

1819 1919 2019 - Remembering Lives Lost in the Aftermath of War

Address Part One

I would like to take you back now two hundred years. The year is 1819. Thirty years ago saw the beginning of the French Revolution. Four years ago, saw the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Both had an influence on the events which are about to unfold in Manchester, as told by Stephen Bates of The Guardian, a newspaper whose founder was drawn to create what was first the Manchester Guardian by the story which unfolds below. .

On the morning of 16 August 1819, an immense crowd poured into Manchester, perhaps the largest the town had ever seen. They came in an orderly and peaceful fashion. Banners bearing slogans such as "Liberty and Fraternity" and "Taxation without Representation is Unjust and Tyrannical" flapped in the breeze, and bands played patriotic tunes including Rule Britannia and God Save the King. It was a fine and sunny day. On they came in cheerful mood; organised contingents from Bolton and Bury; 6,000 marching from Rochdale and Middleton; others from Saddleworth and Stalybridge; 200 women dressed in white from Oldham, together with families bringing their children and picnics with them. If later estimates that 60,000 people gathered at St Peter's Field that day are correct, it means that practically half the population of Manchester and the surrounding had come to attend a meeting calling for parliamentary reform. Having the vote mattered, they believed; it would change everything and force politicians to listen to their views and needs – and respond. A young businessman, 25-year-old John Benjamin Smith, was watching with his aunt from a window overlooking the open space on the edge of the town near St Peter's Church. He later wrote: "There were crowds of people in all directions, full of good humour, laughing and shouting and making fun ... It seemed to be a gala day with the country people who were mostly dressed in their best and brought with them their wives, and when I saw boys and girls taking their father's hand in the procession, I observed to my aunt: 'These are the guarantees of their peaceable intentions – we need have no fears. The people were expecting speeches and a good day out. What they were not anticipating was violence, carried out by troops sent in to disperse them, so aggressively that 18 people would be killed and more than 650 injured in the bloodiest political clash in British history. What happened at St Peter's Field would become known as the Peterloo Massacre – a name coined by a local journalist named James Wroe in punning reference to the Battle of Waterloo four years earlier. Wroe paid for the joke by seeing his radical newspaper, the Manchester Observer, closed down, and was himself sentenced to a year's imprisonment for seditious libel. Other demonstrations had been put down ruthlessly before, but none in Britain had been marked with such brutality or as many deaths as Peterloo. Unlike at some other attempted rallies of that period, those attending the St Peter's Field meeting were peaceful and law-abiding, demanding reform by constitutional means – and yet they were mown down. The authorities feared a violent outbreak, and a spark that would ignite an English revolution to follow the French. The storming of the Bastille in 1789 and the terror that followed were well within living memory. The magistrates were taking no chances and had signed up 400 special constables armed with long wooden truncheons. They also deployed 60 yeomanry troops from Manchester (with another 420 from Cheshire in reserve), called in 340 regular cavalry from the 15th Hussars, plus 400 infantry and two six-pounder cannon from the artillery. There were more than 1,500 soldiers and constables in all.

Henry Hunt, the lead speaker for the day, had got out no more than a few sentences before he saw the mounted Manchester Yeomanry approaching the edge of the crowd at a fast pace. They were the first troops to be called. They had been milling in the back streets, drinking in local taverns, and were fired up, ready to unleash themselves on the subversives. They clattered down Cooper Street, knocking over a 23-year-old woman, also called Fildes, and knocking her baby son, William, out of her arms, on to the cobbles and under their horses' hooves: he was the first fatality of the day. Contrary to the assertions of the authorities, fewer than a quarter were crushed in the crowd: more than 200 were sabred, 70 battered by truncheons, and 188 trampled by horses. James Lees, 25, had fought at Waterloo and was now a weaver with two children. He received two deep sabre cuts to the head and was battered black and blue, but when he went to the infirmary a doctor asked him whether he had had enough of political meetings. Lees said no and was promptly turned away. Before he died, three weeks later, he told a relative: "At Waterloo there was man to man, but here it was downright murder."¹ I cannot help also feeling that the gung ho spirit that filled the air after the victory at Waterloo, helped prime the pump of massacre at Peterloo. Lees was the only victim to have an inquest and the inquest was curtailed by the authorities to stop a verdict of unlawful killing being returned.²

Let us turn the clock forward now one hundred years. It is 1919. The Great War had not long ended. In Scotland, we commonly remember the tragedy of the *lolaire*, the ship carrying men returning to the *Ilse* of Lewis from the horrors of war at New Year, only to founder on rocks with the loss of 200 lives. But today I want to tell a different story.

This is the story of the Glasgow harbour riot of Thursday 23rd January 1919, as told by Jacqueline Jenkinson of Stirling University. The riot began in the yard of the mercantile marine office in James Watt Street where sailors gathered for their chance to be signed on to a ship. While waiting to see if they would be hired, competing groups of black and white sailors jostled and shouted insults at each other. This baiting descended into a pitched battle which spilled out of the yard onto the street. More than thirty black sailors fled the sailors' yard pursued by a large crowd of white sailors. White locals joined the crowd which grew to several hundred strong. The rioters used guns, knives, batons and makeshift weapons including stones and bricks picked from the street. On being chased out of the hiring yard, the group of black sailors initially ran towards the nearby Glasgow sailors' home on the corner of James Watt Street and Broomielaw Street. The white crowd smashed the windows of the sailors' home and then invaded it. The two or three beat police officers in the harbour area were overwhelmed and an additional force of 50 police officers was called in. The large police force cleared the two sets of rioters out of the sailors' home. The black sailors fled along the broad street parallel to the River Clyde into their own boarding house at 118 Broomielaw Street. White rioters sought to force the sailors back out into the street by smashing the windows with missiles, surrounding the building and then attacking it. In response, some of the black colonial sailors fired shots down at the crowd. Cornered in their boarding house the black sailors offered no resistance when the police force entered the premises. However, to restore order, the police removed 30 black sailors from the boarding house and into 'protective custody'. All were subsequently charged with riot and weapons

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/04/peterloo-massacre-bloody-clash-that-changed-britain>

² <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/waterloo-to-peterloo-the-tragic-story-of-john-lees/>

offences. None of the large crowd of white rioters was arrested. Three people were seriously injured.

Jenkinson comments as follows. In the aftermath of war, black British colonial sailors were branded as unfair economic competitors by the national seamen's unions and their local delegates, chased out of the merchant marine hiring yard by white sailors when they sought jobs, beaten in the street, attacked in their boarding house and then targeted for mass arrest by police called in to halt the disorder. The Glasgow Harbour riot was one of many during 1919 as the working class in general and ex-service personnel in particular took to the streets in violent demonstrations of dissatisfaction with the post-war employment, housing and pensions situation. The frustrations within society evident in the widespread rioting of 1919 were in the seaports focused on racialised minority ethnic populations who were regarded as an 'alien' element in the British workforce. The riot in Glasgow was soon followed by others in South Shields, Salford, London, Hull, Liverpool, Newport, Cardiff and Barry. Five people were killed in the wave of port rioting, dozens more were seriously injured and there were over 250 arrests as the police, and often troops, struggled to control the rioters. In these nine seaport riots, hostile crowds of white working-class people abused and attacked black, Arab, Chinese and south Asian workers, predominantly British colonial sailors. During the war, thousands of colonial subjects were attracted to Britain to fill employment gaps and many of the new arrivals settled in the ports. Post-war, their continued presence became a source of white working-class resentment. The port rioting was triggered by intense job competition among merchant seaman. Rapid post war demobilisation led to high unemployment in the merchant navy as the industry experienced early the post-war economic depression that did not fully take effect in most of Britain until 1921. The operation of a 'colour' bar by sailors' unions heightened dockside tensions around Britain's seaports. Prominent Glasgow labour leaders enforced and supported the 'colour' bar on black and Chinese sailors.

Two deeply unhappy episodes in our history.

We are tempted to make judgements on the individuals involved, for good or ill. And indeed, I believe that up to a point we should. But in both cases, let us also consider the social forces which have provided a context for the actions of people long ago. And how some of those may still be at work. Thinking of those stories from our past, the good the bad and the ugly, I chose our next hymn, Undying Echoes, most of all for its last two lines: "For by our deeds we ever send undying echoes down the years."

So now please get ready for our second hymn, in the Green book number 292 Undying Echoes.