In the wake of Peterloo? A radical account of the founding of the *Guardian*

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Introduction

The *Guardian* regularly, and proudly, declares that it was born in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre of August 1819, one of the turning-points in British working-class history. Some 50,000 people attended a mass rally in St Peter's Fields in Manchester to press for electoral reform and trade union rights and were met with a brutal assault by local yeomanry that led to the deaths of 18 people and widespread outrage against the authorities. Peterloo, argues one historian, 'was no accident; it was a political earthquake in the northern powerhouse of the industrial revolution'[i] that ultimately weakened the grip of the old aristocratic forces and emboldened the movement for reform.

In the crowd that day was John Edward Taylor, a cotton merchant and part-time journalist who wrote up his account of the massacre for *The Times*, helping to make what might have been contained as a local event into a national sensation. According to the current editor of the *Guardian*, Katherine Viner, 'Taylor exposed the facts, without hysteria. By reporting what he had witnessed, he told the stories of the powerless, and held the powerful to account.'[ii] Peterloo radicalised Taylor and prompted him, in the words of a *Guardian* feature in 2018, 'to start his own paper, two years later, to campaign for reform'[iii] and to pursue a democratic agenda based on truth-telling and a commitment to progressive, liberal values. This paper was the *Manchester Guardian* and its supporters argue that it has continued ever since to devote itself to the pursuit of 'enlightenment values, liberty, reform and justice'[iv].

This chapter argues that this account of the *Guardian*'s birth conceals far more than it reveals and glosses over a central fact that the liberal values espoused by Taylor served to contain, rather than to promote, demands for more fundamental democratic change. Taylor had a far more ambivalent reaction to the events at Peterloo than is widely credited and launched the *Guardian* in order to foster a constitutional alternative to radical social forces and to cater to the needs of an increasingly politically confident business community in Manchester. The chapter challenges some of the myths surrounding the founding of the newspaper (not least that it was designed to be a fearless advocate of progressive social change and working-class representation), explores the objectives of the group of businessmen who sponsored it and examines its coverage of key reform issues in its first few years.

Peterloo in context

There is little doubt that the second decade of the nineteenth century was an insurrectionary period in England. With the French Revolution a recent memory and with basic democratic rights to vote and to organise denied to the vast majority of the population, there was a rebellious mood amongst a

growing working class movement characterised by the smashing up of machinery, huge radical meetings, hunger marches and food riots.[v] As Viner notes: 'The combination of economic depression, political repression and the politicisation of workers with economic need was combustible.'[vi]

This presented a threat not simply to the landed gentry still in power but also to an emerging professional class who were terrified about the prospects of a powerful labour movement. According to John Saville, the middle class at this time 'never forgot the history of revolutionary France and they were constantly reminded of the problems and the dangers of too rapid change when they listened to the ultra-radical doctrines of their own working people.'[vii] The choice for the old order in this context was either continued repression of or accommodation to demands for change/ However, the latter approach in 1819, as E.P. Thompson argues, 'would have meant concession to a largely working class reform movement; the middle-class reformers were not yet strong enough…to offer a moderate line of advance.'[viii]

The violence meted out at Peterloo helped to transform the balance of forces amongst proponents of reform. It exposed the barbarism of the authorities to a national audience and opened the door to liberal reformers to make a case for piecemeal change and thus to pre-empt the need to cave in to radical demands for universal suffrage. Indeed, while the 'constitutionalist' wing of the movement gained in confidence following Peterloo, the 'revolutionary' wing, facing sustained repression and internal division, and temporarily lost its momentum. According to Thompson, once the 'clamour of 1819 had died down, the middle-class reform movement assumed a more determined aspect' and the industrial militancy that had characterised that decade died down, at least for a few years.[ix]

In Manchester, this paved the way for liberal-minded business leaders to agitate for parliamentary reform, religious freedom and, above all, for free trade. People like Taylor, his good friend and fellow journalist Archibald Prentice, his then business partner John Shuttleworth, and his future publisher Jeremiah Garnett were part of what was known as the 'Little Circle', a group of Manchester merchants that opposed both the rule of the 'old order' and the extension of the franchise to all working people. According to David Knott, the Circle believed that 'it was preferable to have a small bourgeois public such as themselves exercising political rights, as they alone would approach this role with objectivity and rationality.'[x] Many of its members were connected to the cotton trade, an industry that was intimately linked to and dependent on the profits yielded by slave labour in the Caribbean and US, even though, as individuals, many of them were also active as abolitionists, an apparent contradiction to which we return later in this chapter.

Peterloo played a key role in the development of the Circle, convincing its members of the need for a new, constitutionally-focused political strategy. Knott argues that while Circle members were outraged by the violence they witnessed at Peterloo, 'they were also wanted to distance themselves from the event' and to channel radical political dissent into 'deliberative assemblies' that took the form of 'rational debate within legally sanctioned indoor local

political forums.'[xi] What they lacked at the time was a vehicle that could articulate their values and promote these assemblies – such as a regular newspaper – but the fallout from Peterloo provided precisely this opportunity.

Taylor and the liberal response to Peterloo

The two most recent editors of the *Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger and Katharine Viner, both identify Peterloo as the main inspiration for the birth of the title. For Viner, the 'history of the Guardian begins on 16 August 1819'.[xii] Yet one of the *Guardian*'s official biographers, David Ayerst, suggests that, far from emerging spontaneously from the battleground of St Peter's Fields, the idea actually emerged a few months earlier, following Taylor's victory in a libel case in March 1819 that was brought against him by a Tory politician who accused him of inciting vandalism. 'It is now plain you have the elements of public work in you,' remarked a friend of his on the way home from the trial. 'Why don't you start a newspaper?'[xiii] Taylor was aggrieved, according to another *Guardian* biographer, Haslam Mills, not simply that he had been wrongly accused of criminal behaviour but that his Tory opponents had claimed that he was not a 'moderate reformer' but a more incendiary one.[xiv] Taylor was already contributing to the liberal *Manchester Gazette* but events would propel him to seek a more reliable outlet for his world view.

Peterloo and its aftermath however, provided Taylor with a further incentive to imprint his values on a volatile political landscape. This was necessary partly because he was uncomfortable with the orientation of the radical leaders whose voices were dominant up to and including the day of the massacre, and who were demanding universal suffrage, annual Parliaments and the immediate repeal of the Corn Laws. For Ayerst, Taylor 'was out of sympathy with the extreme radical leaders' and penned an article two weeks before Peterloo criticising them for appealing 'not to the reason but the passions and sufferings of their abused and credulous fellow-countrymen.'[xv] Taylor certainly had little time for Henry Hunt, the radical leader who was the main speaker on 16 August, even if he was horrified by the violence meted out by the yeomanry against innocent people in St Peter's Fields.

Taylor threw himself into a committee aiming to raise funds for the victims of the attack and then wrote a lengthy report, *Notes and Observations*, in response to the government's own account of events. *N&O* attacks with some passion the abuses of power that he witnessed, exonerates the ordinary people who attended the meeting and challenges official 'misrepresentations', for example that 'clubs' allegedly used as weapons by ordinary people were in fact walking sticks held by a small minority of the crowd. Referring sarcastically to the '*glorious* victory of the 16th of August', he excoriates the authorities for losing control: 'I know of no law, which authorizes a yeoman to sabre me, because I may not give way to him quite so soon as he wishes I would.'[xvi]

Yet the report is also determined to be even-handed about where the blame should lie and suggests that the revolutionaries are just as bad as what he calls the 'plebeian aristocracy'.

> I have not a word to say in defence of the presumption, vulgarity and violence of some self-styled reformers on the one hand; but I certainly do think the inhumanity, the ignorance and the rancorous bitterness of many anti-reformers, equally inexcusable on the other.[xvii]

Notes and Observations demonstrates Taylor's reluctance to lay responsibility at the door of the state, insisting that the 'yeomanary are incapable of acting with deliberate cruelty' and blaming instead a handful of wayward individuals 'whose political rancour approaches to absolute insanity.'[xviii] The key lesson for Taylor was not that Peterloo demonstrated the need for thoroughgoing political change and the extension of democracy to the poor but the need to build social harmony and to restore faith in the law – a law that had just permitted the slaughter of more than a dozen citizens. There will be no peace, he argues, 'until the poor have regained that perfect confidence in the impartiality of the law.'[xix]

Taylor sought deliberately to distinguish his political programme from that of the radicals who had organised the meeting in St Peter's Fields. Indeed, he chose never to refer to 'Peterloo' – a phrase first coined by the left-wing *Manchester Observer* shortly after 16 August and which caught on straight away – confining himself in *N&O* to a single reference to the 'tragedy' and the 'atrocities' of that day. Meanwhile, as he and his friends devoted a lot of time to organising relief for the victims of the violence and led demands for a public inquiry, the 'middle-class radicals' (as the Peterloo historian Donald Read calls them) exploited the gap left by a divided working class movement and extended their influence over the campaign for reform.[xx] Faced with a wave of protest following Peterloo, the government passed the 'Six Acts', that criminalised large public meetings, increased stamp duty on newspapers and launched a major assault against the working-class and unlicensed press, all of which resulted in a 'temporary diminution of Radical agitation'[xxi] The brutality of Peterloo, combined with the blunt nature of the government's response,

> convinced many of the middle class that Reform was the only alternative to a policy of repression that would lead inevitably to civil war. From this time parliamentary Reforms began to be 'respectable' and to appear prominently on the programme of the [liberal opposition] Whigs.[xxii]

Whereas a militant working-class movement had dominated demands for reform in the run-up to Peterloo, middle-class reformers -- with a far more limited programme of social change – were able to consolidate their grip in the years that followed. The *Manchester Guardian*, therefore, was born not in an industrial and political upturn powered by a mass movement – let alone in a flowering of radical journalism – but, as E. P. Thompson describes the period, in a 'mildly prosperous plateau of social peace.'[xxiii]

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[i] Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 2.

[ii] Katharine Viner, 'A mission for journalism in a time of crisis', *Guardian*, 16 November 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/16/a-mission-for-journalism-in-a-time-of-crisis (accessed 8 May 2020).
[iii] Stephen Bates, 'The bloody clash that changed Britain', *Guardian*, 4 January 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/04/peterloo-massacre-bloody-clash-that-changed-britain (accessed 2 July 2020).
[iv] Viner, 'A mission for journalism'.
[v] A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (London: Lawrence & Wishart,1989 [1938]), pp. 313-14.
[vi] Viner, 'A mission for journalism'.
[vii] John Saville, *The Consolidation of the Capitalist State: 1800-1850* (London: Pluto, 1994), p 37.
[viii] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 683
[ix] Thompson, *Making*, p. 709.
[x] David Knott, 'The Little Circle and Manchester Politics, 1812-46', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 2018, p. 121.
[xi] Knott, 'Little Circle', p. 72.
[xii] Alan Rusbridger, *Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2019), p. 18; Viner, 'A mission for journalism'.
[xiii] David Ayerst, *Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper* (London: Collins, 1971), p. 15.
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