

Richard Carlile's first account of Peterloo.

Sherwin's Weekly Political Register 21 August 1819.

It is impossible to find words to express the horror which every man must feel at the proceedings of the agents of the Boroughmongers on Monday last, at Manchester. It is out of the pale of words to describe the abhorrence which every Englishman must feel towards the abettors and the actors in that murderous scene. All prospect of reconciliation must now be considered as being effectually destroyed, and the People have now no resource left but to arm themselves immediately, for the recovery of their rights, and the defence of their persons, or patiently submit to the most unconditional slavery. The Government has long been a MILITARY DESPOTISM in a *theoretical* point of view; it is now become so in *practice*, and the murderers at Manchester are but the first fruits of its principles. It is impossible to say what will be the result of the impending contest, but it may with safety be said, that neither this nor any other country ever remained long in such a condition without a revolution. The idea of subduing the People can be entertained by no man of sense, and the idea of accommodating matters is quite as ridiculous. "The rubicon is passes;" the blood of the murdered, martyred heroes, who perished at Manchester, cries aloud for justice and vengeance. The man who could for a moment think of forgiving such injuries as this, would deserve the slavery of slaughter, with which we are all threatened. But it is useless to waste words on a subject where all must feel alike; it is an insult to the reader to argue in a case where every man is convinced. Neither can it be necessary to say anything to stimulate the inhabitants of Manchester and the neighbourhood, to a trial of their last and only mode of obtaining their liberties. Had the agents of the Boroughmongers suffered the meeting to proceed, there is no doubt but it would have terminated peaceably: the People shewed no *disposition to fight*, but what their disposition may be *now*, is a very different question. Their blood has bathed the swords of their enemies; men, women and children, have been wantonly and deliberately murdered, and accursed be the man that would suffer these deeds to go unavenged.

The following Letter of Mr. Carlile to Lord Sidmouth, contains a full and true account of these horrid proceedings. Mr. Carlile accompanied Mr. Hunt from Smedley Cottage to the Meeting, and he remained on the hustings until that Gentleman and several others were taken into custody. The Letter will therefore be read with great interest.

A LETTER TO LORD SIDMOUTH,
Secretary of State for the Home Department,
*On the Conduct of the Magisterial and Yeomanry Assassins of Manchester, on the
16th of August, 1819.*

London, August 18th 1819.

MY LORD,

As a spectator of the horrid proceedings of Monday last at Manchester, I feel it is my duty to give the public a narrative of those proceedings, through the medium of a letter addressed to you, who *ought* to be the *conservator of the public peace*. My motives for doing this are two-fold; the first is to call on you, as Secretary of State for the Home Department, to cause the Magistrates of Manchester, and Yeomanry Cavalry acting under their direction, to be brought to the bar of public justice, for the unprovoked slaughter of the peaceable and distressed inhabitants of that place and neighbourhood, whilst legally exercising their rights in public meeting assembled. For, unless the administration of affairs in the governmental departments of the country feel it their duty, immediately to take this step, the People have no alternative but to identify the Ministers in the metropolis, with the Magistrates of Manchester, as having conjointly violated and subverted that known and admitted law of the country, *which countenances the meeting of popular assemblies for a discussion of the best means to obtain a redress of their grievances*.

And secondly, in the case of the default of the existing government to give satisfaction, to the *mangled and suffering, and to the friends of the MURDERED INHABITANTS* of Manchester; the people, not only of Manchester, but of the whole country are in duty bound and by the laws of nature imperatively called upon to provide themselves with arms and hold their public meetings with arms in their hands, to defend themselves against the attacks of similar assassins, acting in the true *Castlereaghan* character.

The safety of the People is not now the supreme law; the security of the corrupt borough-mongers and their dependants can only be perceived to be the object of the present administration. Where my Lord Sidmouth – where are now to be found the assassins with their daggers? Let us hear no more of the assassinal intentions of the advocates of reforming your corrupt system of government; you have used every means within your reach to urge the Reformers to the use of the dagger; they have been too prudent, and you, no longer able to resist their reasonable demands by reasonable argument, have thrown off your mask and set the first example of shedding blood. The people have no alternative but immediately to prepare for a retaliation. The noble spirit displayed by the Reformers of Manchester on Monday, can never be annihilated, and it is within probability, that before this letter goes to the press, they will return to the attack. Whatever means they resort to at such a moment as the present, they will be justified in. The laws having been violated by those who profess to support them, in an unprovoked attack on a peaceable and unoffending people, in public meeting assembled, that people are no longer bound to deny themselves a mode of defence by respecting and adhering to those laws, but if they value liberty or independence they will immediately rid themselves of those who have not only driven them to starvation and desperation, but now goad them to destruction.

I shall now proceed to give your Lordship a narrative of the proceedings at the meeting, which as far as I could collect from my situation I will vouch for its authenticity. About 11 o'clock the People began to assemble around the house of Mr. Johnson, at Smedley Cottage, where Mr Hunt had taken up his residence;

about 12 Mr. Hunt, and his friends entered the barouche: they had not proceeded far when they were met by the Committee of the Female Reform Society, one of whom, an interesting looking woman, bore a standard on which was painted a female holding in her hand a flag surmounted with the cap of liberty, whilst she trod under foot an emblem of corruption, on which was inscribed that word. She was requested to take a seat on the box of the carriage, (a most appropriate one) which she boldly and immediately acquiesced in, and continued waving her flag and handkerchief until she reached the hustings, where she took her stand on the right corner, in front. The remainder of the committee followed the carriage in procession and mounted the hustings when they reached them. On leaving Smedley Cottage, bodies of men were seen at a distance, marching in regular and military order, with music and colours. Different flags were fallen in with on the road, with various mottoes, such as, NO CORN LAWS, LIBERTY OR DEATH, TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION IS TYRANNY, WE WILL HAVE LIBERTY; the flag used by the friends of Mr Hunt at the general election for Westminster, and various others, many of which were surmounted with CAPS OF LIBERTY. Females from the age of twelve to eighty, were seen cheering with their caps in their hand, and their hair in consequence, dishevelled; the whole scene exceeds the power of description. In passing through the streets to the place of meeting, the crowd became so great, that it was with difficulty the carriage could be moved along. Information was brought to Mr. Hunt, that St. Peter's Field was already filled, and that no less than 300,000 People were assembled in and about the intended spot of meeting. As the carriage moved along, and reached the shops and warehouse of Mr. Johnson of Smedley, three times three were given, also, at the Police Office and at the Exchange. The procession arrived at the place of destination about one o'clock, Mr Hunt expressed his disapprobation of the hustings, and was fearful that some accident would arise from them: after some hesitation he ascended, and the proposition for his being Chairman being moved by Mr. Johnson, it was carried by acclamation. Mr. Hunt began his discourse by thanking them for the favour conferred on him, and made some ironical comments on the conduct of the magistrates, when a cart, which evidently took its direction from that part of the field where the police and magistrates were assembled in a house, was moved through the middle of the field to the great annoyance and danger of the assembled People, who quietly endeavoured to make way for its procedure. The cart had no sooner made its way through, when the Yeomanry Cavalry made their appearance from the same quarter as the cart had got out. They galloped furiously round the field, going over every person who could not get out of their way, to the spot where the Police were fixed, and after a moment's pause, they received the cheers of the Police as the signal to attack. The meeting at the entrance of the cavalry, and from the commencement of business was one of the most calm and orderly that I have ever witnessed. Hilarity was seen on the countenances of all, whilst the Female Reformers crowned the assemblage with a grace, and excited a feeling particularly interesting. The Yeomanry Cavalry made their charge with a most infuriate frenzy; they cut down men, women and children, indiscriminately, and appeared to have commenced a pre-meditated attack with the most insatiable thirst for blood and destruction. They merit a medallion, on one side of which should be inscribed The SLAUGHTERMEN OF MANCHESTER, and a reverse bearing a description of their slaughter of defenceless men, women and children, unprovoked and unnecessary. As a proof of meditated

murder on the part of the Magistrates, every stone was gathered from the ground, on the Friday and Saturday previous to the meeting, by scavengers sent there by the express command of the Magistrates, that the populace might be rendered more defenceless.

This is the social order system which we are exhorted, by Royal Proclamations, to rally round and support. These are the modes of reasoning adopted by villainy in power. I can assure you, my Lord, that the only painful feeling I felt was to see so many thousands of resolute and determined friends of freedom, without the means of self-defence. The *Courier* has this evening claimed the gratitude of the Reformers towards the amiable Mr Nadin, who, it asserts, saved the life of Mr. Hunt from the fury and vengeance of the Yeomanry Butchers. That these Butchers were ready and willing to cut him in pieces, there is no doubt, but in return, let me remind the Editor of the *Courier*, that nothing but the uniform and steady determination of Mr. Hunt to use no other weapons than our oppressive legislators themselves have sanctioned, nor to encourage the use of any other weapons where he has had any influence, could have saved the lives of these Yeomanry and Police, from a People goaded to desperation by a violent and outrageous attack on their lives. The people of Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire are fully prepared to assert their rights, either by argumentative reasoning, or open combat; neither will the desperate schemes of a Castlereagh repeated, foil them. Mr. Hunt, and the people about him, stood firm, and began to cheer the military on their approach to the ground, until they were within arms length, and cutting the way with their sabres. I appealed to the females on their fear of the approach of the military, and found them the last to display an alarm. The Police were as expert in applying their clubs to the heads and shoulders of the People as the cavalry their sabres, and there was no alternative but to run the gauntlet through the one or the other. The brutality of the Police, equalled in ferociousness the massacre of the Yeomanry Cavalry. A better character has been given to the Regular Troops for their endeavours to disperse the people without wounding or otherwise injuring them. The women appear to have been the particular objects of the fury of the Cavalry Assassins. One woman, who was near the spot where I stood, and who held seen infant in her arms, was sabred over the head, and her tender offspring DRENCHED IN ITS MOTHER'S BLOOD. Another was actually stabbed in the neck with the point of a sabre, which must have been a deliberate attempt on the part of the military assassin. Some were sabred in the breast; so inhuman, indiscriminate, and fiend-like, was the conduct of the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry. This, my Lord, is but a faint picture of what really occurred. They are facts and particular that come under my own sight and cognizance; and I have no hesitation in saying, that if the inhabitants of Manchester cannot resent this massacre of their peaceable inhabitants, by retaliating on the Yeomanry Cavalry and Police, collectively, they are called upon by the laws of nature, by the love of their country, their fire-sides, and families, to retaliate on them individually.

And again, my Lord, if the administration of that Government, of which you are a member, cannot support itself without violating the laws and compact between King and People, in an unprovoked and unrelenting massacre of the latter, you had far better retire, and not wait to be driven.

It will be in vain, my Lord, to attempt to palliate this circumstance by exaggerated statements and falsehoods; the many thousand witnesses of this

tragic event will proclaim it as it happened. Those who have hitherto opposed the demand for Reform, are now heard to condemn this act, and must awake from the delusion that has too long prevailed over them. The present is an important crisis for England. A reform, or despotism, must immediately follow. But I, my Lord, who witnessed the attack of the Blood-hounds on the inhabitants of Manchester and its vicinity, do feel a confidence, from the calm and resolute conduct of that meeting, that Despotism and not Reform will be crushed. The People were taken by surprize: when the sabres began to fall on them, they were astonished at the uncalled-for and wanton attack. I, who felt confident of the legality of the proceedings of the meeting, did not expect that any authority would, in this country, have been so far abused as to exceed in atrocity the caprice of a Ferdinand of Spain, a Dey of Algiers, or a Grand Seignior of Turkey. When I saw these Yeomanry Cavalry gallop round, and through the meeting, I had no other idea than that the object of the Magistrates was to impress the People with an awe, and to endeavour to terrify them, and to prevent the proceedings of the meeting, by exhibiting the military to its view. But they soon found this would not do, as the People both, men and women, kept cheering until after they began to feel their sabres.

After these Yeomanry Cavalry (which belonged to Cheshire and Manchester) had performed this grand achievement of attacking by surprize an unarmed assemblage of People, and dispersing them, they were not content, but persisted in riding after, and cutting down, those who were flying from them. One man, who dropt his hat in his flight, stooped to pick it up, and received a sabre wound in the calf of one leg whilst the other was dreadfully bruised by the horse trampling on it!

I will now, my Lord, quit the dreadful scene of St. Peter's Field, and examine the conduct of the Police and Yeomanry Cavalry in and about the streets of Manchester. Intoxicated with the idea of having dispersed so great an assemblage of persons, they began to increase that intoxication by the use of strong liquors, and, taking them in the aggregate, they were evidently in a state of inebriation. A blacksmith who, from his appearance, had just quitted his work, was standing in the course of the afternoon at the corner of a street, in all his working habiliments; a special constable comes up to him and orders him to walk away; the blacksmith seeing no cause for it, refuses; the constable, without ceremony, draws his staff from his pocket, and strikes him over the head. This was intolerable! The blacksmith struck him down with his fist; and a crowd collecting, he received that treatment which he justly merited, in a Town where law and justice were dispensed with by those whose duty it is to enforce them for the protection of those who are under their care.

Another instance, equally disgraceful to the instigator, occurred in the neighbourhood of New Cross, just before dusk. A young man, who was one of the Yeomanry Cavalry, called person a Mr. Tate, in that neighbourhood; and seeing from the window a number of persons collected on that spot, he imprudently, and with an air of derision and defiance, took out of his pocket, a flag that had got into his possession at St Peter's Field, and shook it from the window before the assembled People. This became the signal for attack. The windows of the house were immediately demolished, and the calling of the military to this spot caused the loss of life, to 8 or 10 persons, one of whom was a mere passer by, and was

shot in the head, at a distance of 500 yards from the scene of the action: at this spot a woman was also shot dead.

The conduct both of the Yeomanry Cavalry, and Police, was of the most ruffian-like kind; the military always preceded the Police, which is contrary to the known and established laws of this country. The advocates of a Reform in the Commons House of Parliament must now consider themselves as placed outside the pale of the law. A war was declared upon them by the late Royal Proclamation, which has been enforced by the Magistrates of Manchester, and the Reformers have no alternative but to make it a trial of strength. They have no man to advocate their cause among the existing authorities. There is not a man in the present Borough-Mongers House of Commons that us "bold enough to be honest, nor honest enough to be bold." There is not a man that ventures to rise and tell them of what they are composed. We can then have no hope left by an appeal to that House, nor by an exposition of its character and composition; we must, therefore, appeal to those weapons and that strength which nature has left in the hands of the oppressed to resist the oppressor. The Executive had denounced the demand for Reform, and has thrown itself into the arms of the Borough-mongers. The House of Lords has not pronounced its determination collectively, but when we know that the majority of the Commons are produced by its members, we are justified in the inference, that it will combine with the Executive to protect its own offspring.

And now, my Lord, since a partial triumph has been gained over the Reformers by dispersing them, unarmed, in a public meeting, let us examine what would have been the consequences if the dispositions of the Reformers had been so very violent as to have been represented to be. In the first place, they would not have stood and cheered the military until their sabres began to fall on them, but would have been silent, and sought immediately for the best means of defence. What if they had fallen back into the streets, and had filled the houses, and there sought weapons for attack and defence, they would have annihilated every aggressor on a few hours, whilst they themselves would have suffered little or no loss. In a house, an unarmed man will find better means for attack and defence than half a dozen armed, in the streets. Let us hear no more charges of violence or disorder against the advocates of Reform, but be pleased, my Lord, to take them into your custody, and confer them on the Magistrates of Manchester and other places.

I shall anxiously wait, my Lord, to see whether in the Executive and Administration of the present Government there is sufficient respect for the laws and justice, to enforce them against the Magistrates of Manchester; or whether the Executive and Administration will make the cause of the Magistrates of Manchester their cause; in either case, my Lord, as an individual, living in a country where the laws will not protect the subject, I shall feel it my duty to make the best preparation for the defence of myself, family, and property, against the attack of a Magistrate, Police-Officer, or a troop of Yeomanry Cavalry, who begin to shew a contempt for those laws which they are commissioned to enforce.

Your Lordship's Fellow-Citizen,
R. CARLILE.