Shelley, "Peterloo" and "The Mask of Anarchy"

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SHELLEY

"PETERLOO" AND

"THE MASK OF ANARCHY."
Of this Book

Twenty-five Copies only have been printed
SHELLEY

"PETERLOO"

AND

"THE MASK OF ANARCHY"

BY

H BUXTON FORMAN

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1887
SHELLEY, "PETERLOO," AND THE MASK OF ANARCHY,

A Lecture delivered to the Shelley Society on the 9th of February 1887,

BY H. BUXTON FORMAN.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—In preparing for the press the fac-simile of the holograph Mask of Anarchy, which was the subject of some talk at our last meeting, I have been led to consider the circumstances that induced Shelley to write the poem, and the conditions in which it was produced; and I propose this evening to read to you what I have written on the subject.

The year 1819 was a critical one in the history of reform. Democratic agitation had been rife among the British working classes for some years; monster public gatherings were becoming more and more frequent; and in the summer of 1819 the movement culminated in a huge concourse at Manchester. On the 31st of July an advertisement in The Manchester Observer set forth that a meeting would be held on the 9th of August in a large open space called St. Peter’s Field, with the view of urging forward parliamentary reform. The magistrates declared that such a meeting would be illegal; and its promoters postponed it while endeavouring to compass their end in a more formal manner, but eventually held their meeting on the 16th of August 1819, in St. Peter’s Field. The people poured into Manchester by thousands from all the surrounding towns, coming peaceably and in order, though for a purpose pronounced to be illegal. It was arranged that the chair should be taken by the noisy demagogue Henry Hunt, best known as Orator Hunt, and not connected in any way with Leigh Hunt.
The authorities at Manchester had made extensive but muddlesome preparations for what they termed the preservation of peace. They had ready for action a large number of special constables, some yeomanry cavalry, and some three hundred hussars; but, although the authorities had ample knowledge and warning of the meeting, they failed to arrange beforehand any definite plan of action. They made no effort to arrest the ring-leaders on their way to St. Peter's Field; and it was not till Hunt was on the platform, surrounded by a densely-packed and enormous crowd of peaceable and orderly men, women, and children, that an absurd attempt to take him into custody was made. When the warrant for the apprehension of the reform leaders was handed to the chief constable for execution, he averred that he should need military aid. To this end some forty of the yeomanry cavalry were despatched to make their way through the crowd—an obvious impossibility—and were speedily hemmed in on all hands and stuck fast. They do not appear at first to have done or received serious harm; but, when their mission was found to have failed, a hasty order was given to the three hundred hussars, who were in attendance hard by, to disperse the crowd. They made a vigorous charge, resulting in a terrific scene of confusion and indiscriminate slashing and overturning; and in the end about six people were killed outright, while twenty or thirty were wounded by the sabres of the cavalry, and some fifty or more injured by being trodden under foot and otherwise maltreated.

Such, in a few words, was the Manchester massacre, as Shelley called it, or, as it is often called, the Peterloo massacre. When the news of this ugly business reached Shelley at Leghorn, he was beyond measure transported by resentment against the local authorities and the Government. The affair took place during the administration of the Earl of Liverpool, when Lord Eldon was

1 "'Good God, sir! Do you not see how they are attacking the yeomanry? Disperse the crowd!' On this, the word 'Forward!' was instantly given, the trumpet sounded, and the cavalry dashed among the multitude." See A History of the Thirty Years' Peace, by Harriet Martineau, four volumes, 1877, vol. i. pp. 283-314, for a full account of the whole episode.
Lord High Chancellor, Viscount Sidmouth Home Secretary, and Lord Castlereagh Foreign Secretary. Lord Sidmouth publicly expressed the satisfaction of the Prince Regent with the “prompt, decisive, and efficient measures for the preservation of the public tranquillity” adopted by the local authorities. Lord Eldon, equally, supported the magistrates; and for the rest, the cup of iniquity both of Castlereagh and of Eldon had long, in Shelley’s eyes, been full to overflowing; so that he might well give to Murder a mask like the one, and to Fraud an erminated gown like that of the other.

It is thus that Mrs. Shelley, in her note on the poems of 1819, describes her husband’s feelings on this occasion:—

“Though Shelley’s first eager desire to excite his countrymen to resist openly the oppressions existing during ‘the good old times’ had faded with early youth, still his warmest sympathies were for the people. He was a republican, and loved a democracy. He looked on all human beings as inheriting an equal right to possess the dearest privileges of our nature, the necessities of life, when fairly earned by labour and intellectual instruction. His hatred of any despotism, that looked upon the people as not to be consulted or protected from want and ignorance, was intense. He was residing near Leghorn, at Villa Valsovano, writing The Cenci, when the news of the Manchester Massacre reached us: it roused in him violent emotions of indignation and compassion. The great truth that the many, if accordant and resolute, could control the few, as was shown some years after, made him long to teach his injured countrymen how to resist. Inspired by these feelings he wrote the Masque of Anarchy...”

It may be questioned whether the words “writing The Cenci” were meant to be taken literally. Professor Dowden tells us (Life of Shelley, vol. ii. p. 279) that, on Sunday the 8th of August, Shelley “brought the first rough draft [of The Cenci] to an end,” and that during some later days of the same month he was “engaged in copying and correcting the poem.”

I have reason to know that the words “first rough draft” are not quoted from any contemporary record, but are of the nature of an interpretation, there being no precise knowledge at present as to the degree of finish which characterized the tragedy as completed by Shelley on the 8th of August. It seems certain, however, that, a week later than that, it was not absolutely finished: on the 11th of August he was re-copying some portion of it; and on the 15th of August he wrote to
Leigh Hunt—¹ “My Prometheus is finished, and I am also on the eve of completing another work, totally different from any thing you might conjecture that I should write; of a more popular kind; and, if any thing of mine could deserve attention, of higher claims.”

The work referred to is The Cenci; and, as the middle of August is generally accepted as the time of completion, it is not improbable that the 15th was actually the eve of the tragedy’s birthday. Mrs. Shelley appears to have assisted later in copying; but even of this there seems to be no record after the 20th of August. Now if the 16th was actually the day on which Shelley put the last finishing touch to his tragedy, as I think we may reasonably assume it to have been, in the absence of further evidence, the coincidence was sufficiently remarkable; for that was the very day on which the Manchester magistrates, in the plenitude of their wisdom and forethought for the “public tranquillity,” took order for the enactment of the tragedy in St. Peter’s Field, which was to provide him with the subject of his next considerable poem. But these, we must recollect, were not the days of Reuter’s telegrams, nor did news reach Leghorn from England by post in two or three days. The chances are that Shelley remained ignorant of the massacre till August had given place to September. By the 9th of September he was sending a printed copy of The Cenci to Peacock; and there is a letter to Mr. Ollier in which he mentions the indescribable trouble he had with the Italian printer in getting the work through the press at Leghorn. Now this indescribable trouble must certainly have occupied a plurality of weeks, as any one who is familiar with printing processes at their best must be convinced: I do not doubt, therefore, that the business on which the poet was occupied, when he heard first of the meeting in St. Peter’s Field and its sanguinary results, must have been the printing and not the writing of The Cenci.

How the indescribable trouble inflicted on him by Signor Masi² and his composers must have shrunk into

² Professor Dowden (Life of Shelley, vol. ii., p. 279) says that the book was printed at Masi’s, adding, however, in a foot-note, “I have no positive