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Return to Peterloo, ed. ROBERT POOLE (Manchester Region History Review, vol. 23, 2014. £12.99 pb.)

In 1989 the Manchester Region History Review (MRHR) published a special issue of its annual journal titled 'Peterloo Massacre'. The latter was a tragedy that reverberated through the nineteenth century: one of the most arresting of the many illustrations in the volume under review here is a photograph of Peterloo veterans, assembled in 1884 to mark the passage of the Third Reform Act. This new publication, volume 23 of MRHR for 2014, is similarly dedicated to Peterloo.

Following painstaking research by Michael Bush (published as *The Casualties of Peterloo* in 2005), it is now generally agreed that in all eighteen demonstrators died as a result of a yeomanry cavalry charge into a reform demonstration on Manchester's St Peter's Fields on 16 August 1819. At least seven-hundred others were injured. Within weeks the mordant coinage 'Peterloo' took hold, its evocation of Waterloo helping to cement further the events of that day in the popular mind. Since then there never has been a time when Peterloo failed to provoke strong feeling. Though general interest has ebbed and flowed, as the bicentenary approaches Peterloo is very much to the fore of Manchester culture and politics.

The 1989 MRHR volume was animated by a revival of interest in Peterloo that to a great extent stemmed from E. P. Thompson. His *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) might almost be read as an extended meditation upon the circumstances from which Peterloo emerged. The chapter Thompson devoted to it was one of the two longest in a very long book; Peterloo had, he opined 'the most lasting influence on the British political tradition'. As if to reinforce the point, the dust jacket of the first edition reproduced George Cruikshank's sardonic 1819 'Victory of Peterloo' woodcut, just as almost every issue of the Chartist newspaper *Northern Star* had done in the early Victorian years. In 1969 Thompson went on to write his most impassioned account of Peterloo in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* of Robert Walmsley's *Peterloo: The Case Re-opened*. No other author ever argued with quite Walmsley's obsessiveness that the consequences of 16 August 1819 were entirely accidental and unpremeditated. Thompson was predictably excoriating but wrote anonymously, in accordance with TLS policy at the time. As its central feature, the 1989 MRHR reproduced this essay over its unapologetic author's signature. (The

whole 1989 volume is freely available on-line at www.hssr.mmu.ac.uk/mcrh/mrhr/back-issues-index/ .)

Time moves on. This attractive new MRHR volume has no need to recourse to Thompson for authority. It concedes nothing of the moral indignation that has suffused most treatments of Peterloo; indeed the meticulous research on which it is based quietly but firmly underlines the magnitude of the atrocity. A stand-out contribution ‘What don’t we know about Peterloo?’ by the editor, Robert Poole, is especially significant here, as are three new eyewitness accounts published for the first time. Two are strongly partisan, one radical and the other loyalist; interestingly the third, though independent, is the angriest. They are among over three-hundred participants’ and observers’ statements assembled by the Peterloo Witness Project, led by Poole. ‘It is in the attitudes of those involved, more than in the traditional quibbles over issues such as who cast the first stone’, he argues, ‘that an understanding of the extreme events of 16 August 1819 can be found’. To this end his article is followed by two finely wrought articles, by Frank O’Gorman and Katrina Navickas, analysing loyalism and patriotism in the Manchester region during the three decades before Peterloo.

Another way in which ‘Return to Peterloo’ enriches our understanding of its subject is its attentiveness to literary and material culture. Shelley’s *Masque of Anarchy* need no longer bear the burden of being the sole well-known literary artefact. John Gardiner offers an insightful reading of the most widely circulated literary reactions to Peterloo, William Hone’s spirited polemics of 1819-20 (which Cruikshank illustrated). Alison Morgan’s essay on ‘starving mothers and murdered children in cultural representations of Peterloo’, takes the reader to the heart of the emotive responses of contemporaries to the event, evident in printed reportage and commentary, poetry, and graphically in engravings and on ceramics and even silk handkerchiefs. A complementary evaluation by Ruth Mather of female reform societies makes skilful use of contemporary visual media to demonstrate that women played a central role in a carnivalesque subversion of power and authority in 1819-20.

For this reader, Mather and Morgan’s contributions are the most exciting and ground-breaking in the collection. To state this is not to imply that Matthew Roberts’s piece on the banners of Peterloo is negligible: it is, though, primarily a foretaste of what promises to be a significant and much-broader study of political banners, a central element of nineteenth-century popular culture. The final full-length article,

‘Remembering the Manchester Massacre’ by Terry Wyke, is a thoughtful reconstruction and evaluation. Wyke is careful to avoid an elegiac or uncritically triumphalist account of Peterloo. Indeed, he shows how attempts to fix its place more firmly in the social memory of Manchester have been episodic and weak. He also warns of the limitations of studying the memory of Peterloo solely from a Manchester-centric perspective.

The American literary scholar James Chandler, in his 1998 monograph *England in 1819*, suggested that Peterloo transcends time itself, ‘an event of indeterminate duration that makes a major transformation in the practices of modern literary and political representation, one understood in its moment to have revolutionary potential’. For such a claim to be more than rhetorical hyperbole, an informed and critical understanding of Peterloo and its context is needed. This volume goes a long way to securing that end. In one of five shorter pieces that round off the collection, Paul Fitzgerald recounts recent efforts to secure a memorial of greater gravitas and visual magnetism than the current small plaque, obscurely placed on a hotel off St Peter’s Square. ‘The Poetry of Peterloo’ reprints five short contemporary works. (In a rare lapse, the editorial commentary fails to spot the author of one of these was the London ultra-radical, later Owenite and Chartist, Allen Davenport.) A companion piece by Chris Burgess details a range of contemporary artefacts directly linked to Peterloo. The most spectacular artefact, their blue silk banner that Middleton reformers retrieved from the field of Peterloo (according to a family tradition hidden beneath the skirts of a young Middleton woman who escaped the melee) is the subject of a separate short essay, also by Robert Poole. The banner languishes, he observes wistfully, in a corrugated iron storage facility on a Rochdale industrial estate. The last of these shorter contributions is a most welcome reprint of Charles Dickens’s dramatic and sympathetic reconstruction, first published as one of his ‘Old Stories Retold’ in *All the Year Round* in June 1867. ‘Nowhere else in his writing’, observes Poole, ‘does Dickens so unequivocally take the side of the workers. Peterloo became the supreme example of one of his most heartfelt themes: the alienation of the rich and poor’.

The contributors and *MRHR*’s sponsors (the Centre for Regional History at Manchester Metropolitan University) are to be congratulated on this ‘Return to Peterloo’. Profusely illustrated and full of insight, this is one of the widest ranging and most-thoughtful of all the many publications that have been devoted to its subject.

This deserves a place on the shelves not only of those interested in Manchester's history but of all with a concern for modern northern history.

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