Introduction

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> It is all unaccountable, and I can send you no consistent narrative. Much appears to have been sudden fury, and in many places the act of few. In other lights it looks like plan and deep premeditation. Whether it will ever be unravelled, I know not; or whether, like the history of dark ages, falsehood will become history, and then distant periods conjecture that we have transmitted very blundered relations: but, when I know so little of what has passed before my own eyes, I shall not guess how posterity will form their opinions.
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> Horace Walpole, 14 June 1780[1]

NARRATIVES

Horace Walpole's doubts and perplexities about his experience of the Gordon riots are a warning to the unwary reader of history. A series of events over a number of days involving as many people as the Gordon riots can never be organised into a single authoritative narrative. However, a simple chronological outline provides a useful framework at least to make a start on interpreting this hugely important complex of events and processes.

On a hot Friday morning – 2 June 1780 – some 40,000 to 50,000 people, many of them wearing blue cockades, gathered on London's St George's Fields, a wide expanse of open space a mile or so south of Westminster bridge.[2] A crowd of this size assembling behind a political cause was unprecedented in eighteenth-century England. They gathered in response to the call of the Protestant Association (PA) and its leader, Lord George Gordon, to march with a petition to Parliament for the repeal of a bill passed in 1778 to lift certain restrictions on the civil rights of Roman Catholics – the Catholic Relief Act (18 George III c. 60). The primary aim of the Act was to boost recruitment to the overstretched British army, which was busy fighting the rebellious American colonies. In order to make it easier for Catholics in England to join the armed

forces, the new Act removed the requirement to condemn the Catholic Church when taking an oath of allegiance to the British crown. Some restrictions on land ownership, preaching and publishing were also lifted, though the prohibition on holding public office remained in force until 1829. Despite the modest nature of these measures, there was widespread uneasiness and in some circles bitter opposition. When the government tried to extend the Act's remit to Scotland in early 1779, a series of major riots resulted in a government climb-down. This victory was in part attributed to the charismatic flair of the Scottish campaign's new leader, Lord George Gordon. Flushed with this success, Gordon was the obvious choice to lead the revitalised campaign of the English PA. By the spring of 1780 the PA had considerable popular support, especially in London. Importantly, it also had support from within the City of London where the Court of Common Council – which had been a consistent opponent of the American war and a supporter of 'oeconomical' and parliamentary reform – instructed its parliamentary representatives to support 'any Bill that may be brought into Parliament for repealing the late Act in favour of Roman Catholics'.[3] *An Appeal from the Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain* made clear that many Protestants saw Catholicism as a slumbering threat that an irresponsible government awakened at its peril: 'Popery has long been chained in Britain: the consequences of unchaining it will be dreadful to posterity … to tolerate Popery, is to encourage what by Toleration itself we mean to destroy, a spirit of persecution and bigotry of the most notorious kind.'[4]

The culmination of the Association's campaign was the presentation to Parliament of a massive petition, with around 44,000 signatures, demanding repeal of the Catholic Relief Act. Gordon was determined that this petition would be received by the Commons with suitable respect and thus called for a gathering of the PA's supporters en masse. Some members of the Committee were doubtful about the wisdom of this and it was only agreed to after Gordon had threatened to resign as the Association's president. As Samuel Romilly exclaimed shortly after the riots: 'What! – summon 40,000 fanatics to meet together, and expect them to be orderly! What is it but to invite hungry wretches to a banquet, and at the same time to enjoin them not to eat?'[5] This was a view that was widely shared and it was later taken as evidence that Gordon intended mischief from the beginning. Nevertheless on the morning of 2 June the crowds gathering on St George's Fields were observed to be quiet and well-behaved tradesmen in their Sunday best. Before noon the supporters of the PA set off in four divisions, each with its flags and banners taking a

separate route to the Houses of Parliament. One of them was made up of the London Scottish, and at the head of their march was a Highlander in his tartan carrying a broad sword and flanked by two pipers. According to the next day's newspapers, the protestors 'made a noble appearance, and marched in a very peaceable and quiet manner'.[6] The division that crossed London Bridge and marched through the City 'afforded great satisfaction to the inhabitants, well-wishers to the petition, as they all behaved with great decorum'.[7] The *St James's Chronicle* commented the next day: 'Though the Appearance of the Associators in General, was such as bespoke them Mechanicks and working people, yet was their behaviour at first, and during all their march through the City, such as would have done any Cause, any Rank, the highest Honour.'[8] En route more people joined the marchers, including some men on horseback and even a few carriages. There were cheers, presumably ironic, when the crowd passed churches and the Admiralty buildings on Whitehall.

Gradually the yards and streets and alleys around the Houses of Parliament filled with the arriving marchers. At this point the good-natured carnival atmosphere began to turn more threatening. Members arriving for the afternoon's parliamentary session had to navigate their way through crowds that began, as one newspaper put it, 'to exercise the most arbitrary and dictatorial power over both Lords and Commons'. On the one hand several prominent figures in the opposition, such as Shelburne, Camden, and the dukes of Devonshire and Richmond, were cheered and, according to one newspaper, 'had their carriages conducted with great respect and honour to the door of the House'. Other politicians associated with the government were treated very roughly. Their carriages were damaged and they were threatened and manhandled. Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, had the windows of his carriage broken and his wig torn off. The duke of Northumberland was knocked around and his watch stolen. Lord George Germaine was treated 'with great severity' and had porter thrown in his face. The Lords Spiritual had a particularly hard time. The Archbishops of York and Canterbury were verbally abused, their wigs pulled about and their canonical robes torn. Other bishops were similarly given a taste of charivari. Only one bishop was cheered by the crowd and escorted to the House with respect – the bishop of Peterborough, John Hichliffe. He was one of the few bishops who opposed the American war and had voiced his anxieties about the Catholic Relief Act and the continuing dangers of popery. It might also be significant that he was a local boy, the son of a Westminster stable keeper, who could claim to have risen by his own efforts.[9] Members of

the Commons, with one or two exceptions, had an easier passage through the crowds, though many of their carriages had 'No Popery' chalked on their doors. According to one newspaper, 'We do not hear that any of the members of the House of Commons received much insult, further than verbal abuse.'[10] The scene outside the House of Commons was undoubtedly extremely intimidating, though it is worth noting that not one of the crowd's high-ranking victims received injuries requiring medical treatment.

Inside the besieged House, parliamentary business was carried on in an increasingly tense atmosphere. Some elements of the crowd broke into the lobby, adding to the sense of crisis. To bolster his demand for its immediate consideration, Lord Gordon insisted that the 'enormous' petition be brought into the debating chamber and 'dumped on the floor'.[11] He also addressed his supporters in the lobby from the gallery of the chamber, a deliberately provocative and theatrical gesture. After a six-hour debate, the House of Commons voted overwhelmingly (by 192 votes to 6) to adjourn further debate on the petition until the following Tuesday.

What followed marks the beginning of what has become known as 'the Gordon riots', though the man himself would disown the association. Although sections of the crowd had begun to disperse, many others hung around Palace Yard.[12] On hearing the news of the defeat of Gordon's motion, tempers flared, and troops were called in to disperse the crowd. The streets around Parliament were cleared and the crisis seemed to have passed. However, later that night a group of rioters burned down the chapel of the Sardinian embassy in Duke Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields and made a bonfire of its contents. This was the first in a series of attacks on public and private buildings that the crowd associated with Catholicism. A familiar pattern soon established itself of well-planned demolition, plunder and ritualistic arson. When the fire brigade was called to the Sardinian chapel, the mob allowed it to protect the adjoining houses but not the burning church. Another crowd gathered at the chapel of the Bavarian ambassador in Warwick Street, Golden Square (in present-day Soho). Its furniture was burned in the street, though attempts to set the building alight did not succeed.[13] By the end of the day a demonstration, a march on Parliament and a petition, each on an unprecedented scale, had turned into the more familiar London sight of a well-organised and precisely-focused attack on specific institutions – in this case two fashionable West End Roman Catholic chapels notoriously frequented by upper-class English Catholics.

However, the ructions of Friday 2 June were merely a prelude. For the next six days London was wracked by unparalleled social disorder and destruction to property. The narrative of the riots can be divided into two phases: initially, most of the attacks were directed at sites associated with Catholicism; but from Tuesday 6 June events took a more revolutionary turn as attention moved to sites and symbols of state power such as the prisons and the Bank of England.

In the first phase there was a series of attacks on Catholic chapels and private houses in various parts of London, especially around Moorfields, an area adjoining the City of London that contained many Irish workers. The most high-profile target was a rich silk merchant named Malo. Having been refused assistance by Brackley Kennett, London's Lord Mayor, Malo watched his house and its contents suffer the same fate as all the Catholic chapels in the area; even his beloved canaries were immolated as 'Popish birds'.[14] Other targets included prominent political figures suspected of Catholic sympathies, including Sir George Savile, who sponsored the Catholic Relief Act, and Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice. The burning of Savile's house in Leicester Fields (present-day Leicester Square) was so intense that it illuminated the night sky, an anticipation of the larger conflagration to come.[15]

The growing confidence of the crowd was reinforced by the refusal of the London authorities to authorise armed intervention by troops. One of the abiding images of this phase of the riots is the sight of impotent soldiers being insulted and mocked by the rioters, though there is also evidence of friendly exchanges between the two groups. Decisive action at this stage could have stifled further escalation, and the reasons for the ineffectual response of magistrates and the Lord Mayor remain controversial. One consequence of 'the great supineness of the civil magistrates', in the king's words,[16] was that many Londoners could only appease the mob by wearing blue cockades and either shouting 'No popery' or chalking the same phrase on their front doors. By the end of Monday 5 June the crowd were so buoyed up by their relatively unimpeded success that they were able to punish Samson Rainforth, the king's tallow chandler, for testifying in court against the Sardinian chapel rioters. He was dragged from his bed and forced to watch the plunder of his house and warehouse.

By this time the situation in London was clearly out of control. Gordon and the PA issued a public statement condemning the violence, calling for 'a legal and peaceable deportment' and warning that 'all unconstitutional proceedings … can only tend to prevent the Members of the Legislature from paying due attention to the United Prayers of the Protestant

Association'.[17] When Parliament reconvened on Tuesday 6 June, Lord Gordon was noticeably chastened and subdued. His new-found diffidence had little effect on the crowd and when Parliament once again refused to debate the PA's petition, the violence escalated further. It is this second phase of the disturbances that gave the Gordon riots a proto-revolutionary rather than merely anti-Catholic character, and which has provoked a lasting debate about motives, methods and outcomes.

As darkness fell on Tuesday 6 June, London was illuminated by a devastating series of fires. The Burney family witnessed the destruction of the house of Lord Justice Hyde and saw the rioters 'with lighted firebrands in their hands, like so many furies'.[18] Such diabolical imagery was one way in which eye-witnesses tried to make sense of the violence. After the sacking of Hyde's house the crowd meted out the same treatment to the home of Sir John Fielding, the Bow Street magistrate and brother of the novelist Henry Fielding, and to the Bloomsbury home of Lord Mansfield. But the rioters' sights were now set on even grander targets. The first of these was Newgate prison, where some of the rioters who had been arrested on previous days were being held. The sacking of Newgate has become the most iconic event of the Gordon riots, owing largely to its prominence in contemporary printed and visual reportage and its vivid representation in Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). This reputation is surely deserved, as Newgate was the most prestigious trophy of the Gordon rioters. As troops stood by, the crowd demolished this formidable symbol of the Georgian state and liberated its prisoners. With the rioters flush with this success, the other major prisons of London – the New Prison, Clerkenwell, King's Bench and the Fleet – were broken open, prisoners released and buildings set on fire. There were also enforced collections of money for the 'support' of the emancipated prisoners.

The climax of the riots was 'Black Wednesday', 7 June.[19] The sublime devastation reached new heights with the burning down of a large Holborn distillery owned by a Catholic named Langdale. This blaze illuminated most of central London, while burning gin ran down the pavements. At the same time, the riots reached their most revolutionary phase with a series of attacks on the Bank of England. By this point even supporters of the PA distanced themselves from events. At the same time, the cause of anti-popery still had significant support. For instance, on 'Black Wednesday' the Common Council of the City resolved unanimously that it favoured further petitioning of the Commons against what it called 'the Act of Parliament lately passed in favour of Roman Catholics'. But whatever the confused loyalties of City authorities when it came to policing

the riots, the state had decided to act. Over the heads of the local magistrates, the king in Council ordered the military to take charge of the situation, in effect proclaiming martial law. Thousands of troops had been brought into London and were now authorised to shoot at rioters without reference to the magistrates and without the necessity of reading the Riot Act. On the night of Wednesday 7 June, Lord George Gordon appeared at the Bank of England and, after failing to persuade the mob to disband, told the commander of the troops that he wished to join the forces of law and order. The famous political rebel John Wilkes also joined Gordon in defence of the Bank. The entry in his diary for that night reads: 'Fired 6 or 7 times on the rioters at the end of the Bank towards Austin Friars, and towards the middle of the Bank. Killed two rioters directly opposite to the great gate of the Bank; several others in Pig Street and Cheap-side.'[20]

By the evening of Thursday 8 June, several hundred rioters had been shot dead or fatally wounded, and the riots finally subsided.[21] Areas of the city, including its largest prison, were left in smoking ruins, and bodies littered the streets. According to Nathaniel Wraxall, the official estimate of nearly 300 dead grossly underestimated the extent of the casualties, all of whom were on one side. A level-headed eye-witness of the riots, he had also talked to several other well-informed observers and he suggested a figure of 700 dead and seriously wounded.[22] The body count rose further in July when 25 men and women were hanged for offences against property. The Privy Council issued a warrant for Lord George's arrest for high treason, accusing him of attempting to raise and levy war and insurrection against the king, and he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. He remained there for nearly eight months until his trial on 5 February 1781. After sitting for over twenty hours, the jury returned an unqualified verdict of acquittal and Gordon was released. A prosperous Catholic draper ascribed Gordon's acquittal to intimidation, noting in his diary: 'the Constables being gone home a very great uproar, and a rescue apprehended which 'tis thought intimidated Lord Mansfield and the jury'. But as he went on to note, London was quiet. Few houses were illuminated to celebrate the acquittal and the magistrates quickly intervened to put these out.[23]

PERSPECTIVES

In the years following the Gordon riots the prisons and devastated properties were rebuilt and the old enemy from across the English Channel once again became the chief threat to national security. But the trauma

of the riots lingered like a political and cultural spectre. Contemporaries had been shaken to the core by this unexpected explosion of popular violence at the heart of the nation and the empire. 'No event in our Annals bears any analogy with the scene exhibited in the Capital', Wraxall commented, 'except the Fire of London under Charles the Second'.[24] Samuel Romilly had witnessed every stage of the riots and had mixed with the marchers on 2 June. He described the Gordon riots as 'that most extraordinary insurrection, excited by Lord George Gordon, which has hardly any parallel in our history'. The metropolis found itself, he says, 'abandoned … to the plunder and fury of a bigoted and frantic populace'.[25] The riots became an instant media sensation and generated an impressive quantity of written material – in the press, in various lengthier accounts published soon after, in the numerous court cases of those prosecuted and in the correspondence and recollections of the propertied. Twenty years later the *Anti-Jacobin Review* was still talking about the riots as 'one of the most important and awful intestine commotions that this country has witnessed since the regicide wars, worthy indeed of the descriptive powers of Livy'.[26]

But, though the shadow of the Gordon riots stretched across the Romantic period and into the nineteenth century, no Livy did step forward to write its definitive history, and even creative writers were reluctant to awaken this traumatic event.[27] Contemporaries continued to ascribe the Gordon riots to a lethal cocktail of religious fanaticism, the criminal violence of the lower orders and a dark political conspiracy involving foreign powers. The revolutionary potential of the second phase of the riots provoked lasting alarm, fascination and bewilderment. The *Gentleman's Magazine*, for example, had described the attack on the Bank of England in apocalyptic terms:

> Let any rational mind figure to itself the confusion that must have ensued, the ruin that would have been spread, the distresses in which orphans, widows, natives, and foreigners, persons of all ranks and conditions, in whatever station, in whatever employment, would have been involved, by the annihilation of so many hundreds of millions of property, and the total abolition of all public credit! Who can but for a moment think on the danger, without looking up to heaven in grateful acknowledgment to the Supreme Being for so signal a national deliverance?[28]

But for all its sublime menace this image of the riots was usually subsumed by the more familiar and ideologically secure narrative of an urban *jacquerie* shorn of any explicit political direction. This 'spectacular riot'[29] blazed in all its infernal glory from the pages of Thomas Holcroft's

influential *A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances in the Cities of London and Westminster, and Borough of Southwark* (1780):

> Numbers, it is said, and at various places, died with inebriation, especially at the distilleries of the unfortunate Mr. Langdale, from whose vessels the licquors ran down the middle of the street, was taken up by pailfuls, and held to the mouths of the besotted multitude; many of whom killed themselves with drinking non-rectified spirits, and were burnt or buried in the ruins.[30]

Insofar as there was any public knowledge in nineteenth-century England of what happened during London's 'June Days', it probably owed more to passages in Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* than to anything else. Written during a time of Chartist disturbances, Dickens's vivid recreation of the sacking of Newgate drew heavily on Holcroft and Carlyle's phantasmagoric account of the French Revolution. Although there is a characteristic Dickensian sympathy for the urban poor who are swept up in the violence, Dickens's conclusion is that 'the great mass never reasoned or thought at all, but were stimulated by their own headlong passions, by poverty, by ignorance, by the love of mischief, and the hope of plunder'.[31] This image of the irrational mob both reflected and consolidated the dominant nineteenth-century narrative of the Gordon riots. In this 'mythic' riot, the misguided and gullible urban underclasses were inflamed to mindless destruction by bigoted agitators who gave the crowd the pretext to vent their pent-up economic and social grievances against their superiors. Dickens's account was anticipated by John Aikin in *Annals of the Reign of King George III* (1816):

> In a capital like London, whatever be the cause that first collects a riotous assembly, it will soon be joined by a crowd of turbulent banditti whose sole view is pillage and mischief. In the present case, it cannot be doubted that the petitioners mustered in St. George's Fields, were actuated by religious fanaticism, and to them may be attributed the outrages of the first day before the houses of parliament, and the demolition of the Catholic chapels. But it is probable that they in general had withdrawn before the subsequent widely-extended scenes of destruction, and that in fine, all the scum and dregs of the metropolis overflowed its streets, fired by a blind and indiscriminate rage for devastation.[32]

The argument remained much the same even a century and a half later. In the most widely read modern history, *King Mob*, first published in 1958, Christopher Hibbert displays a similar kind of distaste for the 'religious fanaticism' of the PA. For Hibbert, fears of popery were stimulated among a gullible populace by 'wild and unlikely stories' and by 'zealous troublemakers': 'The PA kept the fear and hatred of popery burning with the distribution of pamphlets as ill-written as they were grotesque.'

According to Hibbert, anti-popery was merely a pretext for anarchic violence that was stimulated by alcohol and sheer destructiveness. The rioters were 'interested only in destruction, not reform'.[33]

By this time, however, more sophisticated interpretations of the Gordon riots were developing. John Paul de Castro's monograph of 1926 had provided the first detailed historical analysis of the riots. Thoroughly documented though this was, it was pretty much a scissors-and-paste job – full of useful material but thin on argument. It was mainly concerned with questions of public order, though it did make some connections to the deepening international crisis that was engulfing the British state by 1780. In the 1950s and 1960s the crucial revaluation was undertaken by Marxist historians concerned to impute a degree of class-consciousness to the rioters and to replace the Dickensian legacy of anarchic and self-destructive mindlessness with a new emphasis on rational collective action. Several articles by George Rudé subjected the riots to a much more sophisticated economic, social and political interpretation based on thorough archival research. Rudé showed that many of the rioters were 'sober workmen' rather than criminals or riff-raff. Moreover, there was a social purpose behind the riots, 'a groping desire to settle accounts with the rich, if only for a day, and to achieve some rough kind of justice'.[34] Rudé s view was reinforced by E. P. Thompson in his seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). He sketched three stages of the Gordon riots. First, there was the proto-revolutionary crowd, made up mostly of respectable tradesman and organised by the PA. This is, he says, 'Dissenting London'. Then, following frustration at the failure of Parliament to debate the petition, there was a second stage – a phase of licensed spontaneity, during which violence was informed by the traditional call of 'No popery' but also with social resentment against the upper orders. Now the respectable tradesmen were replaced by journeymen, apprentices, servants and some of the criminal elements. A third stage followed: a descent into destructiveness marked, in Thompson's words, by 'indiscriminate orgies of drunkenness, arson, and pickpocketing'. No longer licensed by the City authorities, the riots were quickly and brutally suppressed. In Thompson's view, Gordon was seeking, unsuccessfully, to emulate Wilkes. What he actually did was to release a spontaneous process of riot. So for Thompson, the riots were 'a mixture of manipulated mob and revolutionary crowd'.[35] Despite some differences of emphasis, Rudé and Thompson initiated a new historical narrative in which the riots had a political logic rooted in popular economic and social grievances. The actions of the rioters comprised