

## *PETERLOO*

Mike Leigh's new film, *Peterloo*,\* recounts the massacre in St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819.

Peterloo soon became a play on Waterloo. The latter had been a victory over one of the greatest armies of all time. Peterloo saw yeomen kill eleven and wound more than 400 unarmed and peaceful protestors. The yeoman were carrying out the orders of the local magistrates† to arrest the speaker, Henry Hunt.

After the Leader of the Commons, Lord Castlereagh, showered praise on the magistrates, Shelley flung back:

I met murder on the way.

He had a mask like Castlereagh.

The regime imposed more limits on fair trials, the press, assembly and speech under the 'Six Acts'.

Valuable as it is for wage-slaves around the world to be reminded - even told - about the Peterloo massacre, it is far more important to absorb that ruling-class violence is no exception - least of all for the Motherland of bourgeois democracy - the United Kingdom. Even more important is for our class to learn from how workers then fought back.

First, how did the Kingdom get to be united? Scots fought for their independence against the Romans and seemingly forever against the English. The invasion and conquest of Britain by the Dutch Protestant William III in 1688 deposes the Stuart James II. On 13 February 1692, the Campbells slaughter the MacDonalds at the Massacre of Glencoe, carrying out the order of William's Joint Secretary of State for Scotland: 'You are hereby ordered to fall upon the rebels ... and to put all to the sword under seventy.' The 1688-9 'The Bill of Rights' did not apply to Scotland or to workers anywhere. The '45 Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 ended with the slaughter at Culloden. Prisoners - men, women and children - were sold as indentured labour into the Americas. Then came the Clearances.

No less determined than the Clans to throw off the foreign yoke, the Irish rebelled again in 1798. The repression slaughtered 30,000, far more on a population basis than had the French 'Terror', so much employed to decry all and any revolution. In 1989, Mitterrand had to remind Thatcher that the French had followed the example of the English in regicide.

Class violence had raged under Feudalism before 1400 followed by the Vagrancy Laws under the Tudors. Capitalism came into the world, as Marx says, dripping dirt and blood from every pore.

That shining light of English 'Liberty', John Locke, advised the Board of Trade in 1697 that the recalcitrantly idle be whipped while their children taken away at the age of three and placed in schools to inculcate work discipline.

The state put more troops into the North of England around 1812 against the Luddites than they had in the Peninsula against Napoleon.

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\* *Peterloo* screens from Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> in the British Film Festival at Palace Cinemas in all the mainland capitals, with several sessions for each venue. It is bound to get a commercial release in the New Year.

† Adam Smith would not have been surprised: 'The masters upon these occasions are just as clamorous upon the other side, and never cease to all aloud for the assistance of the civil magistrates, and the rigorous execution of those laws which have been enacted with so much severity against the combinations of servants, labourers and journeymen.' *The Wealth of Nations*.

Nor would Max Weber: 'The industrialist takes into account the fact that people exist who are hungry, and that those other people in the spiked helmets will prevent them using physical force simply to take the means where they find them which could serve to allay their hunger ...'

The number of hanging offences increased, though sentences were reduced to transportation to more than balance the number of hangings. One spike came between 1797 and 1821 when the state battled to protect a paper currency against forgers.

In general, the great criminals remained to rule the Empire while victims of their exploitation were condemned to exile with hard labour.

Having lost their independence by the mid-1550s, the Welsh proved the most consistently forceful in their resistance to the conditions of work imposed with the spread of mining, metallurgy and textile-factories from the 1770s. A massacre of coal miners from around Merthyr at 1831 killed at least sixteen, almost twice that at Peterloo. Between 1820 and the 1840s, Monmouthshire miners held their ground; they styled themselves 'Scotch Cattle', perhaps a reference to the Scotch Greys, the regiment sent against them.

English workers pushed back during the 1820s with the Captain Swing rick-burnings by rural labourers from 1830.

Despite the repeal of the Anti-Combination Acts in 1825 the state applied an Act against the taking of extra-legal oaths to transport the six Tolpuddle Martyrs to Australia in 1834 for protesting against yet another cut in their wages. The injustice within the law was overturned – not by learned judges – but after a campaign powered by the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union.

London freethinker and republican, Richard Carlile led the fight for a free press though his successes came when 150 workers served a total of 200 years in prison for defying the Six Acts, but also thanks to the jurors who refused to convict in the face of instructions from the Chief Justice to do so.

Around the same time, editors in Hobart and Sydney went on producing their newspapers from cells to which they had been condemned for criticising the colonial governors. As the organiser with the Builders' Labourers told a Hobart rally in 1916:

Our liberties were not won by mining magnates or stock-exchange jobbers, but by genuine men of the working-class movement who had died on the gallows and rotted in dungeons and were buried in nameless graves.

Bourgeois liberals who now claim to be the champions of democracy are the political descendants of those who opposed every step that working people took towards removing the worst features of class dictatorship.

Twenty years after the 1819 massacre at St Peter's Field, Chartists carried banners calling on the people to 'Remember the Bloody Deeds of Peterloo'. Shelley's refrain is alive today among the Corbynites:

Rise like lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number!

Ye are many - they are few.

That remains true arithmetically. The obstacle is that 'they' still hold the monopoly over the means of violence. They never have, indeed never can, refrain from using the force of their state apparatuses to hold onto their ill-gotten gains. The bayonetting of wounded diggers at Eureka is but one more example of the civilising mission on display in Mike Leigh's feature film.

Our future depends on the relative strength of the contending classes.

Humphrey McQueen  
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