DON MILLIGAN'S
Off The cuff
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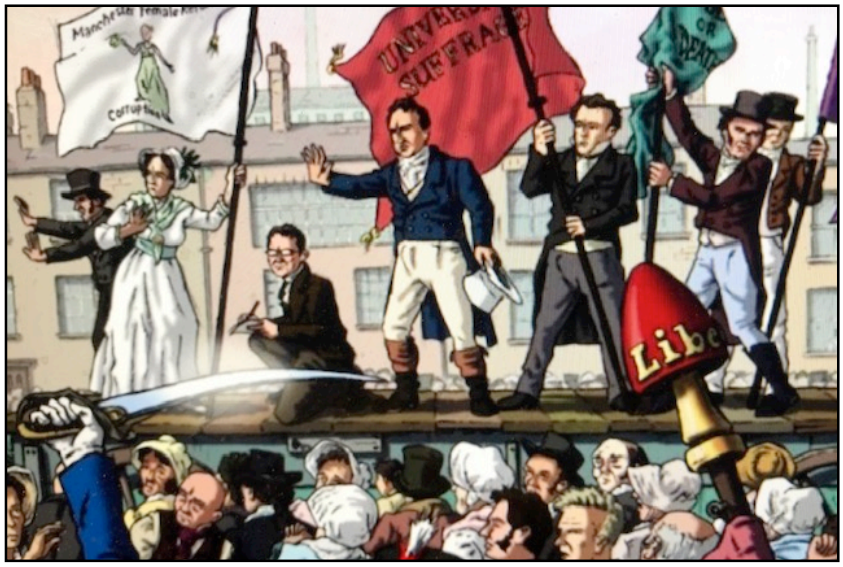
PETERLOO
Dodgy Histories



ON AUGUST 16, 1819 a crowd of workingmen, women and children assembled on St Peter's Field in the centre of Manchester to listen to speeches arguing for reform of Parliamentary representation. It was a peaceful gathering of weavers, other craftsmen, and labourers, dressed smartly in their best clothes, arriving in well stewarded contingents from city neighbourhoods, surrounding towns, and nearby villages.

Magistrates, alarmed by the radicalism and the vast size of the gathering - equalling perhaps half of Manchester and district's population at the time – decided to arrest the orators and suppress the meeting.

They ordered the militia to clear a path to the speakers' platform so that the arrests could take place. However, the militia, composed of the sons of local merchants, manufacturers, and innkeepers on horseback, soon found themselves in trouble, and had

to be rescued by more experienced regular troops, that had been kept in reserve. In the resulting melee, workingmen, women, and children, were brutally ridden down and slashed by men on horseback. Hundreds were grievously injured and a dozen died in what came to be known as 'The Peterloo Massacre' – a bitter reference to the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

In response to this monstrous event Percy Bysshe Shelley, in Italy at the time, wrote his lengthy poem, *The Masque of Anarchy*; the final stanza (XCI) of which expresses fine sentiments concerning resistance to tyranny.

> Rise, like lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number!
> Shake your chains to earth like dew
> Which in sleep had fallen on you:
> Ye are many—they are few!"

[Read the whole poem at https://archive.org/]

Nothing positive resulted from the Peterloo Massacre, apart perhaps from the founding of the *Manchester Guardian.* Shelley's poem was not published until 1832, the year in which middle class men of property won the vote. Alternatively, Chartism, the struggle for working class male suffrage was violently suppressed, and had petered out by the end of the eighteen forties; workingmen – the heads of households in stable employment – did not begin to gain the vote in large numbers until 1867.

However, Shelley's poem and the event, it eulogises, came to represent for many on the left the historic character of the struggle for equality and democratic rights. Like the musings of Lollard priests, rebellions of medieval peasants, seventeenth century 'Levellers' and 'Diggers', and the Tolpuddle Martyrs two centuries later, Shelley's marvellous poem has joined the parade of British socialist sightings of their ancestors, stretching back to time immemorial.

The late Tony Benn pioneered this mode of 'remembering', and Jeremy Corbyn has proved to be no slouch in this regard.

Labour's slogan 'For the Many, Not the Few' is a direct result of this rather flawed engagement with 'our' history, and consequently, leads to radical misrepresentations of 'our' present. We can get carried away with the masque of anarchy to such an extent that contemporary realities become well and truly masked. *This is because 'we' are not so many, and 'they' are not quite so few.*

The capitalist class numbers around twelve per cent of the population – that is, just under eight million people, considerably more if you factor in all those, relatives and the like, who live wholly or partially on income derived from investment capital. On the other hand the working class – those people without investments engaged in routine clerical or manual labour, number perhaps some fifty per cent of the population – more than 32 million people. The remaining 24 million are small business owners, single traders, shop keepers, managers, supervisors, professional middle class people of all sorts, together with the genuinely self-employed, who have some measure of control over their working environment and how they carry out their jobs.

However you choose to calculate these gross figures (which of course include children, the retired, the unemployed, and the destitute), we are not in the mythical world of "the one per cent" ranged against the "ninety-nine per cent", nor are we in the territory of Shelley's "many" in struggle with "the few". The class relations, like the long history of the battle for the vote, are extremely complicated.

Consistent with rhetoric about the exalted achievements of the working class movement many people on the left like to imagine that the vote, and everything good from the emancipation of slaves, to equal rights for homosexuals, was won by the 'left' ranged against a uniformly hostile 'right'. This kind of slipshod reasoning recently led Jeremy Corbyn to

attack the 'Tories' for the Peterloo Massacre as if Teresa May, or at least, Margaret Thatcher, had wielded a sabre on St Peter's Field.

The truth is, of course, that the 'Tories' of 1819 were rather different from those that eventually backed the Whigs in passing the First Reform Act of 1832, to the Tories who under the leadership of the Earl of Derby, and with the assistance of Benjamin Disraeli, passed the Second Reform Act, which doubled the size of the electorate in 1867. Similarly, it was the Marquess of Salisbury's Tory administration that introduced the bill that became the Third Reform Act in 1885. It was Lloyd George's coalition, stuffed with Tories and Liberals that enfranchised all men of eighteen and over in 1918, and some women of thirty and over at the same time. And, the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act was the work of Stanley Baldwin's Tory government in 1928, finally awarding women the same rights as men at the ballot box.

There is no doubt that the vast size and unruly militancy of the working class and the urban poor in the 1860s frightened the bejesus out of the propertied classes, leading to broad social, political, and cultural efforts, to 'civilise' the 'dangerous classes' by incorporating as many of their number into society as possible. For example, George Eliot's novel, *Felix Holt the Radical*, paints a vivid portrait of such fears and of the efforts needed to ameliorate the rudeness of the labouring classes, and reduce their potential for disorder. Many people amongst the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie – politicians, writers, industrialists, philanthropists, and social reformers – had by the eighteen sixties and seventies become convinced of the wisdom of finding ways of incorporating the working class into society as full citizens.

This was a lengthy process and the trade unions, with the Liberal Party's help in founding the Labour Party, no doubt played a crucial role at the opening of the twentieth century. But we should not forget that the Tories were an essential part of the process of

incorporating the working class into a bourgeois democratic set up in which material inequality is both sanctioned and defended by governments freely elected by men and women of all classes.

I have no doubt, no doubt at all, that I'm going to love Mike Leigh's picture, *Peterloo*, that'll be premiered in Manchester on 17th October (and will go on general release on 2nd November). I have also no doubt that the screening of the film will be accompanied by a great deal of socialist hoo-hah and palaver generated by the doyens of the left from Billy Bragg to Maxine Peake as they tell a vivid folktale in which both the martyrs and the villains of St Peter's Field are cast in a passion play in which eternally benighted Tories are inevitably ranged against the virtuous masses. In this way the skilled public employees, students, actors, musicians, managers, supervisors, and labour movement apparatchiks, of Corbyn's party will signal their record in always having been "on the right side of history".