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HIS320 Custom and Culture in Later Georgian England

Dissertation

The Pentrich Rising of 1817

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Chapter One - Introduction

... thus much is known, that so soon as the whole nation lifted up its voice for parliamentary reform, spies were sent forth. These were selected from the most worthless and infamous of mankind, and dispersed among the multitude of famished and illiterate labourers. It was their business if they found no discontent to create it. It was their business to find victims, no matter whether right or wrong. It was their business to produce upon the public all impression, that if any attempt to attain national freedom, or to diminish the burdens of debt and taxation under which we groan, were successful, the starving multitude would rush in, and confound all orders and distinctions, and institutions and laws, in common ruin ...¹

On 9 June 1817, Jeremiah Brandreth, a framework knitter from Sutton in Ashfield, led a small group of men and boys armed with pikes and muskets in what he believed was a coordinated attempt to overthrow the government. Originating from the Derbyshire villages of Pentrich, South Wingfield, Swanwick and Ripley, Brandreth's rebels believed that they were only one small part of a huge revolutionary force. However, hardly anyone else joined the rising. In fact, the government knew of the plans in advance and the villagers were met by soldiers who were lying in wait just outside Nottingham. In order to set an example, over eighty of the rebels were held in gaol and eventually three were hanged at Derby for High Treason.

The reasons why the rebels risked all were complex. Certainly, the years following the Napoleonic Wars were ones of severe distress. Many industries faced a post-war slump that resulted in large scale unemployment, especially when 300,000 soldiers were released into the shrinking employment market. In addition, the 1815 volcanic eruption on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa threw large quantities of dust and volcanic ash

¹ P. B. Shelley, *An Address to the People on the Death of Princess Charlotte*, November 1817, Part IX, Derby CRO, D1667/ Z84 at www.pentrich.org.uk/html/wm.turner.petition.html

into the stratosphere². This reduced the amount of sunlight reaching the ground and average temperatures fell dramatically. Consequently, 1816 became known as the “the year without a summer” and in most places there were few crops to harvest³. Sir Henry Fitzherbert described the conditions in Derbyshire:

... Spring was most severely cold, the snow falling as late as the 7th June. The autumn was unusually wet, so that the Harvest throughout England was very bad, and in the higher parts of Derbyshire, the oats were not cut till October ...⁴

Addressing Parliament in March 1817, Henry Brougham stated that the nation faced, “a great and universal distress; a distress wholly without parallel in any former period of its history”. Brougham reported that the clothing trade was very hard hit. In the districts of Leeds, Huddersfield, Wakefield and Halifax, over a third of the workforce were unemployed and, of those with work, less than one third were in full-time employment⁵.

Under such conditions, many resorted to violence. In 1816, there were anti-grain export riots in Devon, attempts to destroy machinery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and riots by unemployed weavers in Preston⁶. In addition to ‘bread and blood’ rioting, the conditions provided the environment in which radical ideas for reform spread and political clubs, such as the Hampden Clubs, flourished. Publications such as Cobbett’s *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers of England and Wales*, which focussed the anger of those in distress on the corrupt system of government and high taxation⁷, were distributed far and wide, including the manufacturing districts of Derby and

² This is about 150 times as much as the 1980 Mount St. Helens Eruption.

³ R.B. Stothers, ‘The Great Tambora Eruption of 1815 and Its Aftermath’, *Science*, 224(1984), Pp. 1191-1198

⁴ Sir Henry Fitzherbert cited in J. Stevens, *England’s Last Revolution: Pentrich 1817* (Moorland, 1977) p.15

⁵ Henry Brougham, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, March 13 1817, House of Commons, Vol. I, Pp.1004-18,

⁶ S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, Ch. II.

⁷ W. Cobbett, *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers of England and Wales*, Cobbett’s Political Register, 3 Nov 1816

Nottingham⁸. Significantly, the notion that this rising tide of radicalism would join forces with those who saw violence as a means to achieve their aims led to government fears of a general insurrection. Therefore, to counter what was seen as the growing threat of democrats, revolutionaries, republicans, and the ‘swinish multitude’ the government suspended Habeas Corpus.

This clamp down was followed just a few days later by the march of the Blanketeers on 10 March 1817. Approximately 12,000 gathered in St. Peter’s Fields in Manchester but they were quickly dispersed by the authorities. Of the 1,000 who set off for London, the majority gave up and others were rounded up and arrested. The Blanketeers may have failed, but in the spring and summer of 1817, their march was followed by other activities, of a more insurrectionary nature.

Those who marched from Pentrich numbered even fewer than the Blanketeers, and, similarly, the outcome was a dismal failure. Nevertheless, in his influential work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson argues that the rising was significant, calling it, “one of the first attempts in history to mount a wholly proletarian insurrection, without any middle-class support”⁹. Although this early flowering of working-class activism failed, the example set by the experience of the Pentrich rebels may have been a key factor in the shifting of working-class radicalism from revolutionary to more constitutional methods. However, the rising’s primary significance stems from the allegations that it may have been the creation of the government informer, William Richards, who came to be known as *Oliver the Spy*. The widespread public outrage resulting from these allegations has been cited as one of the factors that attracted a middle-class that, up to that point, had been largely apathetic, to the cause of moderate reform.

⁸ S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, Ch. II

⁹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1991, 3rd Ed. London: Penguin), p.733

Therefore, no study of the Pentrich rising would be complete without a detailed assessment of the role of Oliver as both informer and, quite possibly, *agent provocateur*. Was Pentrich the creation of Oliver? From the evidence of the epigraph above, Shelley was clearly convinced and he was far from alone. However, we must not forget those who organised and took part in the rising. In particular, Thomas Bacon, who planned the affair and Jeremiah Brandreth, who led the rising with dogged determination. Were they duped by Oliver? Or, were they seasoned revolutionaries trained in the school of Luddism who would grasp at any opportunity to carry out their plan even when many others saw through the dangerous web of government informers and chose to stay at home?

Before we can answer these questions, or make any judgements concerning its wider significance, we must assess the social, cultural and political factors that triggered the Rising. Thompson's narrative of the making of the English working-class is central to any discussion of the context in which the rising took place and its wider significance in the development of working-class radicalism. In addition, his essay, *The Patricians and the Plebs*, provides an interesting observation on the social and political framework in which rising radicalism and events such as Pentrich can be placed¹⁰. Also worthy of note are E. Royle's, *Revolutionary Britannia?*¹¹, in which the social tensions and revolutionary fervour that Britain faced in the years leading up to, and including, the rising are assessed and J. Belchem's, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain*¹², which discusses the rising within the context of popular radicalism during the evolutionary years of the mass platform.

¹⁰ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (1991, London: Penguin), Pp.16-96

¹¹ E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?* (2000, MUP)

¹² J. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth Century Britain* (1996, Macmillan)

In terms of the historiography of the rising, the most comprehensive study to-date is John Stevens' book, *England's Last Revolution*¹³. This account draws on the primary sources to trace the events leading up to, including, and after the night of June 9th. Also of use is A.F. Fremantle's article, *The Truth about Oliver the Spy*. Fremantle argues that Oliver was one more in a series of agents that fulfilled the role of detective. Such informers were used to infiltrate cases of ordinary crime such as bank note forgery and tax evasion. However, public revulsion at informers made no distinction between their use to fight crime and their use in the fight against political subversion. In conclusion, Fremantle accepts that Oliver may have overstepped the mark but also argues that Oliver was demonised without ever having the opportunity to defend himself¹⁴.

Others have examined the possibility that Oliver incited the rising and attempted to assess the rising's significance. Thompson's narrative is comprehensive¹⁵ and the earlier work of Hammond and Hammond in *The Skilled Labourer*¹⁶ is much referred to in later publications. Whilst Thompson discusses the events of 1817 within the context of developing working-class radicalism, in *Imagining the Middle Class*¹⁷, Wahrman offers an alternative perspective, seeing Pentrich and the subsequent allegations concerning Oliver as more significant in the development of middle-class participation in calls for reform.

In terms of primary sources, the role of Oliver and the events of 9 June 1817 are documented in Home Office papers and the testimonies of those at the trials of the Pentrich men. Samuel Bamford provides background information to the events of 1817 leading up to the Pentrich rising. In addition, Edward Baines exposed the role of Oliver

¹³ J. Stevens, *England's Last Revolution: Pentrich 1817* (Moorland, 1977)

¹⁴ A.F. Fremantle, 'The Truth about Oliver the Spy', *English Historical Review*, 47(1932), Pp.601-16.

¹⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, Pp.711-34

¹⁶ G.L Hammond & B. Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer* (1970, 2nd Ed. New York: Torchbook), Pp.341-76

¹⁷ D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class* (1995, Cambridge Univ. Press)

to the public by publishing details of the informer's activities in his newspaper, the *Leeds Mercury*. The effect this had on the government and the official line taken can be found in the relevant Hansard volume. Finally, evidence of the effect the case had on popular radical culture can be found in the radical publications of the time.

Chapter Two - Repression, Ambiguity and Revolution

*What did Brandreth do more than was done by the Whigs at the Revolution?*¹⁸

The years from Waterloo to Peterloo have been called the “heroic age of popular radicalism”¹⁹. It was in these years that the widespread distress of the labouring masses caused feelings of disaffection that gained focus through the flourishing political clubs, inspiration via publications such as those of William Cobbett and, ultimately, leadership with the oratory of Henry Hunt. In these years, the labouring population was mobilised in large numbers for peaceful demonstration in the name of Parliamentary reform.

However, in parallel to the legal methods of the mass platform, there was also a revolutionary undercurrent which would attract those who were more motivated by direct action than peaceful protest. Whilst the leaders of the post-war radical movement called for peaceful protest and lawful petitioning, they often stressed the people’s right to resist corrupt government. Magna Charta, the Peasant’s Revolt and the Glorious Revolution were cited as precedents for this notion of resistance. In addition, as if to symbolise the contradictions of the radical movement, imagery such as the Cap of Liberty was often present at meetings for reform²⁰. Also, alongside such ambiguity, extreme radicalism simmered below the surface, fuelled by more recent examples such as the French Revolution, Despard’s conspiracy and revolutionary philosophies such as Millenarianism and Spenceanism. Hence, should the peaceful route to reform become obstructed by the reactionary forces of ‘old corruption’, these revolutionary undercurrents were ready to surface.

¹⁸ Cobbett’s Political Register cited in E.P. Thompson, p.684

¹⁹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.660

²⁰ J. Epstein, ‘Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, *Past and Present*, 122 (1989), Pp. 87-88

Of course, periods of distress and repression were not new and were not sufficient alone to create an insurrectionary situation. Indeed, prior to the 1790s, despite periods of severe distress, it has been argued that such confrontation between the gentry and the labouring poor, or, as Thompson described it, Patricians and Plebs²¹, was avoided. The patricians held onto their position of privilege through the custom of paternalism, which was often no more than a façade, and the plebeians, who were by far the majority, were kept in check by their custom of deference, which again, may have been no more than a charade, punctuated by occasional crowd activities that reminded patricians of their responsibilities to tradition.

However, by the 1790s, this fragile equilibrium had begun to break down and society appears to have become polarised by the struggle between patrician and plebeian. By embracing the philosophy of laissez-faire, the patrician elements of society were starting to ignore those aspects of paternalism that kept the masses at bay, instead resorting to repression. Between 1792 and 1815, the majority of new barracks were built in the northern manufacturing districts. If it could be argued that, prior to the 1790s, the social structure of England was one of “consent and deference, supplemented by the gallows and the ‘Church and King’ mob” it is also fair to argue that by 1816, a transition had taken place in which the English people became “held down by force”²²

But how, in such an undemocratic age, were the disenfranchised and radicalised majority to succeed in bringing about the reforms that Cobbett argued would end their distress? Not all reformers agreed with petitioning. Wooler thought it a weapon of the establishment and demeaning to those who took part, but he had no alternative strategy. Others, such as the republican Sherwin, saw petitioning as the last resort and warned the Regent that if he ignored the people’s petition, he was putting himself in danger of

²¹ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (1991, London: Penguin), Pp.16-96

²² E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.661

suffering a similar fate to Charles I²³. Despite this, by February 1817, those petitions that were drawn up and presented to the government had been ignored, often in a most insulting manner. It was clear from the rioting that discredited the Spa Fields meetings of 1816-17, that for those who preferred physical force, the time had come for action²⁴.

The ambiguity between peaceful means and more violent means of achieving reform was a key dilemma for the radical movement. Popular radicalism inhabited a region where it was not always possible to draw a distinction between legal calls for reform and calls for armed insurrection. Although writing after the Pentrich rising, The Independent Whig newspaper sums up the situation:

It is to a revolution that they owe every portion of civil and religious Liberty they are yet permitted to enjoy, and ... it is to a revolution they will be ultimately compelled to resort, if all other legal means be denied of obtaining a Redress of Grievances ...²⁵

Cobbett exploited this ambiguity in his address of November 1816 by stressing the importance of resisting violence but at the same time warning those in authority:

... he who dines to the music of groaning sufferers, must not, in the moment of insurrection, complain that his daughters are ravished, and then destroyed; and that his sons' throats are cut. When such evils happen, they surely are more imputable to the tyranny of the master, than to the cruelty of the servant ...²⁶

Even Henry Hunt, who promoted himself as the respectable "private country-gentleman with a small fortune"²⁷, flirted with the rhetoric of revolution in the Spa Fields meeting of November 1816. According to the *Examiner*, Hunt made it clear to the crowd:

... Those who resisted the just demands of the people were the real friends of confusion and bloodshed ... but if the fatal day should be destined to arrive, he assured them that if he knew

²³ S. Poole, *The Politics of Regicide in England: 1760-1850* (2000, Manchester Univ. Press)

²⁴ J. Belchem, 'Henry Hunt and the Evolution of the Mass Platform', *English Historical Review*, 93 (Oct 1978), Pp. 739-73.

²⁵ Independent Whig, 27 July 1817 cited in E.P. Thompson, p.684

²⁶ Cobbett, *Address to Journeymen and Labourers ...*, Nov 1816

²⁷ J. Belchem, *Henry Hunt ...*, p.747

anything of himself, he would not be found concealed behind a counter, or sheltering himself in the rear ...²⁸

It seems as though the threat of rebellion was ever present in the rhetoric of the radical movement. It could be argued that for some, it was taken as merely a warning of some future last resort, but for others, it was an invitation for more direct action, should the situation worsen. The radical magazine *Black Dwarf* summed up the mental state of the labouring population well:

The public resemble one hardly roused from a trance: - each conscious of his past slumber, but not completely recovered from its effects, although fully sensible that it is time to rise, - some do not like to move - others wish they were up, but take no steps to put on their clothes, - others sit on the bed-side and in the hurry to dress, put their garments on wrong.²⁹

The Spa Fields meetings of 1816-17 symbolise this duality of the radical movement. While Henry Hunt spoke of petitions, the Spenceans Arthur Thistlewood and Dr James Watson hoped to use the meetings as the springboard for a rising throughout the country³⁰. Whilst many heeded Hunt's calls for peaceful petitioning, ultra-radical Spenceans, Thistlewood and Dr Watson's son, James Watson, rushed to put on their revolutionary 'garments' and marched on the Tower of London at the head of 5,000 looters with all the fanatical optimism of Millenarian revolutionaries³¹. This amateurish and futile attempt to re-enact the storming of the Bastille failed. But according to one government informer, rumours of its success struck a chord with those in the north ready to believe in revolutionary rumours:

²⁸ Examiner, 16 November 1816 cited in E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.685

²⁹ Black Dwarf, 1817, cited in R.J. White, *Waterloo to Peterloo* (1957, Penguin), p.57

³⁰ Henry Hunt, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3

³¹ E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?* (2000, MUP), p.46

... the public mind was thrown into a violent agitation by many exaggerated statements. Amongst other things it was reported that the Bank was destroyed and the Tower surrendered to the insurgents. The leaders went about propagating these and other such rumours...³²

The events of the Spa Fields meetings threw the leaders of the reform movement into confusion at a time when government was becoming increasingly worried about insurrectionary plots. Whilst the January 1817 meeting of the reformers held at the Crown and Anchor in London agreed upon the objective of petitioning for universal manhood suffrage, it did little to unite the leadership of the movement. Hunt had not yet emerged as the leader who would inspire the thousands who thronged to St. Peter's Field in 1819 and although Cartwright remained influential, he was too old to take a fully active role in organising the rapidly expanding network of clubs and petitions. It was Cobbett who stood at Cartwright's right hand as if declaring himself as leader of the movement³³. Cobbett believed the power of his writings could guide the movement, yet Cobbett's publications possessed all of the contradictions that the radical movement displayed in its actions. Although those present at the meeting agreed that a petition should be presented to the government they made no organisational decisions and no statement of what should be done if the petition was unsuccessful³⁴.

Within a week of the meeting, events would throw the weakly organised radical movement into confusion. On 28 January, the Prince Regent's coach was attacked and, as a result, the government were in no mood to look upon petitions for reform favourably. Instead, the government set in motion measures that recreated the repressive policies of the mid-1790s. Crucially, the Hampden Clubs, the very means by which the reform movement stood any chance of focussing the activities of its supporters were outlawed by the Seditious Meetings Act.

³² Chippendale to Major-General Byng, 7 Dec 1816, HO/40/3

³³ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. IV

³⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.699

Therefore, by March 1817, just as the reform movement faced the backlash of ‘old corruption’, the leadership was divided and their rhetoric contradictory. In these dangerous circumstances, solidarity and strong leadership were required. Instead, fearful of arrest, Cobbett publicly renounced reformist societies and fled to America. Bamford sums up the sorry state of the radical movement:

It seemed as if the sun of freedom were gone down, and a rayless expanse of oppression had finally closed over us. Cobbett, in terror of imprisonment, had fled to America; Sir Francis Burdett had enough to do in keeping his own arms free; Lord Cochrane was threatened, but quailed not; Hunt was still somewhat turbulent, but he was powerless – for he had lost the genius of his influence when he lost Cobbett, and was now almost like Sampson shorn and blind³⁵

In addition, Hunt records how those that could have offered a calming influence turned on each other instead:

... Mr. Wooler, as well as Mr. White, of the Independent Whig, lashed Mr. Cobbett most unmercifully for his cowardice in flying his country, and abandoning the Reformers at such a critical moment. Mr. Wooler was excessively severe, and he laid it on with an unsparing hand. I lost no opportunity to vindicate the character of my absent friend, and in doing this I attacked Mr. Wooler as violently as he attacked Mr. Cobbett, for which Mr. Wooler denounced me as a spy of the Government! ...³⁶

Faced with this, those who lived in extreme hardship could be excused for thinking that the time for more direct action had come. From this point on, the radical movement moved into the shady territory of the secret meeting and the whispered conspiracy, where men and women were forced into the secrecy of private houses and, in more rural areas, to meet “like owls at nightfall”³⁷. What followed was the March of the Blanketeers, the Ardwick Conspiracy and the Pentrich Rising: separate events, but all linked by the confusion, distress and repression of the times. Whether because of some

³⁵ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. VII

³⁶ H. Hunt, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3

³⁷ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. VII

underlying Millenarian tone in the more radical rhetoric of the time, or, because people who are desperate are often willing to grasp at any hope, the common theme behind all of these schemes is the widely optimistic belief that there were thousands ready to rise all over the country when the opening shots of insurrection took place.

The first of these, the March of the Blanketeers, may have been known to what leadership had existed in London prior to the chaos following the government's repressive Acts. Bamford refers to the march as "one of the bad schemes which accompanied us from London"³⁸. Bamford appears to have been a calm head when many around him were carried away with the idea of marching to London in thousands and pressuring the government into submission. According to Bamford, "their blind zeal over-ran every reasonable consideration"³⁹. Up until the dark days following March 1817, the strategy of the reform movement had been to stay within the law, but now, in the confusion and indignation of government repression, "doctrines varying from this now began to be broached"⁴⁰.

Crucially, not everyone possessed Bamford's good sense. In the climate of whispered exaggeration that plagued the activities of 1817, one leader claimed that as many as 100,000 would join the March of the Blanketeers. As it was, on the designated day of 10 March, around 12,000 unarmed people assembled in St. Peter's Field, Manchester⁴¹. The Riot Act was read and the meeting was quickly dispersed with a number of arrests. Among these were the militants, Bagguley and Drummond, whose preference for extreme actions had gained popularity with many⁴². Between 300 and 1000 set off for London but many were arrested and others gave up.

³⁸ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. VI

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.17

⁴² S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. VI.

The March of the Blanketeers was an ambitious failure. The day after the march, feelings were running high and many were calling for more violent solutions. One man, whom Bamford theorised to be named Samuel Priestly, claimed that there was a plan to make “a Moscow of Manchester” and “the light of the conflagration was to be the signal for the country people to come in”. Like all of the plans that were conceived in 1817, this was naively optimistic. But to the gullible and the desperate, such a plan might prove attractive. However, to Bamford and his colleagues, such a plan “was too absurd as well as iniquitous to excite anything save wonder and disgust”⁴³.

Nevertheless, others were carried away by the talk of thousands ready to rise and overthrow the government. If we can believe the report of one government informer, even the March of the Blanketeers, which was thought by many who took part as purely a legal means of delivering a petition to the Prince Regent, may have been seen by some radicals as a means by which the Prince Regent could be murdered and Republican government installed:

... then out of the great numbers that went and would be there collected, 3 or 4 steady men might be found to dispatch him at once. The uproar and consternation consequent upon this, would be so great that all those who were in Office, would leave Town immediately, and the whole direction of affairs would fall into the hands of proper persons who would be watching the event.⁴⁴

It would appear that those revolutionary undertones that had been carefully balanced by what leadership had existed prior to Cobbett’s flight to America were now voiced by many. Bamford expressed his concern at this slide towards insanely optimistic schemes that were whispered in dark barns, “Such, and about as rational, were some of the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ MCL MSF.363, Documents concerning the formation of Hampden Clubs 1816-17.

incoherent dreams which at this time began to find favour in the eyes of the gross multitude”⁴⁵.

Later in March 1817, a meeting was broken up at the Royal Oak at Ardwick Bridge where a small group had assembled to attack Manchester. Once again, those who met believed that thousands were on the brink of insurrection. During the planning stage of the Ardwick plot, one government informer reported that those present claimed “... two or three thousand would be sufficient to do what they had to do, for no doubt they would be fifty thousand strong by Daylight ...”⁴⁶. In addition, they were confident that in Huddersfield and Leeds “people were all ready to begin at any hour as they had been getting up a deal of arms that had been hid since the time of the Luddites”⁴⁷.

It was in this context of wild optimism and Luddite traditions that the planning for the Pentrich rising took place. During this time, Bamford was visited by Thomas Bacon and William Turner who were both to take an active role in the Pentrich rising. Bacon informed Bamford that plans had been hatched that “would cause a finishing blow to be levelled at the boroughmongers”. Bamford wanted unimpressed with such plans and warned that due to the strength of the government and the use of informers “no force would avail in overturning the present state of things”⁴⁸.

Bamford was right. Even a conversation in June 1817, reputedly overheard in a privy, just days before the Pentrich rising, was reported to the government:

First Man: We shall have some fun soon.

Second Man: What do you mean?

First man: There will be a rising all over the north in a few days and we shall join them.

⁴⁵ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. VI.

⁴⁶ HO/40/5, 23 March 1817, Secret Agent’s Report on Chadderton meeting

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. XXVI

The two men talked of 5,000 pikes arriving in Leicester with the first man claiming that all would be murdered before them. The rising, he claimed, would be signalled by the stopping of the mail coaches and would start on Tuesday 10 June⁴⁹.

Such talk was typical in the spring of 1817. With the radical movement in confusion, many were carried away by such rumours. In particular, the men of Pentrich seized their pikes and muskets and placed their faith in a bold plan to overthrow the government. With its promises of a hundred guineas, a pound of beef and unlimited rum, England's Last Revolution was an event more in tune with the "tradition of Merrie England"⁵⁰ than an industrialising society on the verge of democratic reform.

⁴⁹ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.18

⁵⁰ R.J. White, 'The Pentrich Revolution: 1817', *History Today* (1955), Pp.538

Chapter Three - Old Tommy, the Nottingham Captain and Oliver the Spy

*“Much confidence is placed in me by them supposing I am appointed from London”*⁵¹

The Pentrich rising was an abysmal failure and a vindication of the warnings given by Bamford to Bacon and Turner. As a result, it has been argued that the experience of Brandreth’s rebels represented a key stage in the process whereby the working-class rejected the Jacobin doctrines of ‘Old Radicalism’ and accepted the need to use constitutional means with undiminished determination⁵². Furthermore, Pentrich would have an even greater impact on the reform movement as a whole since, just days after the rising, the *Leeds Mercury* made allegations that the insurrection may have resulted from the provocations of Oliver the Spy. Public outrage at the idea that the government could treacherously incite the poor to commit acts of violence was fuelled even further when, just seconds before he was hung for his part in the rising, William Turner declared, “This is all Oliver and the Government”⁵³.

Turner’s words would hamper the efforts of those who advocated physical force for many years to come⁵⁴. Cobbett became convinced that Turner’s words had a ring of truth. Writing in 1818, he claimed that the Pentrich tragedy could easily have been avoided since “employers of Oliver might, in an hour, have put a total stop to those preparations” but the aim of the government was “not to prevent but to produce those acts”⁵⁵ in order to justify its repressive measures. Others shared Cobbett’s suspicions

⁵¹ Oliver the Spy cited in A. F. Fremantle, *The Truth* ..., p.604

⁵² E.P. Thompson, *The Making* ..., p. 735

⁵³ The State Prisoners at Derby, 6 November 1817, Innes Printers, Manchester.

⁵⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making* ..., p. 736

⁵⁵ Cobbett’s Political Register, 16 May 1818

and the Oliver affair soon became a tool by which the radical print culture could attack the government.

As early as January 1817, the *Leeds Mercury* had warned people to be on their guard against secret agents. Then, on 13 June, the newspaper's owner, Edward Baines, received evidence that a government spy was trying to incite treasonous activities. As a result of Baines' investigation, the *Leeds Mercury* published an editorial exposing the activities of Oliver the Spy just a few days after the failed Pentrich rising⁵⁶. The newspaper alleged that a Dewsbury plot had "been got up under the instigation of an agent from London" and that this agent matched the description of a man who had been reported at meetings in other parts of the country claiming that he was in league with, and spoke for, those who wished for action to overthrow the government⁵⁷. According to the *Leeds Mercury*, it was obvious that Oliver "was a green bag maker by profession"⁵⁸ who had played a key role in encouraging the disturbances of June 1817.

Prior to the Oliver editorial, Edward Baines and the *Leeds Mercury* were relatively unknown outside the north of England. But afterwards, the paper achieved national coverage and gave Baines a journalistic coup that established his paper as the leading liberal newspaper for the next thirty to forty years and with it, Baines' reputation as a leading spokesman for liberal reform⁵⁹. Furthermore, it has been argued that the outrage centred on Oliver fed into the climate of public opinion that jolted the middle-class from its apathy and ultimately led to greater middle-class participation in the campaign for moderate reform⁶⁰. If Pentrich had occurred without Oliver, the middle-classes might have leaned towards the government, but with Oliver, the middle-class warmed to the

⁵⁶ E. Baines, *The Life of Edward Baines* (1859, 2nd Ed. London: Longman), Pp.77-78.

⁵⁷ *Leeds Mercury* editorial read aloud by Sir F. Burdett, Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, First Series, Vol. XXXVI, 16 June 1817

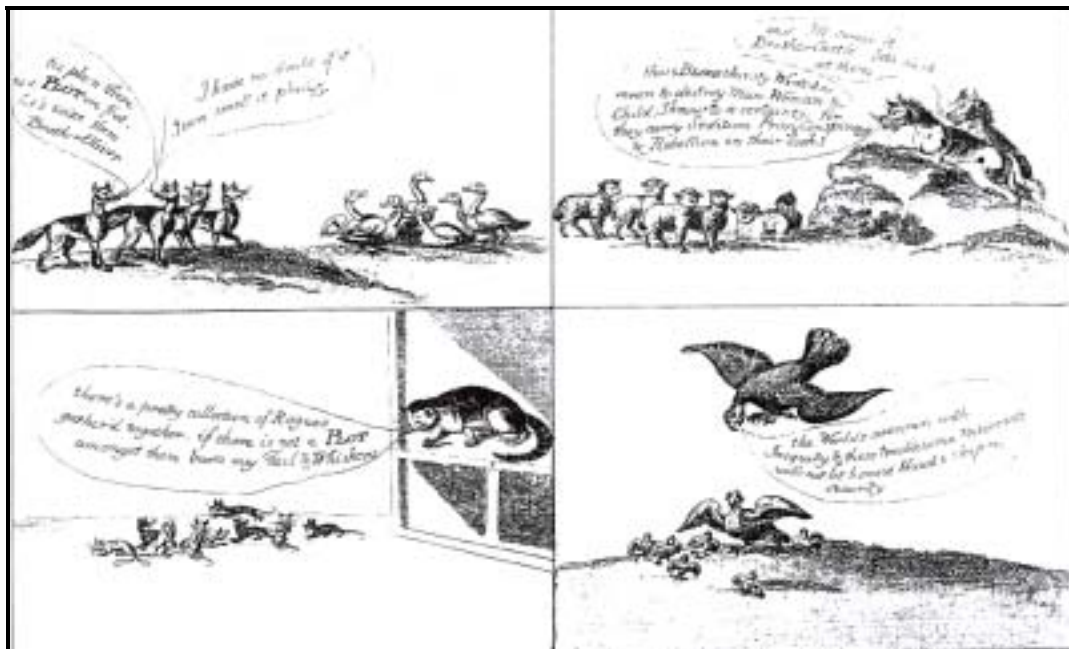
⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ D. Fraser, 'The Life of Edward Baines', *Northern History*, 31(1995), Pp.208-22

⁶⁰ D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class* (1995, Cambridge Univ. Press), p.184

calls for reform via the fight for liberty and the free press⁶¹. If this is the case, whatever role Oliver actually played, the outrage over the executions could be cited as one small step in rallying the middle-classes to the cause of moderate reform. Indeed, the Oliver article certainly struck a chord with Sir Francis Burdett, a leading exponent of moderate reform who had rejected the petitioning tactics of Cobbett and Hunt and the cause of universal manhood suffrage that they pursued. Addressing Parliament on the matter of the Oliver editorial, Burdett stated that nothing “could be more atrocious, especially in these times of wretchedness and distress, than for the government to hire and pay people to excite sedition”⁶².

Caricaturists were quick to tune in to this climate of public opinion. Figure 1, *More Plots!!! More Plots!!!*, is one example of the attacks made by caricaturists on the government in 1817. The caricature shows Oliver and Castle, the two most notorious spies of 1817, acting as predators inciting harmless people into treasonous activities:



⁶¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p. 735

⁶² Speech by Sir F. Burdett, Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, First Series, Vol. XXXVI, 16 June 1817

Figure 1: More Plots!!! More Plots!!!⁶³

Such images struck a chord with many who were ready to believe that the government would resort to any measures to preserve the status quo, even measures exploiting the poor. These revelations convinced many people that the real threat to liberty lay, not with revolutionaries, but with the government. Significantly, following the Oliver allegations, there were no anti-radical caricatures published for the rest of 1817⁶⁴.

Following the revelations contained in the *Leeds Mercury* and their subsequent discussion in Parliament, eight out of the ten men arrested at Thornhill-Lees were released and a few days later, the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, admitted that Oliver had been employed as a Home Office informer⁶⁵. Certainly then, by the government's own admission, Oliver was a government informer, this much is not in dispute. Indeed, as Fremantle argues, the use of informers was a common occurrence in a society that had not yet introduced reliable means of crime detection, despite public revulsion of such tactics⁶⁶.

Throughout the Luddite years informers were employed by the authorities and were partly responsible for bringing Luddism to an end. However, their activities often involved provocation. In the attack on Duncroff's Mill at Westhoughton in 1812, the father-and-son spy team of Simeon and John Stones had been active in plotting the attack. They were certainly involved, and like many similar cases, their role as *agent provocateurs* is implied but not proven. As a result, spies often became an additional cause of the problems they were employed to detect. At the Spa Fields meetings of 1816-17, the activities of the government informer Castle were inextricably entwined,

⁶³ T.L. Hunt, *Defining John Bull: Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England*, (2003, Ashgate), p.202

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.203

⁶⁵ E. Baines, *The Life of ...*, p.79

⁶⁶ A.F. Fremantle, *The Truth ...*, p.602

by his own admission, with the revolutionary plotting of the Spenceans who sought to take the Tower of London. As a result of Castle's tainted testimony, the government failed to convict Dr. Watson of High Treason⁶⁷. However, public outrage at the activities of Castle, was soon be replaced by even greater outrage at the revelations of Oliver published in the *Leeds Mercury*, and much later, by renewed outrage over the role Edwards played as *provocateur* in the Cato Street Conspiracy⁶⁸.

Clearly then, spies were a powerful but unpopular weapon in struggle between patrician and pleb. But can we really accept Turner's accusation that the Pentrich rising was all Oliver and the government? Turner made no mention of him in his plea for mercy to the Duke of York. Instead, he blamed the agitated state of the public and the distress of his neighbourhood for creating those "visionary thoughts" that caused him to withdraw his allegiance from his sovereign⁶⁹. Also, according to the gaol chaplain, Turner had admitted a few days before his famous utterance that, at the time of the rising, he had never met or heard of Oliver⁷⁰. Instead, while admitting that the spy may have overstepped the mark, Fremantle argued that he merely reported back information in relation to a community that was edging towards insurrection and attempted to postpone the rising so that the cohesion of the revolutionary factions fell apart⁷¹. In his defence, we shall see that Oliver did work to postpone the insurrection and the various elements and factions within the conspiracy did fall apart. To this end, he was successful. But on the other hand, there is ample evidence that he encouraged and talked-up the scope of support that the rising might expect from his revolutionary

⁶⁷ B. Porter, *Plots and Paranoia*, p.46

⁶⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.773

⁶⁹ William Turner to Frederick, Duke of York, 24 October 1817 at the Pentrich Organisation Website: www.pentrich.org.uk/html/wm.turner.petition.html

⁷⁰ A.F. Fremantle, *The Truth ...*, p.612

⁷¹ A.F. Fremantle, *The Truth ...*, p.616

friends in London. Even those in Parliament thought this the case when a committee reported:

... the language and conduct of some of the latter [Oliver] may, in some instances, have had the effect of encouraging those designs, which it was intended they should only be the instruments of detecting ...⁷²

However, Oliver was a spy. The role of a spy is to infiltrate and to inform, without detection and via the use of cunning and deception. Therefore, it is doubtful whether we can ever really know the truth about Oliver the Spy. Castle was exposed on the witness stand whereas Oliver never suffered that fate because the government focussed the trial of the Pentrich men wholly on the events of the rising, not its planning. Therefore, Oliver remains a mystery with his character hidden from the public eye⁷³. Also, the available evidence is unreliable and originates from radical publications with their anti-government bias, from the testimonies of witnesses who were responding to the directed questions of barristers, from the government who naturally sought to limit any blame that may have been attached to them, the unreliable statements of informers, and finally, Oliver's own narrative which must be treated with caution, since, as a spy, Oliver was accomplished in the art of deception.

Nevertheless, we must try to assess the character of Oliver and his role in the Pentrich rising. Before becoming a spy, Oliver had been variously employed as a clerk, carpenter, builder and surveyor. As a builder, Oliver accrued debts of £79 15s 6d and found himself in debtor's gaol from May to October 1816. Oliver's friends secured his release and it was soon after this that he sought to associate himself with London reformers and political societies. As a result, he was soon accepted and admitted into the

⁷² Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, First Series, Vol. XXXVII, January 1818

⁷³ E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?*, p.51

inner circle of London reformers⁷⁴. Then, on 28 March 1817, Oliver offered his services as an informer to the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth. It seems as though Oliver may have offered his services as spy because of his precarious financial position, in any event, he was soon under the employ of the Home Office.

Oliver the Spy was soon at work. He visited Thomas Wooler, the editor of the *Black Dwarf*, and William Hone, a publisher of radical satire, while they were both in gaol awaiting trial for libel. Oliver tried to persuade Wooler to publish seditious political bills, calling for a general uprising across the country, but Wooler refused. Oliver even offered to pay Wooler's bail, so that he might accompany him on a tour of the North to further the cause of revolution. Once again, Wooler refused. In his visit to Hone, Oliver was both suave and persuasive. Hone describes how Oliver tried to wear down his scruples, trying to trap him into uttering revolutionary sentiments. Although Hone did not discover that the stranger who quizzed him was Oliver until some time later, he was sure the man was an informer⁷⁵. With Hone and Wooler, Oliver failed. But soon, Oliver would be able to weave his spell on a less educated audience, with tragic results.

One of those who had secured Oliver's release from gaol was Charles Pendrill, a well-known republican who had been involved in the Despard conspiracy years before⁷⁶. It was Pendrill who supplied Oliver with a flattering calling card, upon which it was stated:

Mr Oliver is a good friend of reform and a man in whom you may place implicit confidence on the subject of repairing the old building or pulling it down and erecting a new one; as he is a skilled architect, you may speak freely.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Hammond & Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.353

⁷⁵ F. Hackwood, *William Hone: His Life and Times* (1912, Unwin), Pp.139-40

⁷⁶ E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?*, p.48

⁷⁷ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.36

Also, it was through Pendrill that Oliver was introduced to Joseph Mitchell, a printer from Liverpool who had gained the trust of many by acting as a radical missionary in Lancashire since 1816⁷⁸.

Mitchell was a perfect contact for Oliver. He had been befriended by members of the London 'revolutionary party' at the Hampden Club convention earlier that year and had also been present at the Cock, in Grafton Street, where plans were discussed for a rising in the spring of 1817. The rising would be coordinated by Wakefield delegates and would involve simultaneous risings across the North and Midlands with forces concentrating around Nottingham as a prelude to a march on London. It must be stressed that this all happened before Oliver was known to the radicals. Crucially, it was Mitchell, not Oliver, who was assigned the task of touring the North in order to gauge support for the rising and report back to its coordinators in Wakefield⁷⁹.

However, unlike Hone and Wooler, Mitchell was taken in by Oliver's suave appearance, his impressive calling card and with the portraits of leading radicals that adorned the walls of his rooms. Oliver asked to accompany Mitchell on his fact finding mission and the two men set off on 23 April on a tour that would allow Oliver to meet leading radicals in the provinces. Oliver found it increasingly difficult to report back to his masters in London with Mitchell present. So, on 4 May, Mitchell was conveniently arrested in Huddersfield, probably at Oliver's request⁸⁰. This enabled Oliver to continue alone, now calling himself the London delegate and the only link between the intellectual radicalism of London and the disaffected areas of the industrial north. Also,

⁷⁸ E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?*, p.46

⁷⁹ J. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth Century Britain* (1996, Macmillan), Pp.43-44

⁸⁰ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.39

with Mitchell gone, there would be no one present to contradict Oliver's wild claims of the thousands ready to rise in London⁸¹.

From this point, it is difficult to separate Oliver from the preparations for insurrection. Several areas of the North and Midlands were preparing for action yet their sole contact with the supposed support from London was Oliver, a government agent. Leading radicals took Oliver into their confidence and he became active in preparations for the rising that many expected. Oliver associated himself in various ways. To less militant reformers, he presented himself as the respectable friend of Burdett and Cartwright, sent as he was to say, "With Sir. F. Burdett's compliments" To other, more militant reformers, Oliver claimed to represent the physical force party in London, where he claimed that seventy thousand were ready to rise as soon as the provinces could play their part⁸². Using this approach, Oliver appears to have been successful in working his way into the planning for the summer insurrection. William Stevens was later to write that:

... About five or six days before the 26th of May, a letter from our friends at Sheffield came to Nottingham, informing us that the rising has been put off to the 9th of June in consequence of the advice of Oliver ... because the nights would then be dark, and because the whole country would by that time be in a more perfect state for rising ...⁸³

Hence, by a combination of resourcefulness and deceit, Oliver had both uncovered a plot to overthrow the government, and played an active role in influencing the planning of the same a plot. He had also managed to delay the rising, until 9 June, in order, so he told the Home Office, to give the plotters plenty of time to disintegrate into confusion⁸⁴.

Oliver returned to London and on 23 May Sidmouth was advised that an insurrection

⁸¹ E.. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?*, p.47

⁸² Hammond & Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.354

⁸³ Stevens cited in E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.718

⁸⁴ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.42.

would start on 9 June. The government needed more information so Oliver was sent back into the country, this time with a Home Office letter, formalising his position as a significant government informer⁸⁵.

This second tour was to last from 23 May until 7 June and during this time Oliver's language became blatantly inflammatory. He urged Sheffield to rise, claiming that he could raise seventy thousand in London. A member of the Sheffield contingent claimed that they had no other knowledge of such support, or the level of support in Birmingham and Manchester except what that had been told by Oliver. It was claimed, "Oliver is the Chief Agent and promoter in the business"⁸⁶. Even Bradley, an agent who operated in the Sheffield area, was completely taken in by Oliver, thinking him to be the main instigator of the forthcoming rising⁸⁷. Oliver spoke of plans in Wolverhampton to take Weedon Barracks and of fictitious plans for Wooler's *Black Dwarf* to publish the first proclamations of the Provisional Government. Crucially, Oliver focussed most of his attention on those places that had possessed the strongest Luddite organisation, the West Riding and Nottingham. It was at this time that the machinations of Oliver became entwined with the ambitions of those who sought to lead Nottingham in revolution.

Oliver appears to have been extremely successful in working his way into the confidence of those who sought to overthrow the government. In order to sustain revolutionary fervour, his language was inflammatory. Surely, if his brief was to avoid insurrection, it would have been better for him to have played down talk of support, to deflate the hopes of those who sought to rise. Conversely, if he wished to flush out hard core revolutionaries, it is possible to argue that his strategy was correct. However, can Brandreth and the unfortunate rain soaked men and boys who rose at Pentrich be

⁸⁵ Hammond & Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.355

⁸⁶ Hammond & Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.356

⁸⁷ Hammond & Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.357

described as hard core revolutionaries? One other interpretation of Oliver's strategy, apart from self improvement, was that the government needed a plot to justify their repressive tactics. Indeed, writing of the government in 1816, Cobbett stated, "They sigh for a plot ... Oh, how they sigh! They are working and slaving and fretting and stewing; they are sweating all over; they are absolutely pining and dying for a plot"⁸⁸. It could be argued that Oliver certainly delivered them the plot they hoped for. Given such an opportunity, it could be argued that the government would follow Lord Colchester's hard core patrician view of events when he declared that it was high time the belief was dispelled that "High Treason was an offence for which low persons were not punishable"⁸⁹.

Nevertheless, whilst it could be argued that Oliver played a prominent role in exciting the events of June 1817, the Pentrich rising was certainly not all Oliver and the government, as Turner claimed. In particular, we must consider the willingness of certain members of the local communities to take part in such ventures. It has already been stated that Oliver focussed his attention on those areas that had seen some of the most highly organised Luddite activities. As late as May 1816 there had been attacks on new lace-frames and on 18 June 1816, Heathcote's Mill in Loughborough was attacked and set on fire by a mob of around 100 men. This event was the last of the Luddite activity in the region⁹⁰ but a link between the Luddites and Pentrich is provided by the one man who could be described as leader of the radical movement in the Nottingham and surrounding areas. This was Thomas Bacon, also known as *Old Tommy*.

Bacon was a 64 year-old stockinger and outspoken republican who had, according to the authorities, been involved in machine-breaking activities during the Luddite

⁸⁸ Cobbett's Political Register, 13 December 1816, cited in H. Hunt, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3

⁸⁹ R.J. White, 'The Pentrich Revolution: 1817', *History Today* (1955), Pp.534

⁹⁰ W. Felkin, *History of the machine-wrought hosiery and lace manufactures*, (1867, London), Pp.236-237

troubles⁹¹. Although there is no evidence to link Bacon to the Loughborough incident of 1816, the presence of Luddite activity just one year prior to the Pentrich rising is yet one more factor to be considered when assessing the militancy of those who lived in the immediate area, especially as six of the participants of that action were executed in April 1817; in front of a crowd of 15,000 mostly sympathetic people⁹². What better example of government repression could focus the mind when talk of insurrection was already widespread?

Bacon first appears in Oliver's reports on 5 May, during which time Bacon was openly engaged in planning the rising since, as a local Hampden Club delegate, he had been present at the insurrectionary planning meeting held at the Cock in January⁹³. According to the prosecution brief, Bacon was a well known radical who thought that Cobbett's Political Register and the Hampden Clubs did not go far enough⁹⁴ and it was Bacon who visited Bamford during his tour of Yorkshire and Lancashire to raise support for the revolution he had waited thirty years for⁹⁵.

There can be little doubt that Bacon was desperate for revolution. But having waited for thirty years, why was June 1817 any different? Could Bacon have been encouraged by Oliver? When he visited Middleton to gauge support for the insurrection, Bacon quizzed Bamford about an acquaintance of his from London who had been part of the planning council. Bamford advised Bacon that there was no such man in Middleton and that the name he had given must have been a false one. Writing some years later, and fully aware of the allegations regarding Oliver that became public knowledge, Bamford summed up his account of the meeting with Bacon by stating that

⁹¹ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.20

⁹² Leicester Journal, 4 April 1817 cited in W. Felkin, p.237

⁹³ J. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism ...*, p.44

⁹⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.719

⁹⁵ Testimony of Cope, Howell's State Trials, Vol. 32, p.807

the London delegate, “That stranger, – that betrayer, reader, was, OLIVER THE SPY”⁹⁶.

It is possible that Bacon’s sudden belief that revolution was imminent after thirty years of waiting was down to Oliver. But for the most part, Bacon acted independently of Oliver. According to the authorities, Bacon talked openly of insurrection with little regard for who might overhear⁹⁷. In order to carry out his plan, Bacon made enquiries at the Butterley Ironworks about the manufacture of cannon and pikes. Bacon’s contact at the ironworks was John Cope, a cleaner, who would later give evidence for the prosecution against him. Bacon cultivated Cope by supplying him with copies of radical propaganda such as Cobbett’s 1816 *Address* and the radical *Nottingham Review* and sought his advice on such things as the manufacture of the crow’s foot, a four-spiked device to be used against cavalry. Cope also testified that Bacon sought to apply the successful tactics of the Luddites to a scheme by which the government would be overthrown and the constitution of the country destroyed⁹⁸.

If Bacon had fallen prey to Oliver’s arts, he certainly carried out his part in the story with enthusiasm. From the middle of May, he instigated night meetings at Asherfield Barn near Pentrich and the plotters plans were hatched. It was at the 5th June meeting that Bacon introduced Jeremiah Brandreth as the man chosen to lead the Pentrich contingent of the insurrection. Brandreth might not have been Bacon’s first choice, but the Derbyshire man known as Waine was ill⁹⁹. But like Bacon, Brandreth had possible links with Luddism and it is thought that Brandreth had witnessed the execution of Despard¹⁰⁰. Speaking sometime later, Joseph Weightman claimed that

⁹⁶ S. Bamford, *Passages ...*, Ch. XXVI

⁹⁷ J. Stevens, *England’s Last ...*, p.102

⁹⁸ Testimony of Cope, Howell’s State Trials, Vol. 32, p.807

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ D.G. Wright, *Popular Radicalism*, p.70

Brandreth had told him of his involvement in the machine breaking attack at Basford in which a man had been killed, possibly by Brandreth¹⁰¹.

According to Cope, Brandreth appeared confident, pledging that each man who reached Nottingham would receive 100 guineas, bread, beef and ale. On the appointed night, Nottingham would rise up with at least 16,000 men to attack the barracks. With Nottingham taken, the revolutionary army would row down the River Trent to seize Newark. At the same time, thousands would rise in Wolverhampton and the Weedon army depot in Northamptonshire would be taken to supply everyone with ample armaments. In addition, Belvoir Castle would be taken and its cannons put to use against government forces. Then, all forces would assemble in Nottingham, “there to fall back into one large army with the Trent in their front and the Derbyshire hills in their rear”,¹⁰²

Brandreth has been called “an enthusiast ready to fall in and forward any proposal however wild”¹⁰³. But is this fair? Could Brandreth have fallen prey to Oliver? Interestingly, Brandreth was never as clear as Turner was in blaming Oliver for his sentence of death. *The Times* reported that Brandreth said “Oliver has brought me to this” whereas the *Morning Chronicle* reported Brandreth as saying that but for Oliver he should never have been in gaol. The *Chronicle* also quoted one of the most respectable men in Derbyshire as writing “Brandreth denounces in very violent terms the conduct of Oliver and calls him his murderer”. Shelley referred to Brandreth’s comments on Oliver as evidence of incitement¹⁰⁴ but Brandreth’s words could also be interpreted as a man

¹⁰¹ J. Stevens, *England’s Last ...*, p.103

¹⁰² Testimony of Cope, Howell’s State Trials, Vol. 32, p.807

¹⁰³ Hammond & Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.358

¹⁰⁴ P. B. Shelley, *An Address ...*, Part X

who was bitter because Oliver had reported his plans to the authorities. In this case, the often illuminating words of the condemned man are ambiguous and of little use¹⁰⁵.

However, despite Fremantle's claim that Oliver never visited Pentrich¹⁰⁶, there is evidence to suggest that Brandreth may have had contact with Bacon's London delegate. William Stevens claimed that Oliver visited Nottingham on the 1st or 2nd of June. At a meeting, in which Brandreth was present, Oliver announced that everything was ready for the 9th of June. Oliver said that he would next visit Yorkshire to ensure that all was ready there so that the whole country might be ready to move once the London rising took place. It was claimed by Oliver that 50,000 London men were ready to rise and take the Tower¹⁰⁷. If this is true, it could be argued that, like Bacon, Brandreth was victim to the predatory arts of Oliver the *agent provocateur*.

Furthermore, at around the same time as the Nottingham meeting of the 1st or 2nd of June, Brandreth was approached by another informer in the employ of the Nottingham magistrates. The informer asked Brandreth if he was in contact with any other representatives of the London radicals other than the London delegate. Brandreth replied that he had not had contact with anyone else from London although he was sure that others had. But in any event, the London delegate was widely known and trusted¹⁰⁸. Given this, no matter how much we might present Bacon and Brandreth as revolutionaries hardened Luddism, it is possible that the enthusiasm both men displayed was founded on news provided by Oliver.

Just a few days after this conversation, an event occurred that might help us to understand why Brandreth carried out his part of the plan when so many others did, including the key local instigator of the rising, Thomas Bacon. On Oliver's return to

¹⁰⁵ A. F. Fremantle, *The Truth ...*, p.612

¹⁰⁶ A.F. Fremantle, *The Truth ...*, p.613

¹⁰⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.720

¹⁰⁸ Hammond and Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, p.359

Nottingham, news of his arrest and subsequent release at Thornton-Lees¹⁰⁹ had already spread. Holmes, one of the Nottingham men, began to suspect that Oliver might be an informer. Oliver was subjected to a cross-examination from which he was lucky to escape with his life. Some favoured marching him out to a field at once and shooting him, others opposed the idea. Instead, Oliver managed to keep his nerve and convince the doubters that he was travelling from London in the name of reform and told them that his activities were vital to the success of the insurrection¹¹⁰. According to Oliver's own narrative of the questioning, one man had told him "they were not so fond of being hung for nothing at Nottingham as they were in Lancashire, and if I did not stop he did not know what to think of me"¹¹¹.

We will never know if those present at Oliver's interrogation were convinced by his story. What we do know is that through skilful deception, Oliver was released and he returned to London. Crucially, Brandreth was not present at Oliver's questioning. We have to rely on the testimony of a Nottingham informer for our information but it seems that Brandreth left for Pentrich on 5 June. According to the informer, Brandreth's wife told him that her husband would not return to Nottingham until the job had been done¹¹². Four days later, Brandreth's Pentrich rising went ahead with almost no support. If Brandreth had been present when Oliver had been accused of treachery, would he have been so keen to act? Of course, we will never know, but in trying to separate the willingness of local people to act independently, from the treacherous practices of the *agent provocateur*, this episode may be important.

¹⁰⁹ The details of which were to cause Baines' visit to Dewsbury and subsequent exposure of Oliver. See E. Baines, *The Life of Edward Baines* (1859, 2nd Ed. London: Longman), Pp.77-78.

¹¹⁰ Hammond and Hammond, p.360

¹¹¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.722

¹¹² E.P. Thompson, *The Making ...*, p.722

In contrast to the debate over the role of Oliver, sworn depositions from those who took part give us a clear account the events of the actual rising. Despite the fact that Oliver had been exposed, several hundred advanced on Huddersfield, led by Riley, who like Bacon, was veteran of Luddite activity¹¹³. But, just like the men from Pentrich, they were eventually dispersed by the military. None of the Huddersfield men were convicted but for the Pentrich men it was different. Despite the possibility that Oliver may have duped unfortunate men into a futile and desperate action, the events of the actual rising do not make it easy to build a defence for Brandreth. Brandreth carried out his part of the rising in determined fashion, reciting this verse to bolster the morale of his rain-soaked followers:

*Every man his skill must try,
He must turn out, and not deny;
No bloody soldier must he dread,
He must turn out and fight for bread;
The time is come, you plainly see,
The government oppos'd must be.*¹¹⁴

Thus motivated, the Pentrich men went forth banging on doors to demand guns and support. In one of these raids, Brandreth is alleged to have fired the shot that killed a servant and later, to threaten others with the same fate if they did not deliver up arms¹¹⁵. Brandreth made wild promises to his increasingly despondent ramshackle army that Nottingham would be taken when they arrived there and his men would receive £100, a pound of beef, a pound of bread, a pint of spirits and a quart of ale when they reached Nottingham¹¹⁶. Also, as some began to fear the worst and slip away, Brandreth

¹¹³ E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?*, p.49

¹¹⁴ Testimony of prosecution witness Shirley Asbury cited in Howell, *State Trials*, Vol. 32, p.804

¹¹⁵ Testimonies of William Shipman and Joseph Wilkinson, *Ibid.*, p.805

¹¹⁶ J. Stevens, *England's Last ...*, p.25

responded in a manner similar to the tyrants he hoped to overthrow, by threatening to shoot deserters¹¹⁷.

All of these reasons support the argument that out of all those whom Oliver had encouraged, Brandreth was either the most hopelessly gullible or the most hardened of revolutionaries. Whether he would have been so keen had he delayed his trip to Pentrich long enough to witness the doubts over Oliver is a matter for debate. But, on the night, the Nottingham Captain played his part in the rising with ruthless determination.

¹¹⁷ Testimonies of J. Booth and J. Wilkinson, Ibid., p.805-6

Chapter Four - Conclusions

It has been argued that the March of the Blanketeers, the subsequent plans to make a Moscow of Manchester, the conspiratorial plotting at Ardwick Bridge and the Pentrich rising were all, in part, the products of the revolutionary rhetoric that permeated through the ambiguous and leaderless popular radicalism of the time. As a result, it could be argued that Cobbett, Wooler, Hunt and a host of others are as much to blame as Sidmouth, Oliver and Brandreth for the sad demise of the Pentrich men. However, less clear is the role of Oliver and the rising's wider significance.

In terms of Oliver's role, the story is complex and we are often at the mercy of unreliable evidence. Clearly though, the rising was not all Oliver and the government. Despite its unreliability, the evidence suggests that Oliver played a key part in communicating false hopes of rebellion to many parts of the North and Midlands. As the architect who could oversee the tearing down of the old building and the construction of a new one, Oliver sought out those who tended towards revolution and provided the leadership that was lacking in the radical movement. By replacing Mitchell as the London delegate, Oliver provided the remote districts of the North with the connectivity with the capital that they needed, and, with his talk of the thousands ready to rise in London, the information that they wanted to hear.

Did Oliver incite men to violence when they might not have done so? The answer must be yes. But how many is not so clear. Oliver had contacts in many areas yet only two small regions actually rose in insurrection. If Oliver had intended to incite rebellion across all the regions he visited, then his mission was a failure. If on the other hand, his mission was to act as detective in order to infiltrate, to cause delay and to inform, then his mission was a success. Unfortunately, the evidence is too unreliable for us to say for

certain that it was Oliver's intention to incite rebellion. At most, we can conclude by saying that as informer he occasionally strayed into the territory of the *agent provocateur*. But, in his defence, to carry out his objective of infiltrating those who sought rebellion with the success he achieved, Oliver would have to make himself appear central to their plans.

Despite this, no matter how much we get carried away by the radical press's vilification of Oliver, to make a revolution, we need revolutionaries. It must be stressed that Oliver initially accompanied Mitchell and it was Mitchell who was assigned the role of reporting back to those who were to coordinate the revolution from their base at Wakefield. The plans for insurrection were therefore well known even before Oliver's infamous tour. Also, the areas that did rise in June 1817 had been areas of well organised Luddite violence, and Bacon is alleged to have wanted to bring the organisation of the Luddites into open rebellion. It must be stressed that it was Bacon, not Oliver, who took was present at the Cock in January 1817 where plans for insurrection were laid. It was Bacon, not Oliver, who visited Bamford in May 1817 to canvass support for the rising. It was Bacon who made no secret of his thirty year long desire to see a revolution in England and it was Bacon who sought to manufacture the crow's foot, to use against government cavalry.

Bacon fell short of open rebellion but the one revolutionary who was determined to force his men to fight at all costs was Jeremiah Brandreth, the Nottingham Captain. It was Brandreth who led his men with stubborn determination, singing songs and promising £100, bread, ale and beef. It was Brandreth who was carried away, even in the face of certain failure, by threatening to shoot deserters. And, it was Brandreth, who fired the shot that killed a farm servant, although this may have been an accident. We could speculate that if Brandreth had delayed his journey to Pentrich and been present at

Oliver's interrogation he might not have been so determined to lead his men. It is also possible to argue that Brandreth was a poor gullible labourer who had been duped into rising. But it must be stressed that, on the night, Brandreth went ahead with his part of the plan with grim determination.

In the final analysis, the nature of the evidence and the nature of the spy mean that we may never really know the truth about Old Tommy, the Nottingham Captain and Oliver the Spy. Nevertheless, we know enough to argue that there is a touch of irony in the role that Oliver played. In describing Pentrich as, "one of the first attempts in history to mount a wholly proletarian insurrection, without any middle-class support", Thompson appears to have overlooked the role that Oliver played. Certainly, on the night of the rising, there was no middle-class involvement, just rain-soaked working men and boys from the immediate neighbourhood. However, on the other hand, it could be argued that, because Oliver convinced many of his identity as the middle-class London delegate, who spoke for Cartwright and Burdett, those who rose in June 1817 were, at the very least, expecting middle-class support from London.

In terms of its significance, the picture is complicated by the fact that any lasting effects of the rising are soon overshadowed by the greater tragedy of Peterloo. However, setting aside the debate regarding the parts played by the various actors of this Jacobin tragedy, as well as providing the government with the plot that Cobbett claimed it had been pining and dying for, it can be argued that the rising has significance on a number of counts.

Firstly, Pentrich and the events of 1817 can be cited as evidence of the breakdown of the social equilibrium proposed in Thompson's Patricians and Plebeians thesis, if such a balance ever truly existed. The example of the French Revolution, the impact of increasing industrialisation on traditional paternalist values and the post-war recession

caused widespread disaffection. The resulting class polarisation became a fertile breeding ground for radical ideas to take shape. Faced with this, those elements of society that could loosely be labelled patrician, lost confidence in the solidity of their power over the plebs and replaced what remained of their adherence to customary paternalism with repression. Unfortunately, this created the very situation it was hoped to avoid. The result was a labouring population who felt it within their right to confront oppression in the customary time honoured fashions of Magna Charta, the Peasant's Revolt and the glory of 1688.

Secondly, although Pentrich would not be the last revolutionary plot, the lesson provided by its failure and the subsequent allegations concerning Oliver showed the majority of working-class radicals that Bamford's pessimistic assessment of an armed rising actually succeeding were correct. Given the weakness of the radical movement's leadership and the effectiveness of the government's informer network, if there was to be any chance of achieving reform, force was not the answer. Hence, it could be argued, that the example set by Pentrich and was one small step in the transition of the collective working-class consciousness from one of revolution to one of constitutionalism. The events of June 1817 can therefore be seen a key step in the evolution of the mass platform for Parliamentary reform and a setback for those who advocated physical force.

Finally, the implications of Pentrich and Oliver are captured clearly in Shelley's *Address to the People on the Death of Princess Charlotte*. The mere suggestion that the government could deliberately incite famished and illiterate labourers to their deaths may have been one of the factors that convinced many more moderate sections of the population that the real threat to liberty and property lay with the government rather than the starving multitude. Therefore, whilst it could be argued that the lesson of the

Pentrich rising was an important step in the evolution of working-class radicalism, it is equally valid to argue that the allegations of government treachery were significant in fuelling the climate of public opinion that was instrumental in the political awakening of the English middle-class.

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