

CONSERVING THE PEOPLE'S HISTORY

LESSONS FROM MANCHESTER AND SALFORD

PAUL A. PICKERING

The closest that Margaret Thatcher comes to an admission of failure in her voluminous political memoirs concerns her efforts to promote history as a subject for school children. Ironically, however, one of the acknowledged legacies of the Thatcher years, a by-product of the transformation of the British economy from manufacturing to services under her stewardship, is the proliferation of museums and historical precincts that pepper the countryside from New Lanark to Wigan Pier. Although Mrs Thatcher would be unlikely to approve of the subject matter, for those interested in 'history from below' there are many lessons to be learned from recent efforts at the conservation of the people's history in the heartland of Britain's nineteenth-century industrial landscape. Manchester and Salford offer a vision of the museum of the future that is worthy of emulation.

During the morning of Monday, 16 August 1819, large numbers of people began to gather in St Peter's Fields, Manchester, for a public meeting that was advertised to commence later that day. The purpose of the meeting was to demand extensive reform of the British political system, in particular universal manhood suffrage and annual parliaments, and many of the crowd had come to hear these principles expounded by the leading radical reformer of the day, 'Orator' Henry Hunt. By noon a crowd estimated at about 60,000 had assembled. As each new group of protesters arrived the cheering was renewed for the sentiments displayed on their many banners and flags: 'Liberty and Fraternity', 'Hunt and Liberty', 'Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments', and 'No Corn Laws', the latter a

reference to the tax that institutionalised high bread prices to buttress the wealth and power of the land-owning aristocracy. For all that the cause was a serious one the numerous colourful banners, bands of music, and the presence of many families gave the occasion in prospect an unmistakably festive air.¹

Overlooking St Peter's Fields from the window of a hotel, however, a group of nervous magistrates viewed the scene as anything but festive. Alarmed by reports of secret radical 'drilling' in the surrounding hills, and tormented by the largely apocryphal tales of spies and agent provocateurs, the magistrates decided that the scene 'bore the appearance of insurrection' and determined to arrest Hunt. In the surrounding streets contingents of Yeomanry Cavalry, Hussars and Special Constables lay in wait to assist in the execution of the warrant.

Hunt arrived to tremendous cheering at about 1.00 pm and began to address the massive crowd from the hustings that had been erected. As he began to speak the Deputy Constable of Manchester was ordered to serve his warrant and he, in turn, requested military support before setting foot among the protesters. The first force to arrive were the Yeomanry Cavalry — part-time soldiers, including many who had no cause to love the radicals — who charged into the peaceful crowd near the hustings with sabres drawn. Hunt was arrested, his famous 'White Hat' of Liberty smashed by the truncheon of a Special Constable. In the melee fifteen people lost their lives — the first victims were a woman and her child — and more than four hundred were injured, many seriously.²

Instantaneously British public opinion was polarised by the massacre of 'Peterloo' — a term coined by a radical journalist that cleverly combined the location with the fact that the meeting had taken place on the fourth anniversary of the battle of Waterloo. While the Tory-dominated Parliament passed a vote of thanks to the cavalry for their 'patriotic conduct', outraged citizens from all over the nation protested at the arbitrary attack on members of a peaceful crowd. No event in recent or remote history was more important for subsequent generations of radicals and reformers. For supporters of the largest working-class movement of the 1840s, the Chartists, this was evident in innumerable ways, from the monument erected by subscription in Manchester in commemoration of 'Orator' Hunt, to the scores of ballads and poems that celebrated courage and perpetuated a sense of indignation.

"How valiantly we met that crew, Of infants, men and women too, Upon the plain of Peter-loo", ran the opening stanzas of a popular satire composed by the fictional Sir Hugo Burlo Furioso in 1819, "And gloriously did hack and hew, The d[amne]d reforming gang..." For many years after the inns and pubs of working-class Ancoats reputedly echoed to the strains of "With Henry Hunt We'll Go, We'll Go" on a Saturday night.³ The Peterloo Massacre is better remembered for its association with the movement for manhood suffrage, but leading middle-class reformers saw it differently. The Manchester Free Trade Hall, home of the archetypal middle-class pressure group of the 1840s, the Anti-Corn Law League, was erected, in part, as a "cenotaph raised on the shades of the victims" of Peterloo.⁴

Peterloo did not pass beyond the realm of living memory until late in the century. Even in the 1880s there were a dozen or so 'Peterloo Veterans' in the village of Failsworth, a few miles from central Manchester, who met in their local Liberal Club surrounded by the banners they had carried on that tragic day more than sixty years before.⁵ By this time,

however, there were already signs that Peterloo's talismanic place in British history was beginning to wane. In 1888 on the site where, in 1842, 30,000 Chartists had witnessed the laying of the foundation stone, a mere handful of protesters watched the Hunt Monument being demolished to be sold-off as scrap building material.⁶ By the end of the twentieth century the transformation was complete. Despite Mrs Thatcher's support for the study of history in schools, albeit a Gradgrind-like preference for 'facts' rather than 'interpretation',⁷ the level of historical knowledge and understanding in the general community is low. A recent survey completed during the sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain, for example, showed that 10 per cent of Britons aged eighteen to twenty-four believed that it had occurred in 1815 and a further 11 per cent thought it had occurred in 1066. Not surprisingly 'Peterloo' is now a forgotten episode.⁸

No student of nineteenth-century British politics is surprised that Peterloo occurred in Manchester, a city characterised by abrasive class values and the centre of what many working people regarded as the 'White slavery' of the burgeoning factory system. Manchester was 'the workshop of the world' that amazed or terrified contemporaries with Thomas Carlyle performing the typically Promethean role of upholding both extremes in his famous references to a "Sooty Manchester" which was "every whit as wonderful, as fearful, unimaginable, as the oldest Salem or Prophetic City".⁹ For most of the first half of the nineteenth century at least, the city seethed with discontent against a backdrop of poverty, squalor and environmental spoliation that was the scandal of the age. It is thus appropriate that a sustained attempt to rescue the memory of Peterloo, and the history of working people in general, is taking place in Manchester and Salford.

In August 2000 the Pump House People's History Museum in Manchester displayed its latest acquisition: a truncheon snatched from the hands of a Special Constable on St Peter's



Dreadful Scene at Manchester, 1819. Published by J.Evans and Sons, 42 Long LaneWest, Smithfield, 27th August, 1819. Note the women on the platform in front of a banner of the Female [Political] Union of Royston.

Fields 181 years earlier.¹⁰ Passed down from generation to generation in a shoe box by members of a local family, the truncheon now takes its place alongside other artefacts from the massacre that are displayed in one of more than twenty galleries in the museum. Located on the banks of the river Irwell in the heartland of what was industrial Manchester the museum is funded principally by the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities and Manchester City Council.

As the only British museum dedicated exclusively to working class history the Pump House combines exhibitions of seminal episodes in political history — from Peterloo and the campaign for a free press to the General Strike of 1926 and the creation of the welfare state by the first majority Labour Government after 1945 — with ephemera

relating to popular leisure from the Beatles to Association Football. A co-op shop is recreated as is the kitchen of leading Manchester suffragette, Hannah Mitchell. The devotion of considerable space to popular culture, in particular football, is appropriate: a reminder that modern Manchester is best known, not as the centre of a global cotton industry (now long since ended) or for its 'School' of economists (also in decline) but for its beloved Red-Devils.

As Frank Bongiorno has pointed out, the tone of museum's galleries is sympathetic but never Manichean.¹¹ Given that the museum is located in the converted Pumping Station that provided Manchester with hydraulic power until the 1970s, a visitor might expect to find more industrial history (machinery) although this is the principal fare of the near-



A Peterloo Medal.
Reproduced in F.A. Burton,
The Story of Peterloo,
Manchester, 1919.

by Museum of Science and Industry. The space that is given to Manchester's industrial heritage makes no pretence at any form of that scientific detachment that characterised some contemporary comment on the condition of nineteenth-century Manchester (and still characterises the displays at the museum's more grandiose and conventional neighbour).¹² The Pump House offers engaged history; an evocation of the past that might have meant something to a leading local Chartist, James Leach, who described "the bitterest curse" as the "hissing, whizzing, jumping, thumping, rattling, steaming and stinking factory".¹³ The Pump House also unashamedly pursues an educative mission, the success of which is exemplified by the acquisition of the

Peterloo truncheon. The local woman in whose family it had remained knew vaguely from her parents — as they had learned it from theirs — that it was associated with an important event in Manchester history, but it was only during a visit to the Museum that it was identified as a prized relic of Peterloo.¹⁴

The Pump House is part of a larger institution, the National Museum of Labour History, that was relocated to Manchester from London in the late 1980s. The main Archive Centre is located in Princess Street in a building that, having been, successively, a Mechanics' Institute and home of the inaugural meeting of the Trades' Union Congress in 1868, is most appropriate for its present purposes. As the principal national centre for the

study of material relating to the history of working people it boasts an impressive collection: from the papers of the Chartists, Henry Vincent and Bronterre O'Brien and leading Labour figures such as Keir Hardie and Robert Blatchford, to an impressive array of organisational records from the Industrial Women's Organisations (1913-1971) and the Socialist Sunday School Movement (1907-1971) to the National Union of Railwaymen Reports and Proceedings (1894-1972) and the Central and Political Committee Minutes of the British Communist Party (1930-1991). The collection is growing apace with regular acquisitions of the papers of recently retired or deceased stalwarts of the Labour movement such as Michael Foot, John Smith and the irascible left-wing Liverpool MP, Eric Heffer.¹⁵ The contrast to the recent difficulties faced by the comparable Noel Butlin Archives at the Australian National University is self-evident.¹⁶

What has put the National Museum of Labour History on the cutting edge in the study of history from below has been the collection, documentation and conservation of political and trade banners (some of its collection are displayed at the Pump House). Few historians have given much attention to the inscriptions and pictorial representations on the banners and flags carried in demonstrations and parades,¹⁷ but their importance in popular politics was evident to radicals and the authorities alike. It was no accident that Peterloo commenced with the command to the Yeomanry Cavalry to 'have at their banners', and, as one of the victims, Samuel Bamford, vividly recalled, the contest for them continued throughout that fateful day in 1819.¹⁸ Those Peterloo banners that survived were regarded as sacred relics and often took pride of place among the banners and flags carried by the local Chartists.¹⁹

Since its move to Manchester the Museum has applied professional conservation standards to banners and has now built a collection of 360, the largest of its kind. In 1997 the Museum applied to the British Heritage

Lottery Fund to support these efforts in the conservation of the nation's banners — estimated at £10,000 for an average banner — and received funding for a major national survey as a preliminary step. During 1998-9 the National Museum's banner survey identified over 2500 banners extant (not including military insignia) which represents an unparalleled resource for the study of people's history.²⁰

The efforts of the National Museum and the Pump House also have a valuable adjunct across the Irwell in Salford. Located in a late Victorian building, Jubilee House, opposite the Salford Art Gallery and Museum, the Working Class Movement Library had begun in 1961 as a private collection of books, pamphlets and labour movement ephemera by two local labour movement activists, Ruth and Eddie Frow, and was originally housed in their home in Stretford.²¹ By the early 1980s the 'Library', at that time containing more than 10,000 volumes, had outgrown a private residence and the City of Salford offered to house it in more suitable premises that would better facilitate its use by scholars and the general public. Since its relocation the collection has grown to 25,000 books and 15,000 pamphlets, as well as an impressive range of badges, posters, photographs and archival material under the care of a professional librarian. One of the most prized artefacts in the collection is an un-presented fragment of one of the 'monster' petitions demanding the implementation of the People's Charter during the 1840s.²²

Taken together these three premises, located within a few short kilometres of each other, possess a critical mass that has made Manchester and Salford a Mecca for the study of the people's history.²³ Manchester, wrote A.J.P. Taylor in 1957, is "irredeemably ugly".²⁴ At the time Taylor's comment must have seemed like an epitaph: after more than a century of conjecture the story of Manchester had reached an unhappy conclusion, a microcosm of Britain's decline as an industrial nation and a world power. Nevertheless Manchester survived the 'British disease' and emerged



'Roll Up Roll Up - No Chinese' flag. Courtesy Young Historical Society Inc.

from the harsh reality of Thatcherism with renewed prosperity as a centre of finance and commerce. It would surprise Taylor as much as it would Carlyle that, at least in part, the rebuilding of Manchester's international standing stems from the study of 'history from below'. Unfortunately for students of Chartism the nationwide banner survey conducted from Manchester's National Museum of Labour History failed to identify a single surviving Chartist banner. In the town of Young, on the southern New South Wales southern tablelands, however, the visitor to the Historical Society premises — known as the Lambing Flat Folk Museum — can see a banner painted on a tent-flap in 1861. Bearing a Southern Cross superimposed over a Cross of St Andrew with the inscription, 'No Chinese, Roll Up', the banner was an advertisement for a public meeting that presaged the infamous Lambing Flat riots later that year.²⁵ Notwithstanding the unfortunate sentiment, the banner is a possibly unique example of the Chartist art form at its peak. Painted by a Scottish migrant, it is a testimo-

ny to the transfer of cultural practices and values through migration. Lying in a dusty glass case in the premises of a small amateur society, it is essentially hidden from history. It is a reminder that the practice of 'history from below' in Australia has produced many works of significant scholarship but fewer landmarks of conservation.²⁶ It too deserves to be rescued.

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Endnotes

- 1 See S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (original 1839-41, repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); J. Marlow, *The Peterloo Massacre* (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1970); R. Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Re-opened* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).
- 2 E.P. Thompson emphasised the actual violence of the day. See *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1980 edition), p. 752f.
- 3 Manchester Central Reference Library, newspaper cuttings: *Notes and Queries*, 12 March 1903, pp. 182-3; *Northern Star*, 2 April 1842, pp. 6-7. *The Renowned Achievements of Peter-loo* (Manchester, 1819), was reputedly written by James Varley whose

- grand-daughter reprinted it in a novel in 1876. See G. Linnaeus Banks, *The Manchester Man* (Altrincham: John Sherratt & Son, 1876), pp. 131-2.
- 4 See P.A. Pickering and A. Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), p.204.
- 5 P. Percival, *Failsworth Folk and Failsworth Memories: Reminiscences Associated With Ben Brierley's Native Place* (Manchester: G. Hargreaves, 1901), pp. 5-6, 27.
- 6 P.A. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 183.
- 7 M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 595-6.
- 8 *Daily Mirror*, 15 September 2000, pp. 1-2. The local museum in Devizes, near Hunt's home town in Wiltshire, has made an effort to keep his memory alive (see: *Guardian*, 24 January 1996). I am grateful to Alex Tyrrell for this reference.
- 9 T. Carlyle, *Past and Present* (original 1843, repr. London: Chapman & Hall, n.d.), p. 247.
- 10 Media Release, Pump House People's History Museum, 9 August 2000.
- 11 F. Bongiorno, 'Heritage Report: Peoples History Museum, Manchester', in *Labour History*, 76 (1999), p. 151.
- 12 This contrast is noted in Bongiorno's perceptive report.
- 13 *Northern Star*, 11 July 1840, p. 1.
- 14 The inspiration derived from a Peterloo relic —in this case a sword — is a plot line in Howard Spring's story of the rise of a labour politician in *Fame is the Spur* (Collins, London, 1940).
- 15 The only dark cloud on the Manchester horizon is the threat to funding for the Manchester Central Library. At the time of writing (January 2001) Manchester City Council were considering options to reduce services at the library which has served the local community since 1852. For the early history of this institution which commenced in what had been the Owenite Hall of Science in Manchester see M. Hewitt, 'Confronting the Modern City: the Manchester Free Public Library, 1850-1880', in *Urban History*, 27,1 (2000), pp. 62-88.
- 16 See T. Irving, 'How to Save the Butlin Archives', in *Labour History*, 73 (1997), pp. v-vii; J. Merritt, 'Closing Down Our Heritage', *Canberra Times*, 7 November 2000; *Hansard* (Senate), 30 October 2000, p. 18613 (speech by Senator Kim Carr).
- 17 Notable exceptions are John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), ch. 9; James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Gwyn Williams' Introduction to J. Gorman, *Banners Bright: An Illustrated History of the Banners of the British Trade Union Movement* (London: Allen Lane, 1973). See also Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists*, ch. 9. Like Gorman's, most studies of banners (in Britain and elsewhere) have tended to pursue antiquarian or aesthetic rather than analytic objectives. See N. Laliberté & . McIlhany, *Banners and Hangings: Design and Construction*, (New York: Van Nostram Reinhold Co, 1966); A. Stephen & A. Reeves, *Badges of Labour; Banners of Pride: Aspects of Working Class Celebration* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986).
- 18 J. Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p. 182; S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, pp. 207, 211; James Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England', in *Past and Present*, 112 (August 1989), pp. 97-103.
- 19 See *Manchester Guardian*, 26 September 1838, p. 2; *Northern Star*, 2 October 1841, pp. 6-7; 19 August 1843, p. 3. According to Peter Percival, 'as late as 1884' one of Bamford's Peterloo Banners was carried in a demonstration against the House of Lords by members of the Failsworth Liberal Club. See *Failsworth Folk and Failsworth Memories*, pp. 5-6.
- 20 See N. Mansfield, 'Radical Rhymes and Union Jacks: A Search for Evidence of Ideologies in the Symbolism of 19th Century Banners', unpublished paper, 2000, pp. 1-25. I am grateful to Dr Mansfield, Director of the National Museum of Labour History, for providing me with a copy of his paper.
- 21 See E & R Frow, 'Travels with Caravan', in *History Workshop Journal*, 2 (1976).
- 22 I am grateful to the librarian at the Working Class Museum, Dr Alan Kahan, for allowing me to examine this document. For the importance of petitioning see P.A Pickering, "'And Your Petitioners &c'": Chartist Petitioning and Popular Politics, 1838-1848', in *English Historical Review*, 466 (April 2001), pp. 368-388.
- 23 Of note also is the establishment of the North West Film Archive by the Manchester Metropolitan University which now has a collection of over 25,000 reels of film and video tape.
- 24 A.J.P. Taylor, 'Manchester', in *Encounter*, 8, 3 (1957), p. 4.