

## THE RADICAL WAR

### Manchester massacre

One of the greatest poems ever written in the English language was composed in commemoration of one of the greatest atrocities ever committed on English soil. Its stirring final stanza resonates with oppressed peoples everywhere, even today, urging them to rise up against those who would enslave them.

‘Rise like lions after slumber  
 In unvanquishable numbers  
 Shake your chains to earth like dew  
 Which in sleep had fallen on you  
 Ye are many — they are few.’

Such was the scale of political repression in Britain in 1819 that *Mask of Anarchy* remained unpublished for another thirteen years, only seeing the light of day a full decade after the death of its brilliant young author, Percy Shelley.

He wrote his masterpiece in a state of shock and fury. On 16 August 1819, 60,000 people turned out in St Peter’s Field near Manchester for a peaceful, pro-reform carnival.

By the end of the day, the field resembled a battleground after a troop of cavalry charged into the crowd, hacking them down with sabres. In all, 15 were dead, and over 500 wounded.

Shelley’s poem is something akin to an updated version of the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, recounting the tale of a sinister pageant in which three Tory Ministers and the King ride past dressed as Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy and Anarchy:

‘I met Murder on the way  
 He had a mask like Castlereagh -  
 Very smooth he looked, yet grim  
 Seven blood-hounds followed him.

All were fat; and well they might  
 Be in admirable plight  
 For one by one, and two by two  
 He tossed them human hearts to chew

Last came Anarchy: he rode  
 On a white horse, splashed with blood;  
 He was pale even to the lips,  
 Like Death in the Apocalypse.

And he wore a kingly crown;  
 And in his grasp a sceptre shone;  
 On his brow this mark I saw—  
 "I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!"

The front page of the *Manchester Observer* ran the headline 'Peterloo Masacre' – a darkly sarcastic reference to Britain's celebrated wartime triumph at Waterloo. The name stuck.

But the state turned its fury against the protesters. The Prince Regent and the Home Secretary sent messages of congratulation to Manchester magistrates who had ordered in the cavalry. The organisers of the rally, including the rousing radical orator, Henry Hunt, were charged with 'assembling with unlawful banners at an unlawful meeting for the purpose of exciting discontent'. The government then railroaded through six acts of parliament banning public meetings, silencing radical newspapers and bringing in harsher penalties for sedition.

In towns and cities across Scotland, collections were made to aid the relatives of the victims, while rallies and marches were organised to voice their protest at the atrocity. On Saturday 11 September, a sombre procession, with contingents from all over the west of Scotland, converged again on Meikle Muir near Paisley.

Local magistrates had prohibited flags and banners, but a 300-strong contingent from Glasgow defied the ban, and came bearing flags edged with black borders. After the rally dispersed, a posse of special constables attacked the contingent as it reached Paisley Cross. John Parkhill was there to tell the tale: 'The first flag was seized there, a scuffle ensued, a crowd collected in a moment, and a dreadful riot began; the council chambers windows were smashed

and similar outrages were committed in other parts of the town. The Riot Act was read at 10 o'clock and the cavalry were sent for, and arrived at 1 o'clock. There was a great deal of rioting during the Sabbath, and at 7 o'clock, it became serious and general. The rioters were augmented by strong reinforcements from the villages to the West, who became active partisans.'

Despite repeated recitations of the Riot Act, the voice of protest only became stronger. By the week's end, the chaos had subsided, but the unions were growing in strength.

On 1 November, another great radical meeting was held in Renfrewshire, this time in Johnstone. In his *History of Paisley*, John Parkhill notes: 'The meeting was large, and Mr Brodie, merchant, Kilbarchan, was called to the chair, and a handsome young woman placed a splendid cap of liberty upon his head amidst the cheers of the meeting. The speeches were brief and few, as the day was cold; there were evidently a great number of pistols in the meeting, and all the men were armed with sticks; there were a great number of women on the hustings, and five caps of liberty.'

By now, it seems, women were at least more visible in the movement. And the mood was growing more militant – a point later reinforced by Parkhill, who describes the manufacturing of bullets and other missiles and the military drilling and training that took place in the dead of night, under the supervision of army veterans.

Following the rally, the demonstrators marched the mile or so to Elderslie, and stopped beneath the ancient yew tree, which, according to local legend, had been planted by William Wallace five centuries earlier. After the band played *Scots Wha Hae*, a volley of pistol shots were fired fire into the air.

Some of the banners and slogans listed by an observer further underlined the national dimension to the radical struggle in Scotland. One banner, for example, displayed a portrait of Wallace along with the inscription, '*Sir William Wallace, like our ancestors, we'll defend our liberty and laws.*' Another carried an image of a thistle and a harp intertwined, along with the message '*May our union be firm.*'

At another meeting in Kirkcaldy two days later, attended by around 6,000, a Mr Mitchell moved a 14-point resolution expressing abhorrence of the bloodshed in Manchester and proposing that 'a subscription be opened for the purpose of bringing to justice the inhuman perpetrators of the deeds done

at Manchester'. He later asked the crowd, rhetorically, what Scotland had gained from the union with England: 'the massacre of our people; the debasement of our national character; the accumulation of a debt beyond all spend-thrift precedent; famine in our streets and fever in our houses; the establishment in Europe of a military despotism which leaves the very name of freedom a mockery; the payment of war taxes in the time of peace... this has been our dearly bought indemnity.'

By early 1820, Britain was heading for all-out class war. For a decade, King George III had suffered from dementia, leaving his son, the Prince Regent, in charge. The heir to the throne had flirted with the Whigs in his younger days, before the French Revolution. But as he grew older he hardened into a bigoted reactionary, ranting against Catholic equality, denouncing wicked reformers, and waging a vendetta against his estranged wife. But most of the time, he merely indulged himself in grotesque acts of drunken debauchery. Then, on 29 January, his father died and George IV became king.

Two weeks later, 14 police officers, with a company of the Coldstream Guards as back-up, raided a house just off Edgware Road in London. In the loft of the house, a group of 25 men had gathered to finalise plans to assassinate the entire British cabinet at a dinner party in nearby Grosvenor Square. In the chaos that ensued, shots were exchanged and one police officer was killed when the leader of the group, Arthur Thistlewood, plunged him with a sword. Ten working men were arrested – four shoemakers, a few carpenters, a butcher and a tailor – and a cache of arms and ammunition was recovered, including pistols, muskets, carbines, broadswords, blunderbusses and stiletto knives. The others escaped, including Thistlewood, but were later arrested.

After a sensational trial, five of the men were publicly hanged and another five transported. But the architect of the plot had been absent during the raid, and now vanished into thin air. George Edwards had been Thistlewood's right-hand man. He had paid for the arms and ammunition. He had persuaded the rest of the group to plan the mass assassination. And, as it transpired at the trial, he was an *agent provocateur*, on the payroll of the government, who had whisked him off to Guernsey, before resettling him in South Africa under a new name. The whole affair had been engineered by the state to provoke fear and hysteria among the population at large, and to isolate and demoralise the radical wing of the reform movement in London.

Meanwhile, 400 miles away, the British state's men in Edinburgh and Glasgow were planning their own campaign of entrapment designed to decapitate the strongest, best organised and most militant working class movement anywhere in Europe.

### 'Lured out of their lairs'

By March 1820, the simmering political unrest in the west of Scotland was about to blow its lid. In three villages in Galloway, workers set fire to the mills. In Paisley, angry weavers torched another mill and attacked soldiers with stones. Ayrshire was ablaze with mass meetings and radical rallies.

Colonel Alexander Boswell, the commander of the Ayrshire Yeomanry, and Tory MP for a Devon seat, provided a stream of reports to the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, about the state of affairs in his area. His father James, the famous sidekick and biographer of Dr Samuel Johnson, had been a can-tankerous reactionary, whose poem *No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Empire of Love* was a celebration of the joys of bondage: 'The cheerful gang! – The negroes see; Perform the task of industry. Ev'n at their labour hear them sing, While time flies quick on downy wing.'

Boswell Junior seems to have inherited not just his father's flair for invective, but also his contempt for reform. He wrote of villages such as Newmiln and Galston in Ayrshire being 'contaminated' and 'poisoned' by the 'festering evil' of radicalism. And he warned that 'in all the villages where there are weavers of cotton goods, a large proportion are radicals'.

But the most dangerous centre of revolution anywhere in the empire was the densely packed city on the Clyde, with its flammable cocktail of Irish migrants with rebel hearts, Highlanders burned out of their homes and driven from their lands, and Lowland Scots steeped in the militant egalitarianism of the Covenanters.

On 18 March, the Glasgow Police Commander, Captain James Mitchell, wrote to the Home Secretary in London warning him of plans for an armed uprising:

'The Scottish radicals have been making preparations for some little time now for a general rising in Scotland and to this end they have kept in close communication with the disaffected in England. Their plan is to set up a Scottish Assembly or Parliament in Edinburgh, likewise similar assemblies are to be set up by the dis-

affected in England and Ireland. As far as can be gathered by our informants they are imbibed with the republican ideals that were preached by that odious band of disaffected called United Scotsmen, who, after their abortive attempt to overthrow Government in '97, it was generally accepted, had disappeared at the beginning of the century, but whose aim was also the destruction of the unity of our kingdoms.'

The message was based on detailed intelligence provided by spies who had infiltrated the central leadership of the radical movement in the west of Scotland, a 28-strong 'Committee for Organising a Provisional Government'. The body was due to meet in a few days' time, said Mitchell.

His information was accurate. Three days later, on the evening of Tuesday 21 March, the committee, made up of delegates from local radical groups, met in a tavern in the Gallowgate. One of those present, John King, was a shady character. He called himself a weaver, but according to observers, he 'had no conspicuous occupation', and sometimes used the name John Andrews. Just before 9 o'clock, he excused himself from the meeting with some vague excuse about other business elsewhere.

A few minutes later, a large body of police officers and soldiers, led by Glasgow magistrate Baillie James Hunter, smashed their way in and arrested everyone present. They seized some documents, though many were thrown in the fire and burned before they could be confiscated. The raid was kept secret from the press and the public.

A week later, on 29 March, the Glasgow Police Commander sent a further letter to Lord Sidmouth, urging the Home Secretary 'that action must be taken immediately to quench the treasonable ardours of the disaffected before they grow too strong'. He went on to report the successful rounding-up of the radical leadership, which he explained was 'due solely to the efforts of an informant who has served his Government well'.

He also reported a confession they had managed to extract from the leader of the group, who admitted to 'an audacious plot to sever the kingdom of Scotland from that of England and restore the ancient Scottish Parliament'. He continued:

'We know many of the vipers involved in this treasonable plot but I would say, indeed I would stake all on such a hazard that the disaffected are too weak and disorganised at this date to carry out their wicked intent. Thus my lord, if some

plan were conceived by which the disaffected could be lured out of their lairs – being made to think that the day of “liberty” had come – we would catch them abroad and undefended. The military in North Britain is more than adequate to round up such vermin. Our intelligence leads us to believe that few know of the apprehension of the leaders in this odious treasonable plot and so no suspicion would attach itself to the plan at all. I have given instructions to our informants on these lines – all good men, and true to our principles, who at tremendous hazard to their life and limb, have infiltrated the disaffected’s committees and organisation, and in a few days you shall judge the results. It would, by the severity of their punishment which must be harsh – quench all thought of patriotic pride and Radical feeling among the disaffected.’

A few days later the disaffected were lured out of their lairs. In the dead of night, sometime between Saturday 1 and Sunday 2 April, an *Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* appeared on hoardings, gable ends and even church walls across Glasgow, Paisley, Kilmarnock, Girvan, Strathaven, Hamilton, Airdrie, Kilsyth and Dumbarton. It purported to come from the ‘Committee of Reformation for Forming a Provisional Government’, and called for nothing less than violent revolution, urging not just the people to rise up, but for the army to join them.

The language of the proclamation was clumsy and tedious, in contrast to the highly literate pamphlets and speeches that were the hallmarks of the radical movement in Scotland during these years. It lacked any clear demands, making do with vague, hasty demands for ‘just and equal laws’. Tellingly, it threatened the ‘severest punishment’ to anyone who violated private property; hardly the pressing issue for desperate radicals with no private property to speak of.

Again rather oddly, rather than appeal to the spirit of Wallace and Bruce, which was almost obligatory for radical gatherings and publications in Scotland, it invoked the *Magna Carta* – the charter of rights agreed by King John and his nobles half a millennium before Britain even existed. The fact that it was addressed to the people of Great Britain and Ireland seems to imply that the proclamation had been posted across both islands, and that a simultaneous rising had been declared across Scotland, England and Ireland.

None of it proves conclusively that the address was a forgery. But research conducted at the time by journalist and pro-reform activist Peter MacKenzie,

and augmented by the work of Ellis and Mac a' Ghobhainn, seems to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the proclamation was the work of a group of *agents provocateurs* run by Captain Mitchell and Captain James Brown, the Superintendent of Edinburgh City Police, who in turn reported to the Lord Advocate. The four spies have been identified as John King; Duncan Turner, a tinsmith; John Craig, a weaver from Anderston; and Thomas or Robert Lees, a solicitor from England, and unofficially credited as the author of the proclamation.

It was an audacious plan to incite a premature, chaotic and leaderless rising, solely to draw out and isolate the most radical elements of the working class. With Habeas Corpus long since suspended, the militants could be rounded up and interned. Some at least could be prosecuted for High Treason, and a few executions would surely extinguish the fire in the belly of even the most ardent radical?

That Sunday morning in Glasgow, the 1st Rifle Brigade set up cannons on every bridge across the Clyde to stop any mobilisation of insurgents into the city centre. At the same time, the volunteer Glasgow Yeomanry – commanded by Samuel Hunter, the 18-stone editor of the pro-Tory Glasgow Herald – surrounded and barricaded the city's treasury, the Royal Bank in Queen Street. Just after noon, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army in Scotland, Sir Thomas Bradford, set off on horseback from Edinburgh Castle along with his entire General Staff, protected by a 60-strong squadron of the 10th Hussars.

Seven miles away in Paisley, radicals gathered with the few bits and pieces of ammunition they could muster, to await instructions from the Provisional Government in Glasgow. All across west-central Scotland, fragmented bands of radicals gathered in their hundreds, in town and village squares, waiting for messengers that never came.

For those who had set the trap, everything was going to plan. But those pulling the strings from on high had underestimated the hunger for radical change and were about to discover the law of unintended consequences. Events began to escalate beyond their control, rapidly. The proclamation may have been a fake, but there was nothing artificial about the general strike that it incited. Journalists and historians would later pore over the text of the proclamation, searching for clues that might help them piece together its origins. But the mass of people had seen only the bold headlines and the rousing call to action – 'Liberty or Death!'

By Monday morning, the whole of west and central Scotland – a heavily populated area covering almost 3,000 square miles – had ground to a standstill. The press estimated that 60,000 workers joined the general strike, though the real figure was probably higher still. Upwards of 5,000 troops – all the regulars available in Scotland – were flooded into Glasgow, Paisley and other strongholds of the rebellion, while English regiments were mobilised north to defend Edinburgh. Major-General Bradford sent a message to London urgently requesting 10,000 flintlock firearms and half a million ball cartridges.

The atmosphere of dread was expressed tersely in an anonymous eye-witness report sent to the Duke of Hamilton from ‘A British Subject’, who is now thought to be the eminent geographer and journalist James MacQueen. Under the heading *Events of the Late Rebellion in the West of Scotland*, the letter describes how radical leaders immediately denounced the proclamation as an effort by ‘Government spies to trap the people’. Nonetheless, on the first day of the strike, ‘almost all the labouring population abandoned their work’. Horrified by this colossal mutiny, panic-stricken employers, fearing retribution, sent home those few who had run the gauntlet of the picket lines, and locked up their factories.

According to MacQueen, ‘the manufacture of arms was continued by night and by day with astonishing celerity and perseverance’. Pikes, pistols, muskets, catapults, lead-weighted darts and ammunition were being churned out in huge quantities in makeshift workshops across the Lowlands. Raiding parties roamed the countryside, scouring farm buildings for firearms.

Meanwhile, radicals were preparing to defend themselves against a bloodbath. ‘Drilling in large bodies at all hours was open, extensive and undisguised. Parties of many hundreds drilled during the day in the Green of Glasgow, at Dalmarnock Ford, at the Point House, at Tollcross, and many other places without interruption.’ MacQueen goes on to describe how respectable families fled Paisley and other towns in terror, as ‘workmen openly and boldly declared to their masters that they would work no more till the Government of the country was changed.’

The crisis provided a glimpse of the potential power of the fledgling Scottish working class. Janet Hamilton, who became a prominent working class poet during the Victorian era, was 25 years old at the time, and living in Monklands. In her *Reminiscences of the Radical Time in 1819–20*, she describes how local radicals advised that ‘when the rising took place, every man should help himself as best he could to the possessions of the rich and that property of every kind was no

longer to be monopolised by the few but divided among the many'. She also underlined the extraordinarily advanced cultural level of the west of Scotland weavers – 'the most intelligent, enlightened and by far the most independent body of working men in the Kingdom'. In her own local library, founded by weavers, 'half the books were works of divinity, then biography, travel, voyages, and several sets of the British Essayist, a fair proportion of history and geography'.

For the Tory Government in London, and their henchmen in Edinburgh and Glasgow, the existence of this huge concentration of highly literate and politically militant workers represented a mortal danger to the status quo. Thus, a public meeting of 'prominent citizens' was called to 'consider what steps it may be proper to take regarding the future employment of those who have obeyed the command of a treasonable confederacy to desist from their normal labour'. Addressing the meeting, the commander of the Glasgow Yeomanry warned that 'all the lower classes are contaminated and ready to enter any plan of rebellion'.

The gathering agreed on a declaration, signed by 155 employers, that they would 'withdraw our employment and support from every person who may have lent, or who in the future shall lend, his aid to the purpose of their wicked and treasonable conspiracy'. It resolved not to employ anyone who took part in the strike – a bellicose piece of rhetoric which would have been to impossible to implement without sacking almost every weaver in the west of Scotland.

But key government figures had other tricks up their sleeves. As Tom Johnston notes in his *History of the Working Classes in Scotland*, 'The Government was in no hurry; the troops could bide their time until a Radical army of ill-armed, ill-disciplined rebel weavers had been gathered, and then, in one great carnage, would be taught a lesson that would serve to humiliate two or three generations of the discontented common folk.'

### **The Battle of Bonnymuir**

Meanwhile, the state agents who had penetrated the inner circle of the radical movement worked in the background, almost certainly under orders from the Home Secretary in Westminster, to bring it all to a head.

John King reported to the authorities that the radicals were planning two simultaneous armed offensives on Wednesday 5 April. One unit would lay siege to Glasgow city centre; the other would attempt to seize control of Carron Iron Works in Falkirk, the biggest heavy industrial factory in Europe, with

a 2,000-strong workforce. The ironworks specialised in manufacturing firearms and ammunition, and was famed for developing the pioneering short naval cannon, which became known as the 'carronade'.

King, along with his tightly-knit band of spies, then set about provoking the raids. His right-hand man Duncan Turner met with the radical committee in the north of Glasgow and told them an insurrection was now underway in England and in other parts of Scotland. Claiming to speak for the Provisional Government, he reported that the workforce of Carron Iron Works had joined the strike, and seized several cannons and a hoard of other arms. He assured the group that if they marched on the factory 'there was no doubt whatsoever of their success'.

But Dougald Smith, the leader of the radical forces in the area, was adamant that the group was too small to carry out such a mission. When the promised reinforcements from Anderston, on the western edge of Glasgow, failed to appear, he outright refused to take command of the operation. After a heated debate, the men split into groups. One stayed with Smith, while a small faction of around 30 – commanded by Andrew Hardie from Castle Street, near the site of Glasgow Royal Infirmary – set off on the 35-mile hike to Falkirk.

*En route*, they passed through the village of Condorrat, now part of Cumbernauld new town. Before they arrived, John King had appeared at the door of two brothers in the town, John and Robert Baird, to persuade them to join the attack on Carron Iron Works. To gain entry, he had shown them a headed manuscript from the Provisional Government of Scotland, apparently signed by a number of well-known radicals. He told them that a successful rising had already taken place in England, and that the Provisional Government had robust intelligence that the magistrates of Glasgow and other parts of Scotland were ready to support an insurrection in Scotland. Even the military were ready to switch sides. By way of icing on the cake, he even produced a letter confirming these facts from the 'Secret Committee of the Provisional Government'.

Robert Baird, a married man, was suspicious. But his brother John, a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars and the key leader of the radical movement in the area, was fired up. He agreed to raise a group of local activists to join Andrew Hardie's men in a march on the Carron Iron Works.

It was, of course, a trap. As they headed east to Falkirk, two troops of light cavalry were riding south from Perth. One took position inside the Carron

Iron Works, while the other, the 10th Hussars, commanded by Lieutenant Ellis Hodgson, teamed up with the Stirling Yeomanry to halt the insurgents in their tracks. They confronted each other on a desolate stretch of open moorland outside Falkirk.

On the spectrum of military conflict, the Battle of Bonnymuir was closer in scale to a 1970s Glasgow gang fight than to Stalingrad. The few dozen who marched under Baird and Hardie believed they were participating in a wholesale rising to overthrow the British state. In reality, the movement was without any central leadership. There was no strategy, no tactics, and no clear goal. It was a premature rebellion, doomed from its inception. The ragged band of exhausted, half-starving weavers, armed mainly with pikes, were no match for the professional cavalry.

They fought bravely, refusing repeated demands by Hodgson to surrender, and at one point charging down a hill straight towards the Hussars while cheering. But it was a kamikaze action. Had it been left to the Stirling Yeomanry, who by all accounts were thirsting for blood, they would in all probability have been massacred on the spot. But Lieutenant Hodgson seems to have been a humane man. Or perhaps he was under orders to bring back the leaders alive, to be tried for High Treason and hung from the gallows as a warning to any future would-be rebels, rather than be slaughtered on the battlefield as martyrs. Either way, there were no fatalities.

After a brief skirmish, 18 radicals were arrested, the rest escaping. When the prisoners arrived at Stirling Castle, John Baird made a short plea to the Fort-Major: 'Sir, if there is to be any severity exercised towards us, let it be on me. I am their leader, and have caused them being here. I hope that I alone may suffer.' He then asked for food and treatment for the wounded men.

According to Ellis and Mac a' Ghobhainn, when the news reached Glasgow, 'there was great excitement and the church bells were rung as if another Waterloo had been won. Public meetings were afterwards held by merchants and manufacturers, and resolutions adopted congratulating the Government and their success.' The Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, sent a letter of thanks to the Yeoman of Stirlingshire, and published an 'Extraordinary Bulletin' to all parts of the British empire to celebrate the fact that 'Our glorious constitution in Church and State, the envy of surrounding nations and the admiration of the world, is still to be inviolably preserved for all posterity.'

### ‘Scotland free or a desert’

Elsewhere there were sporadic shows of strength by armed groups of radicals. On the Wednesday night, as the Bonnymuir prisoners were being locked up in Stirling Castle, around 500 weavers armed with muskets, pikes and pistols gathered under a Saltire and a radical banner in the Bridgeton-Calton area. In Tollcross, men, women and children began to arm themselves after hearing that a radical army had defeated government troops at Bonnymuir. In the early hours of Thursday, after receiving a report that radicals planned to seize Dumbarton Castle, the Dunbartonshire Fencibles threw a cordon around the town of Duntocher, and arrested eight radical leaders.

In the absence of a cohesive leadership, rumours and misinformation spread like fireweed. According to one story, Marshall MacDonald – an ex-general in Napoleon’s army and the son of one of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s closest aides – had arrived on the Ayrshire coast with a shipload of arms and cash to support the rising. The day after the Bonnymuir arrests, a messenger arrived in the town of Strathaven, a weaving town steeped in radicalism, with a slightly different version of the rumour. James Shields brought information, supposedly from the Provisional Government, that George Kinloch, a radical laird living in exile in France, had returned to Scotland and set up camp on Cathkin Braes, to the south of Glasgow, with between 5,000 and 7,000 troops. Meanwhile, another army was said to be gathering on the Campsie Fells, to the north of the city.

Shields, by all accounts, had acted in good faith. Some historians, including Peter MacKenzie and the authors of *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820*, argue that he had been duped by John King. Others, including John Stevenson, a local radical activist who later penned his own personal account of events, dismissed suggestions that government agents played a role locally.

Whatever the circumstances, the news created a buzz amongst the radicals of the town. James Wilson was a 60-year-old grandfather, poet, clockmaker, tinsmith and doctor and, according to John Stevenson, ‘a man of much reading and reflection, his natural abilities placed him above mediocrity’. Wilson greeted the news from Shields with elation: ‘I am glad to hear that my countrymen are resolved to act like men. We are seeking nothing but the rights of our forefathers – liberty is not worth having if it’s not worth fighting for.’ That night his home was turned into a miniature pike-making factory.

But the women of the town were more sceptical, and by the following morn-

ing enthusiasm for the mission had dwindled. In *A True Narrative of the Radical Rising in Strathaven*, Stevenson wrote:

‘The night was dark and comfortless; we however succeeded in procuring a number of guns; and there was a good deal of bustle and confusion during the night. Mothers, with maternal solitude, were inquiring after their sons; wives were exhorting and entreating their husbands to return home. In short, the screams of women might occasionally be heard... Although our number at one time amounted to nearly one hundred, by the time the sun rose on morning of the 6th, we could scarcely muster twenty-five; the wetness of the night, the sagacious advice of friends, and the report that all was quiet in Glasgow, will account for the desertion of three quarters of our number; the rest of us, however, were firmly resolved to join the division which Shields positively assured us were to rendezvous on Cathkin that morning.’

The next morning a group of 25 men, with pikes, three guns and a broken sword brandished by James Wilson, marched towards the nearby towns of Kilbride and Maxwellton, hoping to raise reinforcements. They carried a banner which on one side carried the words ‘Strathaven Union Society’ and, on the other, ‘Scotland Free or a Desert’. But no new recruits were forthcoming. By this time, the stirring news of an army of thousands mustered on the Cathkin Braes was beginning to look like either a flight of fancy or disinformation.

As it became apparent that they had been misled, Wilson and others returned to Strathaven, but a dozen or so carried on, including John Stevenson and James Shields, hope prevailing over realism. After seeing for themselves the deserted hillside, they hid their weapons among the bracken and returned home, dejected. The last man to leave the scene was Shields, desperately apologetic, blaming himself for the debacle.

In contrast to Bonnymuir, there was no cavalry or yeomanry there to arrest the insurgents, a fact that lends some weight to John Stevenson’s argument that they had been victims of nothing more sinister than wishful thinking. Yet as he wrote in his memoirs, they returned home with a sense of dread:

‘We left the hill with fearful prognostics of the future. We knew well the vindictive disposition of the old monarchial governments, and that they rarely for-

give those who have the hardihood to rise in arms against their despotic proceedings; and while we were hurrying down the hill I felt a strong presentiment that some of us would expiate this on the scaffold.'

His 'presentiment' was well-founded. Fourteen of the Strathaven rebels were arrested that night, while the remainder fled the country. In all, 88 people across the west of Scotland would be charged in the next few days with the capital offence of High Treason, and hundreds more with lesser offences. Three would face the scaffold. Yet the rebels had killed no-one during the Radical War. Their firearms and pikes had been carried for defensive purposes. The influential pro-reform *Edinburgh Review* described the episode as 'a war of the rich against the poor – of the Government and soldiery against the people'.

The punishments were atrocious and disproportionate, and yet the greatest atrocity of all went unpunished. The incident began when a troop of soldiers from the Port Glasgow Militia was asked to remove five 'prominent Radical leaders' from the now overcrowded Paisley prison and escort them to Greenock Jail. As the regiment marched into the busy port town at 5 o'clock on Saturday 8 April, they were jeered by local bystanders. As the troops reached Cathcart Street in the town centre, a few stones were thrown from the sidelines. The soldiers responded with a volley of shots into the air, wounding a few protesters. But instead of dispersing, the crowd turned on the troops, pelting them with debris. Discipline went to hell, and the soldiers fired indiscriminately. Eight people were killed, including an 8-year-old boy and a 65-year-old man. Another 10 were seriously wounded, including a 65-year-old woman who had to have her leg amputated.

At 7 o'clock, an enraged horde marched on the heavily guarded prison, smashed open the wooden gates and released the five radicals, leaving the non-political prisoners locked up in their cells. Rumours now spread across Scotland that the radicals had captured Greenock. In the early hours of the morning, two troops of cavalry galloped into town, and a few hours later a steamboat packed with footsoldiers arrived from Glasgow. But all was quiet.

Across the west of Scotland, the state forces now went to town. In Glasgow alone, 100 radicals were arrested in dawn raids by the army, while others managed to flee. Although there were still a few splutters of resistance to come, it was all over bar the brutal recriminations.

### The summer of retribution

James Wilson was hanged on Wednesday 20 August outside the High Court of Glasgow, facing south across the River Clyde. A sullen, hostile assembly of over 20,000 had gathered in bright sunshine to witness the execution of the prisoner, who was dressed in a white suit trimmed with black. 'Did you ever see sic a crowd, Tammas?' he asked the nervous executioner, a 20-year-old medical student called Thomas Moore.

Wilson was now a hero of the working people. Before being condemned to death, he had told his judges:

'My gory head may in a few days fall upon the scaffold and be exposed as the head of traitor, but I appeal with confidence to posterity. When my countrymen will have exalted their voices in bold proclamation of the rights and dignity of humanity, and enforced their claim by the extermination of their oppressors, then, and not till then, will some future historian do my memory justice, then will my name and suffering be recorded in Scottish history...'

At his execution, leaflets were circulated, printed with the words, 'May the ghost of the butchered Wilson haunt the pillows of relentless jurors – Murder! Murder! Murder!' The cry was taken up by sections of the gathering as Wilson mounted the scaffold at 2.55pm. Amid scream and hisses, groups of cavalry charged the crowd, fearing attempts to liberate the condemned man.

The *Glasgow Chronicle* reported that 'Wilson was especially cheered when he came to the scaffold, and the sentiments of the mob showed that they regarded him in quite a different light from that of a traitor. Cries of 'he's died for his country' and 'he's murdered' were quite general.' After the hanging, Wilson's body lay for half an hour before it was beheaded by the executioner. 'This is the head of a traitor!' he roared, as was a customary part of the ritual fashion. But the crowd roared back, 'He is a martyr!'

Wilson's corpse was taken to the Cathedral and contemptuously thrown into a pauper's grave. But that night, his daughter and niece dug up the turf and carried his remains back for a proper burial in his beloved Strathaven.

Eighteen days later, at 1 o'clock on Friday 8 September, John Baird and Andrew Hardie, dressed in black, were taken in a horse-drawn hurdle from their cells in Stirling Castle to Broad Street. Along the way, women lined the streets

in tears. At the scaffold, both briefly addressed the 2,000-strong crowd, defending their role in 'the cause of truth and justice'. As in Glasgow, there were hisses and cries of 'Murder!'

Eighteen others had also been condemned to death, but feeling the heat from below, the authorities commuted their sentences to transportation to New South Wales. Hundreds more were jailed for lesser charges. Although the government had been given a fright, the objectives of the British state had been achieved. The radical workers' movement on Clydeside had been left decapitated and demoralised. The executions ushered in a decade of grim reaction.

Yet as with the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, or the 1930s Spanish Civil War, history would later honour the vanquished and shame the victors. Those who conspired to crush the radical weavers have long since been judged as backward bigots, defenders of an oppressive and decaying political system. In contrast, those who were sent to the scaffold are commemorated as the Nelson Mandelas of their day, placing their lives and their liberty on the line to overthrow tyranny.

Indeed, in 1832, an absolute pardon was granted to all those who had been transported for their part in the 1820 insurrection. By that time, only 10 could be traced; the others had either died or disappeared. Almost two centuries after their judicial murder, John Baird, Andrew Hardie and James Wilson are commemorated in marches and rallies, songs and poetry. As James Wilson prophesied, they were, ultimately, vindicated by posterity.

Their persecutors have become a footnote in history. The spies and *agents provocateurs* vanished into the mist. Lord Sidmouth died in 1844, a bitter opponent of Catholic Emancipation and an enemy even of the gutless 1832 Reform Act. In 1822, his associate, Lord Castlereagh, cut his own throat.