Instead, he argues, these 'defiant protests' were driven by an 'oppositional form of patriotism' that sought to defend an ancient 'English constitution' from the corrupted British government and autocratic German monarchs.¹⁸ Through this argument, Poole engages with Linda Colley's foundational study of nationalism, patriotism and conservatism in the long-eighteenth century.¹⁹ Notably, Poole

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.26, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.76-7.

¹⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

challenges Colley's wedding of 'patriotism' and 'conservative loyalism'.²⁰ As these chapters convincingly demonstrate, the success of the reform movement following the Napoleonic Wars was largely due to the reconciliation of patriotic imagery with radical discourses. For English reformers, Poole argues, an 'idealized past' and half-imagined constitutional heritage provided popular legitimacy for their political struggle.²¹

Chapters seven through eleven focus on the protests, riots and demonstrations that provided the immediate backdrop for Peterloo. Between 1817 and 1819, Poole writes, 'the infrastructure of radicalism developed rapidly', moving 'beyond the politics of petitioning and remonstrating to the politics of confrontation.'²² During the summer of 1818, for instance, Poole states that radicals in Manchester were catapulted into a 'position of leadership' due to strikes within the cotton industry.²³ Similarly, military drilling was co-opted into radical political culture as a 'show of defiance, a declaration of fitness for citizenship and a statement about who were the real patriots.'²⁴ Crucially, Poole notes, these campaigns were empowered by the enthusiastic participation of local women. Throughout this section, Poole implores historians to 'dispense with modern categories of analysis and locate female reformers fully in the context of 1819'.²⁵ He argues that the 'socially conservative language' deployed by these women acted as a 'cloak for politically radical behaviour' and helped legitimise the reform movement.²⁶ Conversely, for local authorities, these years brought repeated embarrassments. Through a wide-ranging assessment of loyalist letters, newspapers and reports, Poole conveys the growing frustration amongst Manchester's magistracy. In these documents, female reformers were envisioned as 'disgusting creatures' whilst political gatherings were increasingly described in militaristic terms.²⁷ Although every mass meeting in the early-nineteenth century

²⁰ Poole, *Peterloo*, pp.14, 55; Colley, pp.308-20.

²¹ Poole, *Peterloo*, pp.388-9.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.205, 212.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.170, 236.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.237.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.237-45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.240-6, 249-59.

balanced 'on the edge of physical conflict', Poole successfully demonstrates the acute instability of Regency Manchester.²⁸ For Poole, after years of humiliation, Peterloo provided an opportunity for local elites to enact their revenge.

As may be expected, the strongest section of this book centres around the massacre and its immediate repercussions. Chapters twelve and thirteen provide a highly detailed, powerfully emotive, easy to follow 'minute-by-minute' account of Peterloo. In Poole's analysis, Peterloo allowed a 'drunk and disorderly' yeomanry to enact cathartic violence against those who had previously bested them.²⁹ Building upon his previous studies, Poole notes how radical banners were treated as 'war trophies' and how 'women seemed to be the special objects of rage' for the amateur cavalrymen.³⁰ By making extensive use of over four hundred eyewitness testimonies, Poole reveals how Peterloo was a 'face-to-face affair' founded upon local animosities and interpersonal feuds.³¹ However, this local event would soon reshape the national political landscape.

As such, in chapter fourteen Poole concludes his study by examining the popular and political responses to Peterloo. Throughout his analysis, Poole criticises historical studies that have gauged public reaction through the 'middle-of-the-road' accounts presented in national newspapers or governmental reports.³² In contrast, Poole utilises local correspondence, court documents and regional newspapers to reveal an organised campaign of 'official denial' that ineffectually deflected an overwhelming, and almost revolutionary, wave of criticism and radical activity.³³ Poole shows that wherever possible, officials silenced inquests and investigations through physical force or legal chicanery.³⁴ As Poole concludes, the real 'battle of Peterloo' was the 'war of words, images and ideas that followed and this was the one authorities lost'.³⁵

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.281-2, 372.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.305-307.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.318

³² *Ibid.*, pp.356-7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.343.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.348-51, 386.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.393.

There is little to criticise in this well-argued and detailed study. However, historians of other regions may question the consistent framing of London and Manchester as the paramount political battlegrounds of early-nineteenth century England. In particular, Poole's argument that 'if we want to study the national picture, metropolis and cottonopolis need to be considered together' risks minimising and misrepresenting radical activity not only in cities such as Bristol, Birmingham or Liverpool but also across rural England.³⁶ As scholars such as Steve Poole and Nicholas Rogers have demonstrated, the performance, perception and repression of radical protest varied wildly across the country.³⁷ Despite the persuasiveness of Poole's arguments, prospective readers should thus be wary of constructing a national picture from these two cities. Nevertheless, if positioned alongside studies of other regions, this book will provide readers with a sweeping reassessment of the social, political and economic struggles that shaped nineteenth-century England. *Peterloo: The English Uprising* will likely become a foundational text for historians of protest, with Poole's scholarly yet accessible analysis providing a clear example of regional history's strengths and importance.



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³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4

³⁷ Steve Poole and Nicholas Rogers, *Bristol from Below: Law, Authority and Protest in a Georgian City* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017).