

## Peterloo

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**Author:** Polyp -

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**Reviewer:** Janette Martin

*The English Uprising: Peterloo* opens with the words ‘Two hundred years on, it is still possible to be angry about Peterloo’ ... this was not ‘a clumsy exercise in crowd control’ when ill-disciplined troops panicked, but ‘an atrocity which requires explanation’ (p. 1). Professor Robert Poole does just that in 2 publications that arrived in the bicentenary year: a scholarly book published by Oxford University Press and, more creatively, as the historical expert behind a ground-breaking graphic novel. This double book review will look at the significance of both publications and consider their appeal to different and overlapping audiences and, while novel for academic historians, it will explore how the genre of visual story-telling has a longer prehistory than might first be apparent. It will also consider the ways in which this innovative graphic novel approaches and disseminates historical information, offering a thoughtful approach to the impact agenda that is neither contrived nor trivial. It is hoped that this review will generate debate within the profession. Can a graphic novel have the same status as a scholarly monograph? Will both form part of UCLAN’s Peterloo Impact Case Study? And which generates the biggest sense of achievement in the academic author? The latter is the question I would most like to ask Robert Poole!

Before we start it’s worth reiterating the bare bones of the Peterloo Massacre and its significance in the long and tortuous history of democracy and parliamentary reform. ‘Peterloo’ was the nickname given to an event that took place at Manchester’s St Peter’s Field on 16 August 1819, in mocking reference to the heroic battle of Waterloo only 4 years before. A vast crowd of between 40,000 to 50,000 men, women and children had poured into St Peter’s Field, a piece of undeveloped land in central Manchester to listen to the charismatic

radical reformer Henry Hunt (1773-1835).<sup>(1)</sup> The marchers, carrying flags and banners and accompanied by musicians, came from a wide radius - with contingents from Oldham, Rochdale, Middleton and Stockport and even as far away as Saddleworth on the Yorkshire border. The day ended in horror with at least fifteen people killed, and three dying later from their injuries. Up to 700 more were injured by mounted yeomanry wielding sabres or were trampled underfoot by the panicking crowd. The State's initial response to the massacre was repressive, the ring leaders were rounded up and prosecuted and the 'so called' Six Acts passed which effectively closed down the reform movement. Yet the need for political change was undeniable. Thirteen years later the Great Reform Act (1832) was passed which created new parliamentary seats in the industrial northern towns and cities. The memory of Peterloo loomed large across the nineteenth century, shaping the states response to incremental democratic change and tempering its tolerance for political gatherings and free speech. Peterloo remains a key moment in the nation's (and arguably) world political history and has been evoked across time, place and political context.

I shall begin with the conventional monograph, Robert Poole's *The English Uprising: Peterloo*. A book that has been a long time in the making and is all the better for it. Poole's first article on Peterloo was published in 2006 and he has refined and deepened his analysis in the years that followed, all the while assiduously gathering primary sources and eye witness accounts of this pivotal moment in Manchester's history.<sup>(2)</sup> The most significant primary source collected by Poole was a complete run of the *Manchester Observer* (1818-21) a radical newspaper central to understanding Peterloo and its aftermath.<sup>(3)</sup> How the bound newspaper volumes arrived in Poole's possession is a nice example of how the 'historical' baton is often passed from one generation to the next - in this incidence given to him by the first academic historian of Peterloo, Professor Donald Read (p. vii). *The English Uprising* is a substantial text, 353 pages, 15 chapters in all, and it is telling that the first 12 chapters carefully set the scene with a detailed discussion of Manchester's political culture and archaic civic structures, reformers, rebels, conspirators and rioters and, of course, the catalyst for the meeting - the arrival of Henry Hunt in Manchester. Poole devotes a whole chapter to the march to Peterloo, which is as central to the story as the day's ghastly conclusion. Chapter 13 recounts the horror of the massacre, the penultimate chapter discusses the aftermath and the final chapter the reckoning.

For readers unfamiliar with the Greater Manchester area the map provided at the start of the book offers a useful orientation of the city and its satellites in the early nineteenth century. The map depicts the small towns, hamlets and villages from where impoverished handloom weavers marched - for Peterloo was made not by factory workers living in central Manchester slums, but by politicised artisans and working people from further afield. Another useful guide at the start of the book is the 'list of principal characters' which serves as both a reference tool and to underline how this particular tragedy has an extensive cast of heroes and villains (pp. xxi-xxiii). Poole deftly deals with key historiography in the Prologue, allowing those primarily interested in the story to move swiftly on to the action. Here Poole considers how Peterloo has been treated by historians, shrewdly noting that, while often evoked, Peterloo is 'rarely examined' (p. 4). He attributes this lack of critical evaluation to E P Thompson's classic book, *The Making of the English Working class* (1963) famously set in the Luddite landscape of the West Riding of Yorkshire, which devoted a whole chapter to the massacre. Such was Thompson's stature this has had a deadening effect on the historiography as few would dare revisit or challenge his depiction.

Thompson, however, was a polemicist - he raises questions, offers penetrative and apt theories but his inspirational book and research was centred on the West Riding experience and his knowledge of Manchester was superficial. For all his polemical vigour his interpretation of Peterloo was limited as he failed to understand or explore the Manchester context. Why did Peterloo happen there and not elsewhere in the rapidly industrialising textile towns and cities of northern England? Poole's book, supported by a wealth of new material, answers this question. Chapters 1-3 carefully document the specific reasons it happened in Manchester, stressing the peculiarities of Regency Manchester, where the local authorities operated as 'a close-knit oligarchy' hostile to even the faintest whiff of reform (p. 36). Manchester's decrepit and crooked local power structures epitomised what Cobbett dubbed the 'Old Corruption' - a dire local situation that was aggravated further by the national backdrop of war, high taxation and a pitiful lack of food. Poole also engages with Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992), an important work on

patriotism and identity that reminds us that serving in the army was a common and unifying experience with more men enlisting during the Napoleonic Wars than joining radical societies or labouring in factories. This is significant because one of pro-democracy protesters killed, John Lees, had fought at Waterloo. Poole's analysis cleverly reconciles patriotism with radicalism and convincingly shows how both forces shaped the context of the massacre.

The six page prologue to *The English Uprising* offers both a prescient overview of Peterloo historiography and thoughtful insights into the practice of writing history. Here Poole observes that 'history from below is often history from above viewed in reverse' and notes, with refreshing honesty, that however good a job one does it can only be ever be half the picture (p. 5). This Prologue would make a fabulous discussion piece in an undergraduate skills session on 'becoming a historian' in particular how historians seek to control, explain and understand the past. How, in pursuit of historical 'truth', we obsessively question our sources, second guessing and fixating on the motives of historical actors:

'[how] sooner or later find [ourselves] on the track of those in power, consumed by the desire to work out the differences between what they believed they were doing, what others thought they were doing, what they pretended they were doing, what they were doing in secret, and what they were doing without realising it' (p. 5)

Perhaps, just as importantly as urging historians to pursue their subjects with relentless scrutiny, it is the good example Poole sets by writing vivid, evocative prose that is both scholarly and a pleasure to read. He is a gifted writer with an eye for the telling phrase that brings a character or episode to life. Take, for example, his description of the notoriously corrupt Joseph Nadin, who, as Manchester's Deputy Police Constable, enacted his duties as 'less a public service than a trade' (p. 37). Or how the notoriously drunk and inept Manchester Yeomanry, found themselves 'stuck like raisins in a pudding' (p. 371)

What makes *The English Uprising* so vivid is the sheer range and diversity of sources used from newspaper accounts, letters and memoirs to reports submitted by police spies and courtroom documents. Poole has unearthed a remarkable array of new material including around 70 'lost' petitions from Peterloo victims held in a printed volume at the Parliamentary Archives.<sup>(4)</sup> Centre stage are the people. At the heart of the narrative are 400 or so eye witness accounts of the 16 August 1819 from what Poole describes as "the best-documented crowd event of the nineteenth century" (p. 2). As the Acknowledgments make clear the collection of these accounts drew on the labours of volunteers, research assistants and staff at historical institutions – truly a community-wide approach to understanding and researching Peterloo.<sup>(5)</sup> The book is generously furnished with 46 illustrations, many of which are not well-known. They help locate Peterloo within a broader contemporary culture in which visual depiction was an important mechanism for political expression and, as such, offers a compelling link with the graphic novel also reviewed here. It is an impressive achievement and there is no doubt that Poole's *The English Uprising* is the definitive history of Peterloo – balanced, scholarly yet accessible and deservedly still indignant after 200 years.

The graphic novel *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre*, also published in 2019, tells the story of Peterloo from the same primary sources as the *English Uprising* and draws upon the same historical expertise (Robert Poole) but uses the skills of a professional cartoonist (Polyp) and script editor (Eva Schlunke) to reach new audiences. The novel is arranged in 5 sections each preceded by a contemporary quote – thus for the 16 August sequence of cartoons the byline is 'you will not comeback as merry as you go' – a chilling premonition. The graphic novel takes an innovative approach to story-telling; every single word accompanying the cartoons was spoken or written by a contemporary and is reproduced verbatim. This gives a powerful authenticity and immediacy to the tale, preserving contemporary speech patterns and language. Short references to the primary sources are given next to the picture with a more detailed list of sources in the appendices. Because no words were written by the authors of this volume it is easy to overlook the complexity of construction. Weaving a convincing historical narrative from a disjointed series of contemporary sources is a challenging and skilful job and Eva Schlunke is to be congratulated on her achievement. The story is also ably assisted by the cartoon drawings which deepen and extend the textual

information. For example, I was fascinated to see how Polyp drew actual posters, placards and contemporary woodcuts into his frames, drawing the reader into the street literature of the period. These are playfully done, thus we are treated to a scene where the caricaturist George Cruikshank, with a glass of wine to hand, is at his easel drawing his savagely satirical Peterloo memorial (p. 86). In the background, pinned to the wall we can just about make out a portly Prince Regent. What a fun way to include primary source material in a historical study!(6) While *The English Uprising* is amply furnished with visual sources they are black and white, on standard paper and of the typical, lacklustre, quality found in academic print runs. This contrasts with the riot of colours found in the graphic novel demonstrating how a cartoonist can creatively reuse and manipulate contemporary illustrations.

The graphic novel does not shrink from the more gruesome details of the massacre – such as bloody gore on the grass, blood soaked clothes, wounds being stitched and graphic depictions of a severed ear and other injuries inflicted upon those caught up in the atrocity (pp.72-76). Here, like Mike Leigh's film, *Peterloo* (2018), the artist can come closer to recreating the horror and actual experience of Peterloo, it can bring to life the human suffering of the massacre in a way that the written word cannot. Yet while Leigh's film strives for accuracy in costume and period detail it cannot come close to the layered achievement of a graphic novel in which words are attributed to specific sources and that everything used was expressed by a person who lived through this historical episode. There is power in taking a statement and turning it into a visual representation. We can read about the first victim of Peterloo, 2 year old William Fildes thrown from his mother's arms and 'pitched upon its head', but how heart breaking and poignant is the image of his tiny lifeless body curled up on the cobbles (p.47). Another well-documented and sickening aspect of the massacre was how people attacking and being attacked, knew each other by name. The cartoons bring this to life depicting how a woman's pleas for mercy to her neighbour Tom Shelmerdine were answered by a sabre blow and how, when a young lad 'having caught the eye of Carlton, whom he knew, ran towards him [and] his pleas for safety met with a blow at his head'. (pp. 64; 71)

The interconnectedness of the world, from the plains of Waterloo to an exploding volcano in Indonesia and the profound changes wrought by industrialisation, are all captured in the opening section of the graphic novel, reminding the reader how people's lives are played out in a wider context - shaped by macro and micro histories alike. At the book launch for *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* which took place at the Portico Library, Manchester in June 2019, the artist Polyp explained how, to achieve an appropriate level of visual realism, he drew his characters from real life. This was especially important when trying to capture the dynamics of conflict, so that arms raised in anger or self-defence felt authentic and natural. For this reason he trawled the internet for photographs of more recent conflicts, on which to model his drawings for the key massacre scenes. Intriguingly, Polyp also described how he inserted into his Peterloo scenes covert references to political struggles and flashpoints across time and place. Within the cartoons are subtle references to other occasions when the people were betrayed by the authorities and then denied truth and justice; from the infamous 'Battle of Orgreave' during the 1984/5 Miners' Strike, to those crushed at Hillsborough stadium (1989) and the single protestor in 1989 who defied the tank at Tiananmen Square (pp. 50-1; 65; 70).

While it's tempting to see the graphic novel as a fairly recent invention which has gained cult popularity through the prevalence of Japanese Manga, the genre has precedents in the street literature and print culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. Penny ballads, execution speeches, catchpennies and chap books furnished cheap stories for the masses that relied upon simple messages illustrated with woodcuts to help those with limited literacy.(7) In the aftermath of Peterloo cheap illustrated pamphlets and engravings were quickly produce to satisfy public interest. The best-selling was William Hone's *The political house that Jack built* (1819) which was illustrated with 13 woodcuts by the satirical artist George Cruikshank. The 24 page pamphlet, based on a popular nursery rhyme, sold over 100,000 copies in a few months. That same year a cheap illustrated pamphlet called *Who killed Cock Robin?* took the same formula of politicising a well-known rhyme. For both pamphlets the wood cuts not only illustrated the story but also helped to cater for less literate customers, allowing them to 'read' the pictures and not the words.(8)

The visual format of a graphic novels is more likely appeal to the popular history market and those who might find the 453 pages of *The English Uprising* daunting. Such readers come from diverse backgrounds and their interest in history is often awakened by consideration of local and family history. Peterloo has great appeal to Greater Manchester audiences and, once gripped by this true story in graphic novel form, the appendices provide encouragement to the reader to take their learning further with a page by page commentary of key themes and individuals, followed by a list of sources and a deliberate steer to Robert Poole's definitive work. This is a clever strategy indeed for wining new audiences to academic history and it would be interesting to know how many readers make this journey. Polyp, Schlunke and Poole's graphic novel is not only innovative in approach but also innovative in how the year long period of research and artwork was supported via a crowdfunding project. In addition to a copy of the work, contributors were incentivised by having their name printed at the end of the volume while super supporters were given original art work. The list of acknowledgements makes clear how the book was supported by a grassroots network, a process the authors likened to the way in which the memorials to Henry Hunt and Samuel Bamford were funded by public subscription in the nineteenth century.

While the distinct genres of an academic text and a graphic novel will almost certainly appeal to different audiences, both volumes share the same aim – to hold to account those who committed atrocities over two hundred years ago. For me their biggest triumph is the use of eye witness testimony - letting those present tell their own story. Both offer outstanding contributions to Peterloo scholarship and there is much to be gained by reading them side-by-side.

## Notes

1. Previous estimations put the crowd present at around 60,000. Poole, after revisiting the evidence and applying modern crowd analysis techniques has revised this figure downwards to no more than 50,000 (pp. 360-3)[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Robert Poole, 'The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Georgian England', *Past & Present*, Volume 192, Issue 1, August 2006, Pages 109–153, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtl006> [3]  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Poole has since donated the complete set of Manchester Observer to The University of Manchester Library where it has been digitised and made available online as part of the Peterloo digital collection[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Parliamentary Archives, Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons, 15 Jan–10 July 1821. HC/CL/JO/6/148[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. This collaborative approach and the sharing of information was also seen in the 2019 Manchester Histories Festival which co-ordinated the city wide bicentenary commemoration in 2019 <https://peterloo1819.co.uk/> [4][Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A shorter, simplified children's version of Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre has been produced for use in the classroom <https://ageofrevolution.org/the-peterloo-graphic-novel-available-free-to-schools-now/> [5] [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Charles Hindley's 'Curiosities of Street Literature' (London, 1871) includes examples of the types of visual materials found in Victorian street literature. See Also Leslie Shepard, *The History of Street Literature*, (Newton Abbot, 1973)[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. William Hone *The political house that Jack built*, with thirteen cuts (London, 1819) <https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/media/book/showBook/Mancheste...> [6]  
Thomas Rowlandson *Who killed Cock Robin? a satirical tragedy, or hieroglyphic prophecy on the Manchester blot!!!* (London, 1819) Ref. R196261  
<https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/media/book/showBook/Mancheste...> [7][Back to \(8\)](#)

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[3] <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtl006> [4] <https://peterloo1819.co.uk/> [5] <https://ageofrevolution.org/the-peterloo-graphic-novel-available-free-to-schools-now/>  
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