

***Plus ça Change: John Cam Hobhouse and the Climate of Terror
... and a reply from Lord Liverpool***¹

Peter Cochran and Malcolm Kelsall



John Cam Hobhouse Arthur Thistlewood

It's often suggested that the Terror which Mr Bush and Mr Blair want us to believe in and experience may in part be their creation, and that when they speak of the threat to our security, it's interesting to read them as if it's themselves they're talking about. Such reflections are supported when we examine some events in the first half of the nineteenth century. Things don't change much.

In January 1820, Byron's friend John Cam Hobhouse was in jail. He'd done nothing, and hadn't even been given a hearing, let alone a trial. The Tory government who put him into Newgate weren't interested in anything as vulgar as evidence. Earlier, on August 16th 1819, fifteen people had been sabred and trampled to death at a political meeting in Manchester. They'd done nothing either; but that didn't prevent Robert Southey, the Tories' hack poet, from describing them as a "rascally rabble".² In power thanks to a parliamentary system which allowed corruption to run rampant, the Tories, and their propagandists such as Southey, knew that reason, logic, and evidence were all their enemies. From January 1817 to March 1818, Habeas Corpus had been suspended, and all meetings of over fifty people banned. Now, in 1820, with George III dead and an election in the offing, the Tories needed another crisis – a security scare – to terrify people into voting for them (terrify those people, that is, who had the vote).

On February 22nd 1820, an article in *The New Times* (the government newspaper), said that Lord Harrowby, Lord President of the Council, would be holding a dinner-party on the 21st, at his house at 39 Grosvenor Square. His cabinet colleagues, said the *New Times*, would all be his guests. The article was pointed out to a man called Arthur Thistlewood, who had already done twelve months for threatening a breach of the peace, and who had once planned an uprising involving an attack on the Bank of England.

¹: For this section I have consulted John Stanhope, *The Cato Street Conspiracy* (Jonathan Cape 1962): still, amazingly, the only book on the subject; and <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRcato.htm>>

²: Quoted W.A. Speck, *Robert Southey Entire Man of Letters* (Yale 2006), p.179.

Of Thistlewood's radical credentials, there can be no doubt, any more than there can be about those of Islamic extremists these days. His plan was for Coutts' Bank, the Mansion House, the Bank of England and the Tower, to have been assaulted after the cabinet had been killed, all paper money burnt, and the coin distributed to the poor. Unfortunately for him, the *New Times* article was a plant, and the man who had pointed it out to him, George Edwards, was a government spy – an *agent provocateur*. There was no cabinet dinner party planned at all, and Thistlewood was walking into a trap.

In Newgate on Thursday February 24th 1820, Hobhouse wrote in his diary:

This morning the *Times* says *Arthur Thistlewood* proclaimed a traitor and a murderer – £1,000 reward offered for him – also a denunciation of High Treason against those who harbour him. This is against law – a man must be arraigned or convicted before it is High Treason to harbour him. People coming in the morning tell the whole story: a plot to murder the ministers at a cabinet dinner. The conspirators met in a stable in Cato Street, Edgware Road. They fought desperately – Thistlewood killed one Smithers, a Bow Street officer. He was taken in bed this morning, about half-past nine, I believe. This is, as Brown my jailor says, a trump card for ministers, just before the election.

A trump card indeed it was – just as the Home Office, for whom George Edwards worked, had planned it to be. In fact the newspaper report, and the offer of the reward, had been prepared in advance, and been issued within four hours of the “conspiracy” being “foiled”.

Thistlewood and his radical associates, twenty-seven in all, had rented a two-story stable in Cato Street, off the Edgware Road, about ten minutes' walk from Harrowby's house in Grosvenor Square. Some had just come because it was a cold night, and Thistlewood had been able to afford a bit of coal. Edwards had told his Home Office bosses everything, and they had ordered a Bow Street magistrate called Richard Birnie, with runners, and Coldstream Guards as backup, to make the arrest. On the evening of February 23rd the trap had been sprung. Without waiting for the soldiers, Birnie had sent his men in. Only Thistlewood and one other had been prepared to put up a fight, and Thistlewood had run a Bow Street Runner, Richard Smithers, through with his rapier (an unlikely weapon for a ruffian to wield).



George Cruickshank's version of Cato Street.

The Times got emotional next morning, and drew a Shakespearean parallel:

It is agreeable evidence of the state of moral feeling in the country, that the KING's Ministers, who are obliged by their situation, even under the most favourable circumstances, to enforce many measures which bear heavily on the population, can yet meet at each other's houses, unguarded and unsuspecting, like gentlemen wholly unconnected with the state of politics. How dreadful to reflect, that this their confidence would only have rendered their destruction more sure and easy of accomplishment: and the men who would have murdered them in this their hour of honest unthinking security, would also – as Macbeth is finely said to “to have murdered sleep,” by slaying the sleeping Monarch – have murdered confidence also; that confidence which the governors repose in the integrity of the governed; and would have substituted in its place gloomy suspicion and jealous hatred, evincing themselves hereafter in barbarous precautions and tyrannical ordinances.³

The idea makes George IV, Castlereagh, and the apoplectic Prime Minister Liverpool, into versions of saintly King Duncan. None of them had any “confidence which the governors repose in the integrity of the governed”. “Barbarous precautions and tyrannical ordinances” were for them the order of the day. For them the people were the ones they oppressed, and whom, logically, therefore, they feared.

The Tories didn't want the embarrassment of having to call their own *agent provocateur* as witness, so they offered to drop charges if any of the “official” conspirators would come forward. Two did; and Thistlewood, together with four others, were sentenced to death.

Cato Street became a tourist attraction. *The Sunday Observer* said, on March 3rd:

The interest excited by the discovery of the diabolical conspiracy to assassinate his Majesty's Ministers has, throughout the last week continued with unabated force. The premises in Cato Street, which will be ever memorable for the events of which they were the scene, was visited by several thousand persons. Among whom were many individuals of the highest rank.

The blood of poor Smithers was still visible on the floor, and seemed to be avoided with a sort of reverential awe. Lee, one of the officers who was there when the assault took place, was present, and explained the whole operation from the commencement to the conclusion. Among others attracted to the spot, we remarked several of the fair sex, who braved the inconvenience of the difficult ascent to the loft for the gratification of their curiosity.

The Tories won the election.

On May 1st, Hobhouse – by now, thanks to his late imprisonment, a national hero, and MP for Westminster – witnessed the execution of the Cato Street Conspirators:

3: *The Times*, February 24th 1820.



Rode up to London. Thistlewood, Ings, Brunt, Davidson, and Tidd executed this morning at the Old Bailey. Their heads were cut off by a man in a mask. The people hissed violently during the operation – soldiers were in readiness everywhere. The men died like heroes – Ings perhaps was too obstreperous in singing *Death or Liberty*, and Thistlewood said, “Be quiet Ings, we can die without all this noise”. They admitted they intended to kill the ministers, but without malice, and as the only resource.

It is certain that Edwards, a government spy, was the chief instigator of the whole scheme. The people cried out for him during the execution. The government will gain nothing by this execution.

I went down to the House, and sat some time. The Attorney-General did not come down, and if he had I think I should have been afraid to speak.

Hobhouse was not normally afraid to speak – it seems that though the Cato Street Conspiracy had failed, the government conspiracy, to make free speech impossible, had succeeded. The men had first been hanged and then decapitated. The headsman was probably Tom Parker, an expert resurrection-man and mortician; though several respectable surgeons were assaulted, and in one case almost castrated, on suspicion of having performed the decapitations.

Thistlewood had tried to implicate Hobhouse in the plot,⁴ though as Hobhouse was in jail at the time of its occurrence, obviously nothing could stick. But the Duke of Wellington – clearly as paranoid about conspiracies, and as in thrall to his own party’s lies, as the rest of the nation – was convinced⁵ that if the conspiracy had succeeded, Hobhouse would have accepted the presidency of the new-model, post-Cato Street British Republic.

4: See John Gardner, *From 'Poverty to Guilt', Keats-Shelley Review* 16, 2002, pp.121-2.

5: *The Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot*, ed. Francis Bamford and the Duke of Wellington, two vols, Macmillan 1950, II p.17: entry for May 8th 1820.

LORD LIVERPOOL ANSWERS:*Lord Liverpool*

There was a 'hippopotamus,' like Lord L[iverpool] in the face ..." (Byron, journal, November 14th 1813: BLJ III 206).

Dear Editor

The attached e-mail was logged by GCHQ anti-terrorism branch at 0800 hours today.

It has already been read by COBRA in special sitting and forwarded to me as cleared by a Mr A. Campbell, director of the department for Secure Publication of Intelligence News (SPIN). It refers to your Review, and since it is rare to receive mail from Byron's contemporaries, I think you may wish to consider publishing it.

I add that the views expressed are those of the writer and have nothing to do with me.

With all best wishes

Malcolm Kelsall

The e-mail (as cleared by Mr Campbell) reads as follows:

FROM Jenkinson@Elysium.com

TO The Editor The Newstead Byron Society Review

SUBJECT Terrorism

Sir!

Mr Robert Southey, O.M., has directed my attention to an article in your January Review entitled: "Plus ça Change ... John Cam Hobhouse and the Climate of Terror". I regret that Jacobinical hacks still perpetuate this kind of slander, but I would expect nothing else in a journal promulgating the views of a notorious paedophile, promiscuous womaniser, blasphemer and apologist for the late self-styled emperor of France. May I invoke the freedom of the press to put right the record as understood by my administration.

It is incorrect to state, as you do, that Mr. Hobhouse in 1819 had "done nothing" to provoke His Majesty's ministers. On the contrary, in a malicious and misleading pamphlet, *A Trifling Mistake*, he had incited fellow radicals to storm the Houses of Parliament, claiming that His Majesty's legitimately elected government was a military junta who governed merely by force of arms, and which, without due process of law, wilfully hanged anyone daring to oppose. The implication was (to use the history of your own times) that I myself was a kind of Idi Amin.

You will appreciate that there is a difference between freedom of speech and wilful incitement to break the law. Parliament, having duly considered Mr Hobhouse's publication, remanded him to Newgate prison for a breach of privilege. To claim, as you do, that we had nothing "as vulgar as evidence" is manifestly untrue. I am confident that any Attorney General (your own, in particular) would support my government's claim that we acted by due process. Moreover, it is a sign of the liberality of my administration that Mr Hobhouse was shortly afterwards released without charge.

A further slander against His Majesty's ministers in your article is that we were "Tories" (sic). This term of vulgar abuse originated with the Achitophels of the seventeenth century (encouraged by the lies of one Titus Oates). I repudiate it. Let me make it clear that it was my honour to begin my political career under that distinguished Whig First Lord, true son of the First Earl of Chatham, Mr William Pitt ("old Whig" if you prefer the more exact terminology of that noble Irish patriot, Mr. Edmund Burke). Mr. Pitt's policies were these: at home, by prudent economic management, to increase the wealth of all His Majesty's subjects and, abroad, to maintain the peace of Europe by a just balance of powers. Specifically he favoured rationally progressive parliamentary reform, the abolition of the slave trade, Catholic

emancipation and, concomitantly, a union of the peoples of Great Britain and Ireland.

Only two of these aims were achieved in his lifetime (the beginning of the abolition of the slave trade and the Union) for his policies were frustrated, and Mr Pitt's health and spirit destroyed, by the declaration of war by republican France on the United Kingdom, and the subsequent attempt by the "child and champion of Jacobinism", M. Buonaparte to establish a tyrannical hegemony in Europe and these islands. Nonetheless, Mr. Pitt's aims were finally achieved by the re-establishment of European peace in 1815 (in which Viscount Castlereagh played a distinguished role), Catholic emancipation (the Duke of Wellington) and parliamentary reform (Lord John Russell).

Your Review seems to make light of the disturbed state of the times. Given the recent attempt by Irish republicans to murder the entire British cabinet, I am surprised at the hostile tone you adopt towards the government's hard-pressed security services during the Cato Street conspiracy. But Thistlewood was merely the tip of the iceberg. May I remind you that under one Lord George Gordon (ominous name – any relation to your George Gordon?) the city of London had been occupied by a mob for several days, prisons broken open, breweries plundered, property destroyed and parliament itself threatened. Only the loyalty of the army and vigorous action saved the day. You may care to read the shocked comments of Mr Benjamin Franklin on these outrages in Mr. Southey's eloquent elegy on our late beloved monarch, George III (and in the later romances of Mr. Disraeli and Mr. Dickens). Events in 1798 were even more serious when supported by an invading French army. In 1812 parts of the Midlands and the North were terrorised by armed bands destroying machinery and threatening life, their watchword, according to your George Gordon, "Down with all kings but King Ludd!" But mob violence was common throughout this period, radical agents provocateurs (to use your own words) infiltrating the crowd armed with brickbats and other offensive weapons.

It is in this context you must understand the regrettable events at Manchester in August 1819 which you claim as another example of the military tyranny of the "Tories". As our cabinet minutes indicate, the administration was disturbed by the potential knock on effects, but I remain convinced that the magistrates would have failed in their duty had they not provided sufficient military force to control any breach of the peace. I am prepared to accept the word of respectable radical leaders, such as Sam Bamford, that the intentions of the organisers were peaceful. Nonetheless, our intelligence services had provided us with information that former army NCOs had been secretly drilling companies in the Pennines – worse, I think, than running up and down mountains with a rucksack which has generated such alarmism in your own administration. It was a well-established technique of those of militant tendency, in my own

troubled times, to use a peaceful crowd as cover for terrorist provocation. Moreover, although it is not on record what “Osama bin” Hunt might have said to the crowd, it is not unlikely that his purposes were to incite the rascally elements among them. Let me remind you that it was your own Lord Byron himself who wished that Osama Hunt had been deliberately sabred to death by the forces of public order. (I add that this is typical of the irrational violence of your hero and is utterly repugnant to those of us who support due process of law).



Boney



Paine



Albe

We all know that the snatch squad sent in to arrest Hunt failed, panicked, like the crowd, and laid about them with their weapons to extricate themselves. Stuff happens, as one of your current allies has remarked. But perhaps you think that they order these things much better in France. May I remind you of the actions of your Byron’s hero, M. Buonaparte, when confronted by the citizens of Paris. He ordered his artillery to be loaded with grapeshot, and fired point blank on his fellow citizens. But it is always the way with Jacobinical writers to excuse the actions of tyrants and highlight the mistakes of the defenders of freedom.

Finally, from my own historical position I am not well-qualified to comment on the parallels you draw between my administration and your own. But my view is that you are now suffering the predictable ills of a Jacobinical administration. Contrary to the principles of Mr Pitt, your own First Lord, in my view a vain and visionary radical, has emulated the first French republic and launched wars overseas in the pursuit of the abstract principles of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. Accordingly he has upset the balance of power in the Middle East and risks more general war. Moreover, compared with the Terror in France – *quorum pars magna fui* – your own alarmist administration (in their so-called war with terror) have allowed themselves to be provoked into gross reaction by a few religious madmen armed with hair bleach. In so doing your First Lord has alienated one of the most respectable

interests in British society, subjects respectful of the law, deeply religious, committed to family values, sober and modest. I refer, of course, to the Muslim British, whose values, I add in conclusion, are utterly alien to those of your Lord Byron. It does not surprise me, therefore, that the last act of his sordid and anarchic life was to rouse himself from an adulterous liaison and perpetrate a bloody pogrom against the Muslim inhabitants of the Peloponnese, doubtless in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity. In so doing he fractured a multicultural society which had lived in peace for centuries and fundamentally destabilised the balance of power in the region. It required the joint action of an Anglo French fleet, supported by my friend Mr. Canning, to resolve the crisis.

It is one of the many actions on which I congratulate myself in a long political career in the pursuit of rational liberty and the defence of law and order. My administration, justly mixing firmness with moderation, guided the ship of State through dangerous waters into the calm seas, on which the imperial sun never set, of the splendour of the reign of Her Britannic Majesty, of Glorious Memory, Victoria Regina.

I have the honour to remain, dear editor,
Your most obedient humble servant ...

Liverpool