

PETERLOO

AN EYE-WITNESS'S ACCOUNT

We have received a copy of an original letter about the Peterloo "massacre" written by Mr. John Railton to his wife on the evening of the 16th August, 1819, from his house in Mosley Street, Manchester. Mr. Railton, who was born in 1772 and died in 1857, witnessed the Peterloo meeting and the bloodshed that followed. It will be seen from the letter that he did not approve of the Reformers. The following extracts give in his own words an account of the events as he saw them:-

Early in the morning the town began to fill with idle loiterers from all parts of the country, assembling promiscuously, till bodies of from one to 2,000 each marched in between eleven and twelve o'clock with flags, caps of liberty, and music, taking up the ground near St. Peter's, where a stage was erected for the orators, till Hunt, who was the last to arrive, at the head of a great body of people, appeared about one o'clock. Ben, Mr. Sanderson, and myself were near the spot and had a full view of him. He came in an open carriage with a woman on the box by the side of the driver, the former the wife or relation of Johnson the brushmaker, carrying a flag in her hand, and in the carriage along with Hunt was Johnson, one of the Whitworths, I thought, and three other men. They were loudly cheered by the mob, and on their being drawn alongside of the platform they mounted it, and Hunt gave the signal for three cheers, in which he was joined by the mob. At this period we were coming away, and at the corner of Mrs. Garnett's we met Mr. Ewart, Mr. and R. Grey (I said Samuel in my former letter, in error, I believe), and Dr. Bardsley. At this moment there was coming down Cooper Street, and closely upon us, a body of infantry from the King Street barracks, but their approach was so quiet that we were not sooner aware of them. We followed them to the corner of Dickinson Street, when they took post round the corner and formed there, but they were not seen by the orators, and their business was proceeding very quietly.

"The Scene of Action"

As we stood looking at these troops and wondering at the occasion of their presence, in a few minutes they were followed by a part of the Manchester Cavalry, conducted by Mr. H. Birley at their head, at a full gallop, and they took post round Mr. Christie's wall. At the same time the other part of this body entered the ground at the opposite side by way of Deansgate, and by a signal to each other they advanced and took possession of the orators and the whole of their offensive and revolutionary emblems of flags, caps of liberty, &c. They made a full charge through the mob, who fled in all directions, and Ben and I, feeling it high time to walk off, put in at Mr. Robberds's, and went upstairs to have a full and safe view of all that was passing from a back window. Before we left the ground the dust was so excessive as to obscure everything, but when we had got to the window the rush was subsiding and left a full and shocking view of the scene of action. The cavalry were pursuing the mob, and they were met and goaded by the infantry who were advancing upon and pricking them with fixed bayonets. In a quarter of an hour the whole place was cleared, and the cavalry were pursuing the people up the streets the more effectually to disperse them. Many were trampled upon by their horses and others cut by their swords. Not a shot was fired by the soldiers, but there were a

few pistols discharged by the mob. However, they gave no quarter. When I say no quarter I do not mean that they wantonly killed people, but that they were active and urgent in clearing the ground. And the ground and streets were soon cleared.

Soon after the first attack the troops from the barracks came up, and after them the Cheshire Yeomanry and the flying artillery, and it was on the whole a scene of such confusion as you can have no idea of from description. We took our opportunity, having saturated ourselves with the view from Mr. Robberds's, of crossing home to dinner, but we could not be easy without going upstairs to see what was going on in the streets. By this time all was pretty well cleared, and there was constantly coming past in carts, coaches, and on boards persons dead or sadly hurt, and others limping along that had met with some accident or other. Many of the persons from the country began to make their way home, grumbling and vowing vengeance against the rough usage they had brought upon themselves for travelling so far out of their way to disturb the peace of the town. At an early hour the shops in the public streets were shut up, and it seems that the magistrates were prompted to their line of conduct by many persons in the town waiting upon them and stating that they were in personal fear. On which they had no other discretion than resorting to the measure of dispersing the reformers and driving them to their homes. I wish this may end such meetings, but I fear the populace will now become so exasperated as to be very troublesome by venting their rage on individuals that may have been remarked as the most active. However, it was become an imperious duty, and highly time that their violent and seditious proceedings should be put down. Hunt begged hard to be suffered to go before the magistrates without an escort, but this was not complied with.

The Casualties

I have not heard that any of the leaders were hurt, and I am very sorry to say that in the confusion some of the town's cavalry met with slight accidents and two or three with serious ones. Mr. John Hulme had a brick thrown in his face and was knocked off his horse. He was so disfigured in the face as not to be known till his name was seen in his glove. He was taken to the Infirmary, and is not expected to survive the night. A son of Mr. J. Bayley, a printer in Cannon Street – one of the cavalry – is also very much hurt and in a dangerous way. Some of the constables, being between the Manchester Cavalry and the Barracks Cavalry on the latter entering the ground without their (the constables) being distinguished, were trampled upon or otherwise wounded, and two or three of them were killed.

Had we been aware of the Riot Act being read when the troops approached we should not have remained so long in the open ground, but the whole mass were equally ignorant as ourselves, and it is much to be lamented for the whole affair that it happened so, since the meeting was going on so peaceably. A more notorious publicity should have been given before so serious a measure was resorted to, but I fancy the personal safety of the civil power was deemed incompatible, and that to have acted otherwise might have been the most fatal of the two.

A heavy responsibility is certainly drawn over the proceeding that took place. However, it may perhaps prove the greatest humanity if it is to extinguish the misguided conduct of the refractory spirits we have endured so long the menaces of. I cannot tell what number of troops were put into motion, but it will soon show the mob how fatal can be their measures when actively called upon to

disperse them. Many of the men that came into the town had thick sticks, but there was no time given for the use of them. Nothing could resist or stand against the activity of the soldiers.

I saw Mr. Simpson, Mr. Foxe's partner, who came in a gig from Bury this evening, and he said he met crowds retiring in that direction offering insult by bad language, but not otherwise molesting him, all the way he came to Manchester. It will be a sorry tale for them to tell everywhere, for all their trophies were left behind, and they have returned like shorn sheep. In one cart, with a man seemingly dead, there was a parcel of drums, with the tops cut to pieces, along with other instruments that were spoiled, and they will have to brood over misfortunes of all kinds to kindle their efforts for resumed action, but with 10,000 troops in the immediate neighbourhood we have nothing to dread or care about in the town . . .

On the whole the business has passed off with fewer accidents than could have been expected, and the threats held out by the mob will make the soldiers more united in their duty and determined on other occasions. They will now probably attempt meetings at various towns on the same day, the better to carry their rebellious and revolutionary views into effect, if such be really their object, but the Government must and in course will keep pace in vigilance. Do not let my letters be seen, excepting by your mother and Mrs. Ewart, on account of my remark about the manner in which the military were brought forward, but you can tell or read the other parts as may be gratifying to our Manchester friends. I may be in error in my surmises as regards the premature attack on the mob, and I should be sorry that anything went forth as from me that will be hurtful to the common cause against as despicable a set of men as Hunt and his associates.

Tuesday morning, past six o'clock. – This part of the town has been very quiet all night and there seems fewer people about than usual at the same time on common occasions. I hope it is indicative of returning industry to get honest and creditable livelihoods. I shall write again this evening, when all will be brought pretty much to light that happened yesterday.