

The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain

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For one momentous week, London was convulsed with the most tumultuous series of riots, disorder and arson that its inhabitants had ever experienced. This volume of essays on the Gordon Riots of June 1780 is undoubtedly timely, published in the same month as the report commissioned by the government into the riots that afflicted London and other cities in August 2011. Burning buildings, economic depression, and popular discontent against the government are shared features of the two otherwise considerably different eras.

Ian Haywood and John Seed's volume of essays fills a significant gap in the historiography of popular protest in the 18th century. There has been little in-depth research into the Gordon Riots since George Rude's influential analyses in the 1960s.⁽¹⁾ This lack of new research seems even more anomalous given the recent revival of interest in the politics of riot in the 18th century.⁽²⁾ So why has it taken until now? One reason is because the Gordon riots have always been an awkward topic. They do not fit into the classic narrative of landmark events in Whig/radical/Marxist/labour history. The power of the crowd during the American Revolution is generally presumed to be for the good, for progress and democracy, and not for reaction and religious hatred. Scholars on the left have shared an assumption – and indeed sometimes a desire to believe – that violent anti-Catholicism was a feature of the turmoils of the 17th century, not the tolerant Augustan and Enlightened Britain of the late 18th century. Rudé and E. P. Thompson offered a more nuanced view of the 'faces in the crowd', showing how the riots 'had a political logic rooted in popular economic and social grievances' (p. 10). A couple of decades ago, Nicholas Rogers and Kathleen Wilson further unpicked the socio-economic factors contributing to the events of June 1780. Nevertheless, the riots have been generally regarded as an anomaly in the national story of progress.⁽³⁾

From my own experience of teaching the topic, students are always interested the riots but are forced to scramble round a thin reading list. This volume is therefore sorely needed. In their introduction, Ian Haywood and John Seed call on the reader to rethink the meaning and significance of the Gordon Riots. It provides new insights not just into the causes and consequences of the riots themselves, but also furthers debate in the light of new historical methodologies, cultural history, and digital sources. The [Old Bailey Online](#) [2] in

particular has given new life to research on crime and disorder in London in the 18th century. Haywood and Seed's introduction highlights how the Gordon riots can be used to explore a whole list of contexts and frameworks: war, social disorder, popular political culture, the criminal justice system, moral economy, empire, apocalyptic memory, multiculturalism, revolutionary ideology, spectatorship, the press, bourgeois sexuality and literary history (p. 15).

Increasing popular mistrust of the government is a central theme of the first part of the collection. Nicholas Rogers's chapter places the riots within the wider context of the politics of war. The American war is an obvious but often neglected feature in histories of the Gordon Riots. Rogers argues that 'political divisions over the American war did not cause the riots, but they helped create the political vacuum in which they prospered' (p. 23). Rogers shows how a series of wartime events had laid the ground leading up to the outbreak of the riots of June 1780. Anti-ministerialism had already been building since the trial of Admiral Keppel 16 months beforehand, if not since the 1774 Quebec Act. Some Protestants had regarded emancipation of Catholics in the former French colony as a betrayal of the principles of the Glorious Revolution. Rogers makes the important point that Gordon Riots fundamentally ruptured 'the rapport of crowd and radicals characteristic of the Wilkite era' (p. 33). This again challenges the traditional teleological narrative which tends to assume that the power of the crowd became harnessed solely for parliamentary reform from the 1760s to 1832.

Mark Knight examines the Protestant Association's petitions against the Catholic Relief Act. He finds a strong correlation between petitioners' occupations and their home districts in London and the subsequent spate of rioting. Knight therefore suggests that the correlation between petitioners and rioters was closer than either the Protestant Association or later historians have admitted. As Rogers also argues in the previous chapter, one of the causes of the riots was the populace's dismay with the government's apparent repeated snubs of their rights. The right to petition lay at the heart of the unwritten English constitution and was taken seriously by both the association's members and the rioters.

John Seed tackles the question of anti-papery among Dissenters. He finds that support for the Protestant Association came not from mainstream Anglicanism or Dissent but from 'the Calvinist margins of both church and Dissent or from some kind of institutional no-man's land between them' (p. 78). Again, as Rogers suggests, suspicion among these groups of the government's intentions built upon previous opposition to the 1774 Quebec Act, and had much longer roots in the settlement made at the Glorious Revolution. Popular anti-papery was not, therefore, sectarian prejudice or mindless bigotry; rather it was 'directed against the crown, the state and the church hierarchy' (p. 87).

Dana Rabin examines the imperial dimensions to the riots. She draws attention again to the Quebec Act and how Protestants regarded its dangerous implications for the established state and empire. Examining the symbolism in contemporary cartoons in particular, she argues that a sense of Britishness with a contingent sense of empire was an important element in motivating the rioters. The first places attacked by rioters were the Sardinian embassy chapel and the Bavarian embassy. The Gordon Riots were thus initially shaped by 'xenophobic attitudes merged with anti-Catholicism' (p. 105). They also demonstrated the global mobility and diversity of London's populace, making the capital a symbol of the tense relationship between Britishness and imperial expansion.

The second part of the collection focuses on representation. Ian Haywood explores engravings and descriptions of the riots as a sublime spectacle. Edmund Burke's theory of sublime pleasure and the need to view events from the correct distance was replicated in prints of the events. The defining image of the Gordon Riots was the burning down of Newgate prison on the night of 6 June 1780, and Haywood points to contemporary parallels made with the Great Fire of London of 1666. This interpretation showcases the new insights into familiar topics that cultural history can produce.

Brycchan Carey brings the reader back to the imperial theme in his examination of Ignatius Sancho's account of the riots. Carey carefully deconstructs the timing of events and other details in Sancho's

epistolary narrative. He thus shows how Sancho was less concerned with providing an accurate eye-witness report, as previous historians have presumed. Rather, he constructed a personal response to hearing reports of the events of June 1780, in which his writing explored his feelings of alarm, indignation, relief and reflection.

Similarly, Miriam Wallace looks at the Romantic 'revisioning' of the riots by Thomas Holcroft, the autodidact shoemaker's son and later radical dramatist. She emphasises how Holcroft's influential narrative was shaped by his anomalous position as witness: an 'organic intellectual' who originated from the same labouring class as many of the rioters but 'beginning, in his search to make his way through intellectual labour in 1780, to construct his own philosophies about tolerance, social justice and the powers of mental energies over the body' (p. 174).

The last section focuses on punishment and the legacy of the riots. Tim Hitchcock posits a bold reinterpretation of the events of June 1780, arguing that the subsequent trials played a crucial part in redefining the relationship between Londoners, prisons, and the broader criminal justice system. He highlights the major prison-rebuilding programme enacted in the 1770s, together with a reworking of metropolitan policing. Hitchcock argues that religious motivations quickly shifted to political as the week of disturbances progressed. The rioters' targets of attack swung from chapels to 'the architectural symbols of a newly powerful criminal justice system' (p. 189). He then traces the development of a prisoner subculture in both London's prisons and in the hulks on the Thames, as increasing numbers of convicts became trapped onboard because of the cessation of transportation to the American colonies during the war. Two longer legacies of the riots were the rise of defence counsel and prisoners' refusal of the royal pardon. Hitchcock could have strengthened this argument with reference to recent studies of 'weapons of the weak' and other subcultures of resistance, for example in 19th-century factories and workhouses.[\(4\)](#)

Matthew White addresses the question of why the London courts chose local executions as punishment for the rioters. He argues that the authorities feared the recurrence of mass disorder. The usual three-mile march from Newgate prison to the Tyburn hanging site was perceived to be an occasion for open disorder among spectators. Despite these fears, however, White finds that the thousands of spectators at the scenes of local execution of the Gordon rioters were compliant and calm. Local execution worked, and indeed disproved the predominant image of public executions as *carnavals macabres*.

Susan Matthews considers the female conservative response to the riots. She analyses Charlotte Cowley's *The Ladies History of England: from the Descent of Julius Caesar to the Summer of 1780*, first issued at the end of January 1780 and ending in early 1781 with Gordon's trial. This, Matthews argues, was a 'feminine bourgeois narrative, understood within a pre-existing template that frames the extraordinary and renders it safe' (p. 228). Later pamphlets, sermons, and fiction relating to the riots formed the background to the launch of the Cheap Repository Tracts movement in the 1790s. The legacy of the riots was thus to shape the content and spread of conservative moral propaganda against the French Revolution.

In the afterword, Dominic Green provides a 'biographical reassessment' of George Gordon. His account is lively and a riot to read! Rather than the solitary puritan he was often portrayed to be, Gordon was well travelled and well connected. As Green suggests, there are shades of John Wilkes and older Whig libertines in Gordon's life, as in his preference for 'excursions into the highways and byways of petticoat land' (p. 247). His support for the American Revolution, combined with his 'constitutionally religious' mentality, drew him to lead the Protestant Association. But he was no fan of the 'mob' and had sought to solve the question using parliamentary and party means before events fell out of his control. The story increases in intrigue after Gordon's acquittal in 1781. Green traces his crazy descent into underground circles via 'the wonder-working rabbi Chaim Samuel Falk' and the mountebank 'Count Cagliostro'. In 1788, tried for libel, Gordon was sentenced to five years in Newgate, where he was attended by a 'floating cast of slumming aristocrats, penurious Polish Jews and admiring radicals' (p. 259).

Overall the essays provide a rich and varied set of insights into the causes and consequences of the Gordon

Riots. One weakness of the collection perhaps is that it is predominantly London-centric. For a fuller picture, we need a new analysis of the Scottish riots in the previous year. Much could be gleaned from a comparison of circumstances between Edinburgh and Glasgow and London. More on other provincial reactions, the disturbances in Bath and Hull for example, would be welcome too.[\(5\)](#)

Notes

1. George Rudé, 'The Gordon Riots: a study of the rioters and their victims', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 6 (1956); George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: a Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (London, 1964).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See David R. Green, 'Pauper protests: power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses', *Social History*, 31, 2 (2006).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See Colin Haydon, 'The Gordon Riots in the English provinces', *Historical Research*, 63 (1990).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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