

**Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 480. £25. ISBN 9780198783466.**

Robert Poole's new book is essential reading for anyone studying, teaching or otherwise interested in the Peterloo massacre. Timed to coincide with the bicentenary in 2019, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* is the first book-length study of Peterloo to be published by a 'serving academic' (3) since 1958. Meticulously researched, thoughtfully written and featuring beautiful illustrations, maps and prints (as well as a very welcome 'List of Principal Characters'), it is sure to be the definitive account for years to come.

*Peterloo* draws together a wealth of material from the archives and contemporary press to tell the story of the Peterloo massacre. Poole argues that Peterloo should be understood as a product of the long eighteenth century, rather than squeezed into later Victorian stories of 'progress and reaction' (8). He identifies three particular contexts to Peterloo: politics in the Regency period; Manchester and its institutions; and the wars with France. The work of E. P. Thompson is acknowledged as a crucial starting point for any historian of Peterloo, but Poole also notes the need for reassessment. The book is very strong, for instance, on the significance of the radical movement in Manchester and the north-west (somewhat neglected by Thompson), and on the 'two-way political traffic' (183) between London and Manchester radicals.

Early chapters introduce Poole's three key themes of politics, Manchester and war. Manchester in 1819 was not the Manchester of 1844 chronicled by Engels – it actually had more handloom weavers than cotton mill workers – and its civic institutions were antiquated: politically authoritarian but economically laissez-faire. The protracted wars with France led to spells of severe destitution and food riots across the region, which Poole paints vividly with the help of contemporary accounts. These hardships helped to galvanise the popular movement for parliamentary reform in Manchester and the north-west, and subsequent chapters explore the significance of Major Cartwright's tours of the north; the growth of political clubs in the region; the petitioning campaigns of 1816-17; the march of the Blanketeers in 1817; the influence of spies (especially the notorious 'Oliver'); the Lancashire strikes of 1818; and the emergence of women as a distinct force within the radical movement in the region. The book gathers momentum with the events it describes, taking in Henry Hunt's visit to Manchester in January 1819 and the series of mass meetings in the north of England between January and July of that year. By the summer of 1819, the tension was mounting. Reformers began drilling in earnest in the fields around Manchester, and female reformers gained confidence and prominence. Meanwhile, the Manchester authorities made military preparations, and there were anxious, furtive deliberations with the Home Office on the question of when it would be legally permissible to disperse a mass meeting by force.

Poole dedicates three chapters to the events of the Peterloo massacre itself. Chapter 12, 'March', narrates the build-up to 16 August 1819, including the processions from different districts to St Peter's Field. Crucially, Poole notes, it was the reformers' 'very organization, designed to demonstrate discipline and disarm hostility, that spooked loyalist observers' (278). Chapter 15, 'Massacre', makes for powerful reading. It is here that Poole's use of eyewitness testimony comes into its own: the sources are woven together skillfully, and the reader is guided through abundant material without losing track of the events as they unfold. Chapter 14, 'Aftermath', tackles the fallout from Peterloo, including the rioting and military manoeuvres which took place immediately after the massacre; the deaths and injuries suffered; the official responses to what had happened, including the arrests of key reformers; and, importantly, the influential press reports from Peterloo.

Poole's final chapter, 'Reckoning', offers a compelling analysis of what really happened at Peterloo and why. What were the numbers at Peterloo? Was the Riot Act read?

How did things go so wrong in the ‘chain of command’ (360) for the crowd to be attacked as it was? What kind of violence was used? And, thinking counterfactually, what might have happened if the meeting had not been violently suppressed?

‘There was no “battle of Peterloo” but there was a riot, and it was the forces of order who rioted’ (1), Poole writes. It is an analysis suggestive of Percy Shelley’s *Mask of Anarchy* (surely the most famous ‘Peterloo poem’), in which the character ‘Anarchy’ is named as ‘God, and King, and Law’. Literary scholars will appreciate Poole’s use of popular songs and ballads in the book, as well as his attention to the role of the radical press throughout the Peterloo story, including the prosecutions of radical journalists in the months afterwards. This is an important and timely book, to be recommended wholeheartedly.

*Fiona Milne*  
*University of York*