

“An unjust attack on a peaceful demonstration that had the legal and moral right to meet”

In correspondence with Katrina Navickas

Interview by Rachel Rogers

In December 2021 Katrina Navickas, professor of history at the University of Hertfordshire (UK) and specialist of popular radicalism in Britain, kindly agreed to taking part in a written discussion by email on the topic of Peterloo. Katrina has done a lot of work to bring the radical history of the North to light and to trace the footsteps of those men and women who took part in protest movements in the industrial era. Our conversation took place over the month of January 2022. Apart from small editing adjustments for spelling and coherence this conversation is a faithful transcription of what we wrote. I am very grateful to Katrina for the time she gave to this interview and for her insights and reflections on this important episode in Britain's history.

RR: You wrote in the *London Review of Books* in 2018 that "Peterloo is the story of a moment of terrible repression by the few of the many, and we shouldn't be afraid of saying that the working-class demonstrators were in the right." Could you comment further on this view in your capacity as a historian of British popular protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

KN: My statement about the Peterloo Massacre relates to the way that the event and its significance has been portrayed in history, particularly national history, ever since 1819. Peterloo fits uneasily within the national narrative of an English people who were generally not willing to challenge the system (like the French). Both conservative and Whig/Liberal interpretations of the development of parliamentary democracy in Britain emphasise its peaceful path, and how a constitutional monarchy from 1688 enabled rights to be achieved gradually, when the people were 'ready' for them. I argue that the working classes were 'ready' for parliamentary reform and an expanded franchise by 1819. They were organised and educated; they had read Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, and were well versed in other constitutional thought that pointed to a more democratic form of government as necessary for the new industrial age.

A common misconception in the history of Peterloo, promoted at the time by the authorities and still a point of contention today, was that the male protesters were armed when they marched to St Peter's Fields. Their military style drilling on the fields in the weeks before the meeting are generally perceived as revolutionary. A common theme in the history of Peterloo, therefore, was that the magistrates and the Home Office had no choice to suppress the demonstration, because it was potentially revolutionary.

The evidence from the contemporary reports, diaries and trials of the people who attended the meeting on 16 August was that they were not armed or dangerous. They were anxious to stay within the law and show themselves as peaceful, law abiding citizens, deserving of the vote. Robert Poole's research on the Home Office correspondence now in the National Archives shows how the Home Office had given a green light to the local authorities to put down the demonstration 'by the law or by the sword', i.e. if not legally then through military force. The magistrates and members of the voluntary yeomanry cavalry were ardent loyalists: many were members of Orange

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lodes, seeking to **attach** the Irish Catholic workers in the crowd. Michael Bush's research on the female reform societies suggests that the women in the crowd were deliberately attacked by the yeomanry, and disproportionately injured. It was an unjust attack on a peaceful demonstration that had the legal and moral right to meet.

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RR: It is interesting that you mention the way that military drilling in the weeks leading up to the St Peter's Field meeting on 16th August was drawn upon by the Manchester authorities as evidence of the insurrectionary intentions of the participants in the gathering on 16th August and therefore to justify the military-style response. Samuel Bamford's later recollections of Peterloo lend weight to the view that the men and women who marched from the towns around Manchester were encouraged by the organisers to arrive in an orderly fashion, also a way of showing their 'readiness' for a role in the political nation. That said, the recent collection of articles edited by Jason McElligott and Martin Conboy suggests that there was a long-standing 'revolutionary tradition' which stretched back through British and Irish history and which could be said to have come to a close with the risings in Yorkshire and Scotland in 1820 and with the foiled plot to assassinate Lord Liverpool's cabinet at Cato Street that same February. Some of the contributors also argue that the line between 'constitutional' methods and more violent and direct action to achieve the extension of political rights was very thin at this time, perhaps more so than has commonly been admitted. Do you think this frame of analysis has any bearing on how we can understand the events of Peterloo?

KN: Yes the immediate years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars were a complex mix of potentialities – for revolution, for different reactions to economic distress and cycles of unemployment, mixed with the range of radical ideas that stretched from the Whiggish constitutional to natural rights theories that advocated a complete overturn of the parliamentary and even social system. Working-class radicals were by no means a homogeneous group ideologically. The Manchester radicals had a range of views, and Bamford's recollections, written during the start of Chartism over two decades later, no doubt were keen to over-emphasise the rejection of violence and an attachment to peaceful methods and ideas of reform among his compatriots. Bamford was clearly suspicious of the more firebrand members of the Manchester radical activists, notably William Benbow.

But in the circumstances of the first half of 1819, it is evident from the writings of the radical groups that their aim was to hold peaceful reform meetings across the country to build popular pressure on parliament to reconsider the question of parliamentary reform. Hunt had held a mass meeting in Manchester already in January 1819, and in Smithfield in London in July of that year. The radical Sir Charles Wolesley had been more provocative at the Birmingham meeting in July, with the radicals 'electing' him, with the justification that the borough had no representation in parliament. The Manchester radicals were however careful to consult legal advice, reject the same tactic of appearing to 'elect' a representative, which would have been seen as illegal by the authorities. This is why they postponed their planned rally for a week from 9 to 16 August, so they could ensure that all the legalities had been satisfied.

The armed drilling was seen within the tradition of Major John Cartwright, and his commitment to the right to arm established in Magna Carta. The experience of the French wars had touched everyone, and a large proportion of the adult male population had been involved in some way with

military training, either in active service or in volunteer or militia regiments. It was a natural part of the era therefore to use military drilling to organise large bodies of people.

It was only with the failure of the tactic of mass peaceful meetings, culminating at Peterloo, that the more radical activists in Yorkshire and Scotland sought a more revolutionary and military solution.

RR: You paint a detailed picture of the national scope of the parliamentary reform movement and the interconnected nature of the outdoor meetings that took place across the country in the years after 1815. Given your abiding interest in the geography of protest and the importance of *where* events in the past happened, I wanted to get your view on the importance of geography, landscape and place in the build-up to and events of 16th August 1819. Your recent book, published by Manchester University Press in 2016, is entitled *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place 1789-1848*. In that book you emphasise the fact that Lancashire artisans were a mobile workforce, they were used to walking and moving around in search of employment. Samuel Bamford, to go back to *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, documents this entirely common practice of searching for work on foot and the encounters and possibilities that walking across land could lead to. The men, women and children who arrived on foot in Manchester from the surrounding weaving villages, walked miles to get to St. Peter's Fields on 16th August. Do you think such mobility and familiarity with the land and landscape was a source of alarm for the authorities that day, and a source of confidence for those who attended?

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KN: The mobility and familiarity with the landscape was an essential part of the working-class experience in the early 19th century. Handloom weavers in particular were embedded in the landscape: their workshops were often in villages or semi-rural environments, and they required to travel to Manchester each week to deliver their finished cloth, and pick up the new raw materials. Bamford is a key source for this, and describes the journey to and from Manchester as a key part of working-class sociability and community. They would often walk together, stopping off at pubs to discuss the news on the way home. And as Bamford relates in his memoirs, walking the heaths and moors of the outlying countryside was also a popular pastime at weekends, with an active interest in botany and birds.

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The authorities were alarmed in particular at the scale and organisation of the processions into Manchester. Robert Poole writes about this in his classic article 'The March to Peterloo'. It was the collective mass that was alarming, all with one purpose and, as you say, confidence. The military style drilling on the moors in the weeks before Peterloo was the main cause of the authorities' alarm, as we have discussed. But these processions were different – they were of the whole community, with women and children marching in together in a festival-like atmosphere, like the 'rushbearing' custom that was common in south-east Lancashire at harvest time. It was an expression of community identity, popular custom, and indeed, festival.

RR: It is striking to me that you insist on the festive atmosphere that surrounded the mass meeting and the community efforts that went into the preparations. It is an aspect that M. L. Bush also mentions in his work on the women who went to St. Peter's Field that day who wore white dresses for the occasion, carried bouquets of laurel and embroidered banners with the symbols and slogans of the reform movement. Mike Leigh's interpretation of the film makes a point of showing the

intricate preparations, the good humour and carnivalesque nature of the event for those who set off ~~on the road~~ for Manchester on the morning of 16th August. From your work in the archive and long-standing interest in the lives of working people in the industrial era, could you give your sense of what it might have *felt* like to be on the road to Manchester and part of the rapidly gathering crowd on that sunny Monday morning? Do you think many of those who attended had anticipated what would happen? Do you think there was an underlying expectation of confrontation, or is this something we can only determine in hindsight by looking through Home Office records? On a related note, you mentioned earlier the definitive work of Robert Poole whose monograph *Peterloo: The English Uprising* was published in 2019. In your view, is there anything left to discover about the events of that day, its aftermath and its significance?

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KN: It would have been exciting to be part of the preparations to march to Manchester on the morning of 16 August. It would have felt like a community celebration, as well as a show of unity and identity. The wearing of 'Sunday best' clothing, the carrying of specially made banners, the brass bands and music accompanying the processions, and the numbers involved must have made the participants feel that this was a truly special occasion. I think yes they would have been hopeful and confident that the demonstration and meeting would have made a difference, particularly when they arrived at St Peter's Fields and experienced very likely the largest ever crowd they had ever been in. The arrival of Henry Hunt and the speakers on the stage must have been very uplifting – a feeling that someone well-known who could make a difference, had come to Manchester and cared about their representation and their cause.

Some of the radical leaders knew how much the authorities had prepared in advance, and how many military were stationed in the surrounding streets. There were already rumours about the magistrates and yeomanry having ordered pikes and other weapons. But they had experience of previous meetings such as the previous visit of Hunt in January 1819, and had read about the other mass meetings in London and Birmingham having taken place without too much incident. So it is evident that they did not anticipate the extent of the military suppression of the crowd, the force and violence of the yeomanry, or the deliberate attacks on the female reformers.

Robert Poole's monograph is the definitive account, but there is still more to be discovered about what happened. The commemorations and heritage activities during the bicentenary in 2019 drew great interest from the public, particularly from descendants of people who had attended Peterloo. No doubt there are still family stories, mementoes, objects, held privately that are still to be shared and uncovered.

RR: It is a fascinating prospect, that through oral and family history and the stories of the descendants of those involved that day, some aspects of the events may still come to light. You mention the bicentenary of the massacre, which was commemorated in different ways. A piece of art - the Peterloo Memorial - commissioned from artist Jeremy Heller was unveiled, the ballads of Peterloo were performed in different locations, and universities organised conferences and discussions on the events two hundred years on. A book, *Commemorating Peterloo: Violence, Resilience and Claim-Making in the Romantic Era* was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2021 and the graphic novel, *Witness to a massacre*, also contributed to widening knowledge on this aspect of Britain's past and conveying it in a different form. The director Mike Leigh, himself a native of Manchester, also made a film about the events as we have mentioned. One of the actors

from the film, David Moorst, who plays Joseph, the character who returns from the front to dire poverty and unemployment after the Napoleonic Wars, expressed his reaction to first finding out about the massacre in an interview: “Straight away, how, how do I not know about this? How is this not something that I have been told about? It’s such a huge, awful thing that happened.” What were your impressions of the commemorations and do you think that these events, gatherings and art forms will have helped to make more people aware of this chapter of British history?

The commemorations of Peterloo’s bicentenary in 2019 were a fitting series of events, headed by Manchester Histories Festival (see <https://peterloo1819.co.uk/>), and also accompanied by other activities run by local history groups and museums from across the region. I definitely think that the prominence given to the events, and the Heritage Lottery Funding, legitimised the commemorations. In the years previous to 2019, the commemorations had been quite low-key, reliant on a small group of dedicated local people campaigning for a proper memorial in the city centre. Jeremy Deller’s memorial, completed in 2019, raised an unintended controversy over disability access, and the issue demonstrated the continuing debates about inclusivity and representation today. It was interesting that Extinction Rebellion took part in the official commemoration on 16 August, joining the procession and the performance, which in itself was keen to show the relevance of Peterloo for current social and political movements. The other days had more grass-roots events, including the processions of local groups and trades unions into the city centre. Mike Leigh’s film is certainly important, and depicts a fairly faithful account of the events of 16 August.