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PREVENTING REVOLUTION: CATO STREET, BONNYMUIR AND CATHKIN

John Gardner

Between May and September 1820, eight men were executed for High Treason in three locations around Britain: London, Glasgow and Stirling. On 1 May 1820, two shoemakers, a soldier, a butcher, and a carpenter were hanged and beheaded in London in front of a crowd of 100,000 people for taking part in the so-called Cato Street conspiracy; on 30 August a sixty-seven year old weaver was hanged and beheaded in Glasgow Green in front of 20,000 people for taking part in the Strathaven or Cathkin Insurrection; and on 8 September, in Stirling, two weavers were hanged and beheaded in front of several thousand people for taking part in what has been called the Battle of Bonnymuir. They were the last people to be publicly hanged and decapitated in the United Kingdom. They were also the last people to be executed for High Treason until the Easter rising of 1916, when fifteen were shot at Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin.

These executions have been seen as separate events in literary and historical criticism. Here, through examining poetry written about the rebellions, I argue that in 1820 these executions were viewed as being interrelated and were part of a crackdown on radical activity in England and Scotland, to be followed, as Marilyn Butler puts it, by “a curious period of relative stasis.”¹ I argue also that these rebellions were not entirely orchestrated by their victims, but instead that evidence points towards them being traps laid by agents of the British Government. Despite the tight timeframe within which the 1820 rebellions and executions occurred, the Scottish rebellions have previously been examined separately from the Cato Street conspiracy—largely because

¹ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries; English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), 173.

their stories have often been hijacked by critics concerned with promoting the notion of an independent Scotland. But here I want to reconnect the rebellions in Scotland and England, and argue that they were the result of a government initiative designed to discourage revolution at a time when it appeared to many that one was imminent.²



Fig. 1³

The Cato Street, Bonnymuir and Cathkin events followed the same format. In each, a piece of literature—a newspaper advert in the case of the Cato Street men and a printed address in the case of the Scottish ones—started each rebellion into motion. They were crushed swiftly and punishment was meted out in public, showing potential rebels the futility of rising against a well-organised and vigilant state. The victims were, as

² See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1979), 737.

³ I. R. Cruikshank, from *The Queen and the Magna Charta; or, the Thing that John Signed* (London: T. Dolby, 1820), 11.

Rene Girard writes regarding scapegoats, people who were “vulnerable and close at hand.”⁴

At the end of the war in 1815 a profound recession hit Britain. Demobilisation brought 200,000 men into the labour market, and cancelled orders for war goods increased the problem of unemployment, which had already risen.⁵ In Glasgow the real wages of weavers had fallen by “half between 1815 and 1818.”⁶ Even the ultra-loyalist Harriet Arbuthnot noted in her diary that in 1819 “10,000 able and willing workmen were starving in one town [Glasgow] for want of work, & every other manufacturing town suffering in a like degree.”⁷ Christopher Whatley writes that “by the end of 1819 what was virtually a state of open war existed between working-class communities and the authorities” in Glasgow.⁸

With the killings at St. Peter’s Field in Manchester on 16 August 1819 it appeared that peaceful protest was no longer possible. As John Gale Jones wrote: “the *time for Reform was past and the hour of Revolution come.*”⁹ That the time seemed ripe for a revolution was obvious not only to radicals like Gale Jones, but also loyalists, such as the Reverend Lionel Thomas Berguer, who wrote in a *Warning Letter to the Prince Regent*: “Things have reached their climax: but a REVOLUTION will be either prevented, or induced, according as the MIDDLE ranks bestir themselves during the REBELLION. If your dependence is placed upon your ARMY alone, for the suppression of a general insurrection, your expectations will be disappointed.”¹⁰

This is something that many radicals hoped for. Andrew Hardie, writing from his cell in Stirling Castle as he awaited execution, asserts

⁴ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Continuum, 2005), 2.

⁵ Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 47.

⁶ Christopher A. Whatley, “Labour in the Industrialising City” in *Glasgow: Beginnings to 1830*, ed. by T. M. Devine and Gordon Jackson (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 315.

⁷ *The Journal of Mrs. Arbuthnot*, ed. by Francis Bamford and the Duke of Wellington, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1950), I:139.

⁸ Christopher A. Whatley, *Scottish Society, 1707-1830: Beyond Jacobitism, Towards Industrialization* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2000), 316.

⁹ John Gale Jones, *The Republican* (London: Richard Carlile, 1822), vi, 138.

¹⁰ Lionel Thomas Berguer, *A Warning Letter to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, Intended Principally as a Call Upon the Middle Ranks, At this Important Crisis* (London: T. and J. Allman, 1819), 36.

that the commander of the hussars at Bonnymuir “would not allow one of his men to do us any harm, and actually kept off with his own sword some of the strokes that were aimed at us.”¹¹ On the other hand: “One of the yeomanry was so inhuman, after he had sabered one of the men, sufficient he thought to deprive him of life, as to try and trample him under his horse’s feet.”¹² Praising the regulars and demonizing the yeomanry (who generally came from the merchant classes and were often little more than wealthy men playing soldiers) was the dominant radical response to state violence. Samuel Bamford says much the same as Hardie when he writes about Peterloo that the “hussars, we have reason for supposing, gave but few wounds, and I am not aware that it has been shewn that one of those brave soldiers dishonoured his sword by using the edge of it.”¹³

Radical accounts of military outrages make sure that they always criticize their class enemies, the volunteer yeomanry, but not the regular soldier. The more militant radicals realised that revolution is only really possible if a sizeable percentage of the regular army can be persuaded to recognize their commonality with the revolutionaries. Hence the insistence of many radicals in the aftermath of Peterloo on making a clear moral distinction between the behaviour of the hussars and the behaviour of the yeomanry, who had even bought their own uniforms and arms. In his *Mask of Anarchy* Shelley marks the difference between the “hired murderers” (the yeomanry), “And the bold true warriors, / Who have hugged danger in the wars.”¹⁴ The hussars, it is optimistically predicted, will be “Ashamed of such base company” (that is, ashamed of their association with the yeomanry), and will side with the people: “turn to those who would be free.” The slaughter that we have previously witnessed—“Let them ride among you there; / Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew”—will now serve as an “inspiration” to the people and the hussars, who will join together to overthrow the state and its “hired

¹¹ Peter MacKenzie, *An Exposure of the Spy System Pursued in Glasgow, During the Years 1816-17-18-19 and 20, with Copies of the Original Letters of Andrew Hardie, who was Executed for High Treason at Stirling, in September 1820* (Glasgow: Muir, 1833), 212.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³ Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 153

¹⁴ P. B. Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy* (London: Moxon, 1832), lxxxix.

murderers.”¹⁵ However, in “Radical Bodies, Gae Hame,” by John Goldie, Shelley’s idealized notion that the army will side with the people is ridiculed:

A radical’s safest at hame, at hame.
 On Cathkin your camp was nae doubt rather damp, [...]
 Ye expeckit, nae doubt, at your first turn out,
 That your faes would a’ shrink at your name, your name,
 That our sodgers would join, for to strengthen your line,
 But my conscience! You’re rather mista’en, mista’en.
 The cavalry’s comin’, gae hame, gae hame,
 An’ a rifleman taks a guid aim, guid aim,
 An’ if ance he should mak a bull’s eye o’ your back,
 Ye needna care muckle for hame, for hame.¹⁶

Goldie, a former Ayr Academy pupil who joined the yeomanry in 1819, at a time when he was in charge of a china and stoneware shop in Paisley,¹⁷ follows the loyalist line without betraying his Scots identity. Here, after the Cathkin event, Goldie tells radicals to stay at “hame” or else one of the yeomanry cavalry riflemen will “mak a bull’s eye o’ your back,” suggesting that they would shoot radicals in the back as they ran away. Nevertheless, as Shelley would point out, Goldie, as a member of the yeomanry, was not a “bold, true” “sodger” who had “hugged dangers in the war.” But, conflating the reformers with Napoleon’s army, Goldie prescribes “Wellington pills” for “rebels and foes.”

This image can be found in radical literature too. Cruikshank and Hone take on the persona of a yeomanry soldier like Goldie in the 1819 pamphlet *The Man in the Moon*, which also prescribes “STEEL LOZENGES” to be rammed down the throats of reformers (Fig. 2). In “Sharp Pikes and Radical Clegs” Goldie again calls for violence against radical reformers using the same image as before:

Their orator leaders turnt out rather shy,
 An’ they thocht it was best to let sleepin’ dogs lie;
 For they didna much relish the leuks o’ the chiels
 Wha were ready to scatter some Wellington pills,
 Mang their sharp pikes, &c.

Success to each Briton wha fearlessly rose,
 To defend freedom’s birth-place frae rebels an’ foes,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John Goldie, *Poems and Songs* (Ayr: printed at the Courier Office, 1822), 107.

¹⁷ James Paterson, *Contemporaries of Burns and the Recent Poets of Ayrshire* (Edinburgh: Paton, Carver & Gilder, 1840), 214.

Wi their sharp pikes, &c. [...]

An' may ilk trait'rous chiels wha rebellion wad breed,

Get a prog in the guts, an' a skelp on the head.¹⁸

Here the radicals are called “clegs”—Scots for horse-fly; they are a nuisance who should, again, be given “Wellington pills,” as well as a “prog in the guts” and a “skelp” on the head. It seems that violence was expected after Peterloo, with loyalists worrying that the regular army would perhaps join with the radicals, and radicals hoping for the same thing. To prevent a revolution it appears that the Home Office decided to lure out the more violent revolutionary radicals.



STEEL LOZENGES

will stop their pain,

And set the Constitution

right again.

Fig. 2¹⁹

To demonstrate how the Cato Street, Bonnymuir and Cathkin rebellions are linked, it is necessary to briefly retell their narratives. The Cato Street conspiracy was scripted by people working for the Home

¹⁸ John Goldie, “Sharp Pikes and Radical Clegs,” *Poems and Songs*, 100.

¹⁹ George Cruikshank, “Steel Lozenges,” from *The Man in the Moon* (London: William Hone, 1819).

Office, headed by Lord Sidmouth the Home Secretary and leader of the British spy system.²⁰ As Edward Vallance notes: "Having squashed the mass platform, the government now saw an opportunity to flush out ultra-radical insurrectionists."²¹ Although the event was organised by Home Office agents, Arthur Thistlewood, leader of the approximately twenty men who made up his band, was a true revolutionary who had worked towards encouraging a French invasion of Britain during the war. Supposedly hatched by a few ill-educated and half-starved men, the plot to murder the Cabinet at a dinner in the house of Lord Harrowby never stood any chance of success. The men were trapped through the use of government spies who had infiltrated Thistlewood's gang, and in particular one called George Edwards, who took Thistlewood a copy of the *New Times* on 22 February 1820. In its "Fashionable Mirror" column, the newspaper briefly announced that: "The Earl of HARROBY gives a Grand Cabinet dinner tomorrow at his house in Grosvenor Square." This is as much as any plotters would need to know, giving details of the company, the time and the place. The Cabinet dinner was a trap, and, tellingly, was only announced in the *New Times*, which was edited by one of the government's most energetic propagandists, Dr. John Stoddart, rather than in all of the major papers, as was customary.²² In file HO 42/199, held at Kew Public Records Office, we can read Edwards's detailed daily reports to Sidmouth's under-secretary, Henry Hobhouse, where he states how he entrapped the conspirators: "I went to look at the *New Times* at the office in Fleet St. and then to the Room found them Hall Thistlewood Ings, Brunt Tidd and Bradburn."²³ After seeing Stoddart's paper Thistlewood and his men put a plan into action to murder the Cabinet at dinner. However, just as they gathered in a loft in Cato Street, waiting to go to Harrowby's, they were surprised by the authorities. In the struggle that ensued a policeman, Richard Smithers, was fatally stabbed by Thistlewood. The men were captured, tried for

²⁰ See John Stanhope, *The Cato Street Conspiracy* (London: Cape, 1962); John Gardner, *Poetry and Popular Protest; Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²¹ Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain* (London: Little Brown, 2009), 344.

²² John Stoddart had been editor of *The Times* until he was sacked in 1816.

²³ HO 42/199, f622. The office of the *New Times* in Fleet Street was demolished by a mob sympathetic to Queen Caroline on 11 November 1820. See "Sylvanus Urban," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 90:2 (London: John Nichols): 462.

High Treason, and found guilty, with five being selected for public execution, and another five for transportation.

The Scottish “rebellions” were sparked by an event that occurred a month after the Cato Street arrests. Over the night of Saturday 1 April an “Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain & Ireland” appeared pasted to walls in a twenty-mile radius around Glasgow, purporting to be from “the Committee of Organization for forming a Provisional Government.”²⁴ The Address tells people “to take up ARMS for the redress of our *Common Grievances*.” It demands “Equality of rights” and a general strike. The authors call on soldiers to join them “and support the laudable efforts which we are about to make to replace to Britons those rights consecrated to them by Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights.”²⁵ There is nothing particularly Scottish about this address, except for its place of publication. The Glasgow Magistrates’ reply, released on 4 April, offered a three hundred pound reward for information that would “APPREHEND, or cause to be DISCOVERED AND APPREHENDED, those guilty of this OVERT ACT of HIGH TREASON, by printing, publishing and issuing the said Revolutionary and Treasonable Address.”²⁶ The fonts and language used in this reply are so strikingly similar to the “Address” that one would think that they came from the same printer. Alexander Richmond, who had been a government spy, suggests that the Address might have been produced by someone by the name of “Franklin, *alias* Fletcher” who was “supposed to have been connected with government” and may have “induced a few ignorant, foolish men (in reality the dupes of the others) to commit overt acts.”²⁷ The Address was effective: around 50-60,000 people—mainly weavers from Glasgow and Paisley—went on strike.²⁸ It also encouraged some of the more militant radicals to arm themselves and attempt rebellion.

On 4 April around twenty-five men headed by Andrew Hardie, an unemployed weaver, marched from Glasgow to Condorrat. Here they met

²⁴ *Edinburgh Annual Register for 1820*, in *Edinburgh Annual Register for 1810-1823*, 19 vols (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1823), 13 (1): 326.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

²⁷ Alex. B. Richmond, *Narrative of the Condition of the Manufacturing Population; and the Proceedings of Government which Led to the State Trials in Scotland* (London: James Swan, 1825), 186.

²⁸ R. A. Cage, *The Working Class in Glasgow, 1750-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 102.

John Baird, a weaver who had fought at Waterloo, and a John Andrews who said that he would lead them towards the Carron Iron works where they would secure arms. This John Andrews was in fact John King, a government *agent provocateur*. King presented the group with a piece of paper saying that he was from the “Provisional Government for Scotland in Glasgow.”²⁹ He then left Baird and Hardie in command of thirty-five men to seize the arms. What they didn’t know was that a troop of the 80th Regiment of Foot were already at the Carron works anticipating their arrival. On 5 April, near Bonnybridge, the men again met King who now instructed them to march onto the empty Bonnymuir. This barely armed group, with reportedly only five muskets, two pistols, and eighteen pikes among them, were then intercepted by a troop of the 10th Hussars and the Stirlingshire Yeomanry Cavalry—which had been formed in 1798 at the time of the invasion threat.³⁰ The skirmish that ensued resulted in the death of a horse and the capture of the men. Baird and Hardie were tried for High Treason and sentenced to be hanged and beheaded.

The Address of 1 April also found its way to Strathaven, which is around sixteen miles from Glasgow. On 6 April, a 67 year-old weaver, James Wilson, set out with around fifteen men to join with a radical army that was reported to be in Glasgow.³¹ The men carried some small arms and a banner saying “Strathaven Union Society, 1819” on one side and “Scotland Free or a Desert” on the other.³² They got as far as Cathkin, which is about five miles from Glasgow. But, hearing that there was no army of radicals to meet with, went home. Nevertheless the elderly Wilson, who had the reputation of being an active radical in the 1790s, was soon arrested. When captured he “claimed he had been coerced” into the action. In a much-disputed “Dying Declaration” Wilson is said to have written: “I refused to go; but they threatened to blow my brains out if I did not accompany them [...] I indignantly reject that imputation that I committed high treason.” He also said “I die a true patriot for the cause of freedom for my poor country, and I hope that my countrymen will still

²⁹ Peter MacKenzie, 107.

³⁰ *Monthly Magazine; or, British Register*, 49 (London: Shackell, 1820): 368.

³¹ *Trials for High Treason in Scotland, Under a Special Commission, Held at Stirling, Glasgow, Paisley, Dumbarton and in the Year 1820*, 3 Vols. (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1825), II: 305.

³² *Edinburgh Annual Register*, as in n. 24 above, 231.

continue to see the necessity of Reform.”³³ The validity of this document has been fiercely contested. In *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820*, Peter Berresford Ellis and Seumas Mac a’ Ghobhainn claim that the document is a fake and suggest that it was produced by Peter MacKenzie for his book, *An Exposure of the Spy System Pursued in Glasgow* “to add weight to his version of the rising.”³⁴ But there is no evidence put forward to justify this belief. Instead of evidence the authors assert forgery because they were unable find any documentary evidence to support the validity of Wilson’s “Dying Declaration.” Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn write:

In February, 1821, the notes taken by the shorthand writers at the trials were, indeed returned from London to the Crown Agent in Edinburgh and it was agreed that an edited version of the trials should be published. [...] This version of the trials was published in three volumes in 1825 [...] Despite careful research by the authors (including questionnaires to the major libraries and record offices) assurances were given that the 1825 volumes relating to the trials did not exist or were not catalogued.³⁵

In fact, two accounts of Wilson’s trial do exist, and both can be found in Scotland. Bound into a collection of “Glasgow Pamphlets” held in Special Collections at the University of Glasgow Library, there is a transcript of Wilson’s trial taken by John Graham that was published as a pamphlet in 1820.³⁶ Furthermore, the three volume version of the trials that Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn searched for can now be found in a number of libraries including Aberdeen University Library. These transcripts include witness statements that corroborate Wilson’s “Dying Declaration.”³⁷ A witness called Matthew Rownie (Rony in the account by John Graham) said: “I opened the door, and saw James Wilson coming

³³ James Wilson, “The Dying Declaration of James Wilson. (Written by Himself),” in Peter MacKenzie, *Reminiscences of Glasgow and the West of Scotland* (Glasgow: Tweed, 1865), 177-178.

³⁴ Peter Beresford Ellis and Seumas Mac a’ Ghobhainn, *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820* (London: Pluto, 1989), 270-271.

³⁵ Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn, 267.

³⁶ John Graham, *The Trial of James Wilson, Convicted of High Treason Before the Special Commission of Oyer and Terminer, Held at Glasgow, July, 1820; with the Proceedings in the Case of the Other Prisoners; and an Account of Wilson’s Execution* (Glasgow: Graham, 1820).

³⁷ C. J. Green, *Trials for High Treason, in Scotland, Under a Special Commission, Held at Stirling, Glasgow, Dumbarton, Paisley, and Ayr, In the Year 1820*. 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1825).

to the door, and he said, 'I am not well to-day,' and there was a man behind the door with a gun, and he said 'Wilson, no excuses will do to-day, and if you do not rise and come along with us, I will blow your brains out.'" ³⁸ The prosecution lawyer objected to this statement and Rownie was removed from court. He was later re-admitted and went on to state that he later spoke with Wilson on the road to Cathkin, where he said to him: "'Jem. This is a bad job you have in hand to-day.'" 'Yes,' says he, 'I know it is; but I cannot help it now. [...] As soon as I can,' says he, 'I will make my escape.'" ³⁹ Wilson's sister, Mrs. Barr, who lived under the same roof but through the wall from her brother, also claimed that he had been forced to take part in the march: "for him refusing to go with them; they swore they would set fire to the house, and burn the b—'s house." ⁴⁰ Summing up, the Judge, who baldly led the jury to a guilty verdict, dismissed what Barr had said. ⁴¹ The jury took two hours to find Wilson guilty, and, although they recommended him to mercy, he was sentenced to death on 24 July.

I have told these stories together because of their similarities: all three events happened within a couple of months; the same economic factors drove the men who took part in each of them; each involved the use of provocative texts to instigate the rebellions; in each case there were contemporary suggestions that government spies acted as *agents provocateurs*; each rebellion was quickly detected and crushed; and, finally, there were public executions to warn the general population away from revolt. Nevertheless, since 1820, these events have been viewed separately. In recent years there has been some work done on the Cato Street conspiracy and its relationship with the spy system and contemporary poetry. ⁴² But as Victor Gatrell noted, "Historians have given astonishingly little attention to the Scots." ⁴³

Gordon Pentland, however, points out that politicians have made use of the Scottish rebellions for their own ends. Gil Paterson, a former Scottish National Party Member of the Scottish Parliament for Central Scotland, moved, on 5 September 2001, that the Scottish "Parliament

³⁸ Green, p. 226.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁴⁰ Green, p. 235.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 372.

⁴² Cf. Gardner, *Poetry and Popular Protest*, as in n. 20 above.

⁴³ V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree; Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 299.

recognizes the sacrifice of the three 1820 martyrs [...] who were hanged and beheaded in the 1820 rising which fought for social and economic justice, workers' rights and an independent Scottish Parliament." He went on to say "that the history of their struggle should be included in the education curriculum."⁴⁴ Patterson's knowledge of the events was likely gained from Ellis's and Mac a' Ghobhainn's *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820*, first published in 1970. In the foreword to the book Hugh MacDairmid makes the nationalist agenda of the authors' approach explicit. MacDairmid begins by saying that the book is "a preliminary study into the growth of Scottish national radicalism" before asserting "that there are no two adjacent peoples in the world more utterly and unalterably different than the Scots and the English is fully borne out by this book."⁴⁵ In his introduction to a new edition in 1989 Ellis writes that "One of the reasons that we felt obvious efforts had been made to 'edit' the events from Scottish history was the fact that the rising contained a national content, for it was the intention of the radicals to establish an independent Scottish Parliament—an objective that was unacceptable to the Establishment and its historians."⁴⁶

Writing in an influential, but unpublished, Ph.D thesis, William N. Roach finds the Scottish rebellions pitiful: "When the radicals did resort to arms their efforts were futile and pathetic. The risings which took place in Glasgow and Strathaven had never any chance of achieving anything so haphazard was their whole organization."⁴⁷ However, in common with Ellis and Mac a' Ghobhainn, Roach uses lack of supporting documentary evidence to clinch his analysis, as he, unlike them, discounts the use of paid spies in Scotland. In 1832 Peter MacKenzie had written that the government actually took into its employment wretches, we cannot call them *men*, answering to the names of Oliver, Edwards, Castles, and Richmond, besides many others of lesser note, to act as *spies* among the people—to incite the people, in various important districts of the country, to acts of sedition, insurrection, or open hostility against the government, and

⁴⁴ Gordon Pentland, "'Betrayed by Infamous Spies'? The Commemoration of Scotland's 'Radical War' of 1820," *Past and Present* 201:1 (2008): 141-173 (p. 141).

⁴⁵ Ellis and Mac a' Ghobhainn, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Ellis and Mac a' Ghobhainn, p. 1.

⁴⁷ William N. Roach, "Reform Movements in Scotland from 1815 to 1822 with Particular Reference to the Events in the West of Scotland" (unpub. PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1970), 223.

thereby enable the government to impose on the fears or credulity of the nation, and in that way to parry off the loud and urgent demands then made for Parliamentary Reform.⁴⁸

Finding no evidence in official records to support MacKenzie's claims, Roach asserts that "it is probably wise to reject everything that MacKenzie wrote except when [...] he had first hand knowledge of events."⁴⁹ The lack of archival evidence showing that spies and *agents provocateurs* operated in Scotland in 1820 has encouraged critics such as Roach to put the actions of the rebels down as quixotic fantasies: "Hardie, Baird and Wilson were the victims not of a spy system but of inefficiency and folly."⁵⁰

Partly following Roach's findings, Christopher Whatley writes of the rebellions that "belief that it was simply the work of *agents provocateurs* however, has been soundly refuted and finds no substantial evidence in its support."⁵¹ But, he nevertheless concedes that there was a spy system: "Spies and informers appointed on the instruction of the Lord Advocate, Sir William Rae, and Lord Sidmouth ensured that the authorities were invariably one step ahead of those radicals who were plotting insurrection."⁵² Although Gordon Pentland concedes that the English Cato street men were set up,⁵³ he, like Roach, sees the Scottish rebellions as being genuine but "abortive,"⁵⁴ and in order to arrive at this analysis discounts the use of spies and *agent provocateurs*. Like Roach, Pentland cites a lack of material evidence as reason for supposing that there was no spy system, saying that if there were spies then it is surprising that they did not leave "any trace in the Home Office records or in Sidmouth's papers. Other spies—Oliver, Castle, Edwards—did leave documentation, which the government made a point of preserving."⁵⁵

However documents relating to those figures were only preserved after these spies were named in court trials and in the House of Commons. The spies at work in Scotland did not achieve public notice, whereas Oliver and Castle were exposed as spies at the trial of the

⁴⁸ Peter MacKenzie, 5.

⁴⁹ Roach, xii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵¹ Whatley, *Scottish Society*, 309.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 318.

⁵³ Gordon Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union: Popular Politics in Scotland, 1815-1820* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 103.

organisers of the Spa Fields meeting in 1817. Edwards, the most prominent agent among the Cato Street men, even attracted the attention of writers like Charles Lamb, and public figures, such as twice Lord Mayor of London, Matthew Wood who had said in the House of Commons that “he could safely pledge himself to prove by indisputable evidence that Edwards was the sole plotter and founder of the Cato-street conspiracy.”⁵⁶ On the other hand Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn argue that there was an active spy system that had been used to entrap the Scottish radicals and find the lack of supporting evidence entirely plausible:

The facts of the spy system were unsavory and the Tories leaned over backwards in order to cover up the matter. Many documents and letters concerning the affair disappeared and, as shown in previous chapters, records and documents, especially those appertaining to the trial, have completely vanished.⁵⁷

The reason that Scots spies are missing from the archives might well be due to their names being unknown to the public and therefore there was no compelling reason to record their existence. Contemporary writing suggests that there was a wide-spread belief that spies were involved in each of the rebellions. These writings also say little about the revolts being in the pursuit of an independent Scotland. Instead they are concerned with conditions in Britain regarding the economy, parliamentary representation, state violence, and the use of spies. By taking a British approach the question becomes: if spies were used by the government to foment a rebellion in London, then why not use them for similar set-ups in North Britain? These rebellions took the heat out of revolutionary radicalism by showing the public both the weakness of radical organizations, and just how ruthless the Government’s response to rebellion would be with the execution of eight scapegoats.

Although no one has yet found evidence in government archives that links the Scottish rebellions to the British spy system, poetry of the period insists on it. Andrew Hardie turned to poetry while awaiting his execution for High Treason in prison. In “Bonnymuir” Hardie writes that it was John King, the Government agent who had instructed and entrapped him at Bonnymuir: “Him we saw who had us sent, and on the cause he still was bent, / In one short hour I will you meet, with twenty men, equipped,

⁵⁶ *Parliamentary Debates ... New Series*, 1 (London: Hansard, 1820), 258.

⁵⁷ Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn, 287.

complete.”⁵⁸ Here Hardie asserts that King had sent him to Bonnymuir and promised to meet him there with extra men. However, when he and the others got there, he attests: “With anxious eyes, we looked in vain to see this hero and his train.” Hardie unequivocally states that King set him up. In “Lines Written in a Certain Bridewell, by a State Prisoner, in the Month of April,” by Alexander Rodger, a weaver cleared of High Treason, the repressive moment of 1820 is captured:

Pent up within this horrid cell,
 How heaves my breast with anger’s swell!

 But what’s the reason I’m confined?
 Nae reason, troth, can be assigned,
 Unless it be, I chance to differ
 Frae them wha will that I should suffer,
 And that my views o’ politics
 Accord not wi some statesman’s tricks;⁵⁹

 Under the horrid charge o’ treason?
 As I was used—nor only I,
 But scores o’ mole-blind fools forby,
 Wha couldna see, they were sae poor,
 The beauties of the scarlet w-----e;
 Wha never bowed the knee in homage
 Unto the beast, nor yet his image—
 Wha never did his mark receive,
 Nor did his lying tales believe—
 Wha never chimed in wi’ the custom
 O’ praising up a rotten system,⁶⁰

Like Hardie, Rodger insists that Sidmouth’s “tricks” are responsible for his incarceration. Associating Sidmouth with the devil, Rodger is adamant that he has been chosen for entrapment because he “never bowed the knee in homage” to “the beast” and would never “his mark receive.”

Poetry of the period is infused with paranoia regarding traps and spies. In “The Rising,” Rodger is explicit on the matter regarding on the Scottish Rebellions:

She called on her Reynolds, so famous for murder,

⁵⁸ Andrew Hardie, “Bonnymuir.” Reproduced in Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn, 341.

⁵⁹ Alexander Rodger, *Poems and Songs Humorous, Serious, and Satirical* (Paisley: Gardner, 1901), 195-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

Her Oliver, Castle, and Richmond, most dear:
 And dubbing them knight of the Spy's noble order,
 Bestowed the insignia they henceforth should wear.

Hence, nothing was heard of but plots and sedition,
 High Treason, rebellion, and blasphemy wild,
 Because that the people had dared to petition
 In plain honest language, firm, manly and mild.

The laws were suspended—the prisons were glutted,
 Indictments preferred, and Juries enclosed;
 But mark! In her own wicked efforts outwitted—
 Corruption at once is defeated—exposed!

For truth must prevail over falsehood and error,
 In spite of the Devil, Corruption and Spies; [...]⁶¹

In this poem the Britishness of the named spies is apparent: Reynolds, the United Irishman who had betrayed the cause; Oliver and Castle the English spies who had been exposed as *agent provocateurs* after the Spa Fields riots; and finally Alexander Richmond, the Scottish spy. The repressive political atmosphere is captured in Rodger's statement that "nothing was heard of but plots and sedition." Habeas Corpus had been "suspended—the prisons were glutted." The list of spies Rodger assembles is very similar to one that Charles Lamb gives in his poetic reaction to the Cato Street conspiracy, "The Three Graves," where he names "Castles, Oliver and Edwards."⁶² The difference in Lamb's list is that he names the Cato Street spy Edwards, whereas Rodger names the Scottish spy Richmond.

In his satire "On a Radical Demonstration," told from the perspective of a Tory loyalist, Rodger states that class conflict rather than nationalism is the issue:

Base Rads! Whose ignorance surpasses
 The dull stupidity of asses,
 Think ye the privileged classes
 Care aught about ye?
 If ony mair ye daur to fash us,

⁶¹ Cited in Peter MacKenzie, *Reminiscences*, as in n. 33 above, 243.

⁶² First printed in *The Champion*, May 14, 1820. Reprinted in the *London Magazine*, May 1825, with the sub-title 'Written during the time, now happily almost forgotten, of the spy system.' The names of 'Castles, Oliver and Edwards' in the final line of the poem are indicated with initials and dashes.

By George! We'll shoot ye!⁶³

As with Goldie's "Sharp Pikes and Radical Clegs," the "Base Rads" are little more than an annoyance to the "privileged classes," and will, in the King's name, be shot if they continue to "fash" or annoy them. In "A Most Loyal Ode," written in 1820, Rodger, like many radicals in the period, turns his fire on the Poet Laureate and former radical, Robert Southey, for being silent on the repression taking place throughout Britain:

Come, Southey! What art thou about,
Thou good-for-nothing, lazy lout?
What?—art thou dumb or dead?
Here is a subject for thee now;
Come sing—or else, by Jove! I vow
I'll tear the laurels from thy brow.⁶⁴

In his squib "A New Vision of Judgment," the London-based William Hone also shares Rodger's hope that Southey will return to the ideals of his youth. In this poem Southey goes to a "Paradise" where he meets the king, members of the church and government, "the *Manchester Yeomanry* Cavalry, riding down women," Coleridge, Croker ("mangled" as Hazlitt has already "cut him up" on earth), Gifford, the king's mistresses, manufacturers, "*Lottery-contractors*":

And all the Gentlemen of the *Stock Exchange* were there;
And all the Gentlemen of the *Shipping Interest* were there;
And all the Gentlemen of the *Landed Interest* were there;
But all the people *without Interest* were not there;

Southey is then caught by "a vehement whirlwind, / TO FLAMES and SULPHEROUS DARKNESS, where certain of my *Minor Poems* were scorching." Here he goes through the equivalent of Dante's "cleansing fire." This fire consumes all but "Truth, nothing *but* the Truth, suffered the burning," and so he finds himself purified, and in the company of those killed by the Manchester Yeomanry, Queen Caroline, and "the friends of my childhood – not leaving out *Coleridge*."⁶⁵ He is saved, and both he and Coleridge return to the radical side before he wakes up and realises that this is only a dream.

Another London based broadside, *Derry Down Triangle*, printed by J. Tyler, brings the English and Scottish revolts of 1820 together and

⁶³ Rodger, xx.

⁶⁴ Rodger, 211.

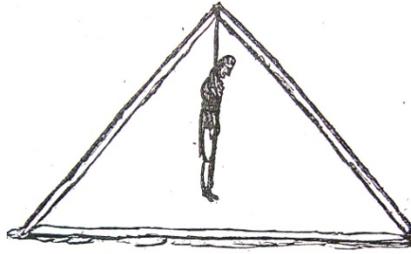
⁶⁵ William Hone, "A New Vision of Judgment," *A Slap at Slop and the Bridge-Street Gang!* (London: William Hone, 1821).

connects them with the suppression of the Irish in 1798 (Fig. 3). Headed with the crude sketch of a man being hanged from the apex of a triangle it reminds readers of 1798, as it alludes to a method of torture and hanging used against the Irish rebels. “Derry Down Triangle” was a name that haunted Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh. In 1798, Castlereagh had been Chief Secretary for Ireland and was thereafter associated with the brutality of the rebellion’s suppression.

The image of a man being hanged on a triangle that appears in Tyler’s broadside is related to a cut by George Cruikshank, “The Triangle,” published by William Hone in *A Slap at Slap and the Bridge Street Gang* (Fig. 4). Both sketches take their audience back to 1798 and the crushing of the Irish rebellion by showing two kinds of hanging. One shows a man, hanging by his neck, dead on a triangle. The other, by Cruikshank, shows a torture scene. We see a man being whipped by Castlereagh, while he is suspended by one hand from the apex of three sticks, standing on a pointed rock with one foot, and with his other hand and foot tied together.

Beneath the cut on the Tyler sheet are two poems. The first, “Derry Down Triangle,” begins by inverting Wordsworth’s “London 1802”—“Milton, thou should’st be living at this hour,”—with “Oh! Chivalrous Burke! If thou wert now living.” It ends with a call to “Come, ye RADICALS all, then, in Country and Town,” to “rejoice and be merry” as the Government “are completely entangled” and “more they’ll be mangled.” In a powerful conclusion, a revolutionary stance is taken: “Country and Town” must combine to overthrow the “GANG.” Not only the rural “Country,” but the whole United Kingdom. At the foot of this broadside is an epitaph on James Wilson, the Scottish weaver who was hanged and beheaded in Glasgow and who is the latest in the line of famous British radical martyrs:

Though basely styl’d a traitor when he fell,
 Yet shall his name rever’d soon rank with those
 Of Hampden, Sydney, Wallace, Bruce, and Tell,
 Who nobly bled to heal their Country’s woes.
 Whose enemies were man’s—were Freedom’s deadliest foes!



Derry Down Triangle!

TUNE—'Down, down, derry down.'

Fig. 3⁶⁶

THE TRIANGLE.



Fig. 4⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Anon., *Derry Down Triangle!* (London: J. Tyler, 1820).

⁶⁷ George Cruikshank, 'The Triangle' from *A Slap at Slop and the Bridge-Street Gang!* (London: William Hone, 1821).

Wallace and Bruce are Scottish heroes, but John Hampden was an English parliamentary leader who was killed in action during the English Revolution in 1643, and Algernon Sydney was an English republican who was executed for treason in 1683. Tell, the pseudonym of Christopher Love, was a Welsh minister who professed to be “a friend to a regulated Monarchy, a free Parliament, an obedient Army, and a Godly ministry; but an enemy to Tyranny, Malignity, Anarchy and Heresie.”⁶⁸ He was executed in 1651 after entering into the cause of the Scottish Covenanters. Tyler’s broadside brings Wilson’s case into a British context by printing his epitaph alongside “Derry Down Triangle” and casts him as a British rather than a Scottish radical martyr. Interestingly this poem is reused in a Scottish context twelve years later as “Lines composed for the Baird and Hardie Memorial of 1832,” with only superficial differences to the epitaph on James Wilson:

Though falsely styled “low traitors” when they fell,
 Yet shall their names revered, soon rank with those,
 Of Hampden, Sidney, Wallace, Bruce and Tell.⁶⁹

Poetry surrounding the Cato Street, Bonnymuir and Cathkin rebellions is concerned with poverty, state violence, representation, and the use of government spies, rather than nationalist concerns. Given what we now know about the entrapment of the Cato Street conspirators six weeks before the Scottish rebellions it seems impossible that the same thing was not going on in Scotland. Some nationalists may have wanted to hijack the event at the time, but this was not on the agenda for the majority who were impoverished in a United Kingdom where only around three per cent of the population had the vote. Over forty per cent of the weavers in Glasgow had been born in Ireland,⁷⁰ and they had more in common with Arthur Thistlewood’s men than they did with Scottish nationalists such as Alistair Ranaldson MacDonell of Glengarry, an ardent nationalist who nonetheless cleared Scots from their own land to make way for sheep and profit. The conflict was about the majority having no say, and this was within a British context, not solely a Scottish

⁶⁸ Geoffrey Smith, *Royalist Agents, Conspirators and Spies: Their Role in the British Civil Wars, 1640-1660* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 152.

⁶⁹ Reprinted in Ellis and Mac a’ Ghobhainn, 349.

⁷⁰ Andrew Gibb, “Industrialization and Demographic Change: A Case Study of Glasgow, 1801-1914,” in *Population and Society in Western European Port-Cities c. 1650-1939*, ed. by Richard Lawton and Robert Lee (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2002), 43.

one. The killing of these eight men on charges of High Treason sent out a message across the British Isles that any rebellion would not only be detected but also brutally crushed. This effectively put an end to the notion that a British revolution could be successful. These conspiracies revealed, as they were intended to, a strong, vigilant, well-organised and ruthless state that was ready to deal with dissent. In the end people who were publically noisy, like Wilson, an old radical, politically-minded weavers like Baird and Hardie, and unemployed radicals like William Davidson, a black West Indian who was executed as a Cato street conspirator, were sacrificed to try to make people believe that rebellion was useless. Davidson finally serves to demonstrate that the concerns of the Scottish and English radicals were the same. The policeman who arrested Davidson said that “he damned and swore against any man who would not die in liberty’s cause—that he gloried in it. He sung a song ‘Scots wha’ hae’ wi’ Wallace bled’—part of it—he was restrained from singing the rest.”⁷¹

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⁷¹ Cited by Stanhope, *Cato Street Conspiracy*, as in n. 20 above, p. 35