PART ONE

THE SIMPLE TALE
CHAPTER 1

The Cato Street Conspiracy: What Happened

In 1975 the London County Council added to its archive a photograph of a small workshop in the mews alley of Cato Street, just behind London’s Edgware Road (Fig. 1.1). Built in 1803 as a gentleman’s stable on the then western edge of built-up London, the building is now converted into a modern dwelling, but when the photograph was taken it looked battered and bruised after more than two centuries’ use. Measuring eighteen feet wide and sixteen deep, it had a double-doored space on the left to admit a carriage, and a narrow stable door on the right that once opened onto three horse-stalls. At the rear a ladder led up to a hayloft furnished with a carpenter’s bench and some hay boxes. Two small rooms opened off the loft, one a bedroom with a fire place and a window over the street, the other a windowless room at the rear (Fig. 1.2). Even in 1820 the building had ‘a mean and ruinous aspect’.

In 1819 the stable’s owner, a military general named Watson, went to India and let it to one of his servants, named Firth. For a while Firth kept five cows in the stable while he dossed down upstairs; but after a time he gave up cow-keeping and sublet the building to an ex-soldier named John Harrison, charging him ‘five shillings a week for six months certain’. Harrison said he wanted to keep his horse and cart there, but he was really looking for somewhere for his friends to meet before they ventured forth in order to change the course of history. That is how on the cold winter night of 23 February 1820, twenty-five or so impoverished men,
some of them hungry, assembled in the stable’s loft in order to commit what we would now call a terrorist atrocity.

The plan was ambitious. From Cato Street, their leader Arthur Thistlewood would walk them a mile south through dimly gas-lit streets to Lord Harrowby’s mansion in Grosvenor Square, where they believed the whole government cabinet would be dining (Map 1). The attackers would carry pistols, swords, and home-made hand grenades and pikes. There, according to the turncoat conspirator Robert Adams in court,

Thistlewood himself was to rap at the door and give a note to the porter while the others rushed in and, presenting a pistol at the porter’s head, should compel him to point out the room where the company were. [Then they would] secure the staircase and area to prevent the servants below from interfering, and if occasion should require be prepared with hand grenades to throw amongst them. . . . Harrison and Adams being tall and swordsmen should first go into the room.
Two men were to be placed at the stairs, leading to the upper part of the house; one was to have fire arms, to be protected by another with a hand-grenade in his hand. If any servants attempted to make any retreat from the lower part of the house, or from the upper part of the house, these men with the hand-grenades, were to clap fire to the hand-grenades, and fling it...
Map 1. Cato Street to Grosvenor Square (from William Faden’s 1813 edition of Richard Horwood’s 1792–9 PLAN of the Cities of LONDON and WESTMINSTER, the Borough of SOUTHWARK, and PARTS adjoining Shewing every HOUSE) (London Topographical Society, 1985)
in amongst them altogether. Two men at the same time were to be placed at the area, one with a blunderbuss and another with a hand-grenade: if any body attempted to make their retreat from the lower part of the house that way, they were to have a hand-grenade thrown in amongst them there. . . .

Into what part of the house did he [Thistlewood] propose they should go? – Where their lordships were.

And what to do? – To murder all they found in the room, good or bad.

After Harrison and Adams had completed the killing, Ings would ‘cut off every head that was in the room, and the heads of lords Castlreagh [sic] and Sidmouth he would bring away in a bag, he would provide for the purpose two bags’. The heads would be stuck on pike-heads and paraded through London.1

While this was in progress, designated parties would create diversions by setting fire to the Portman Street barracks off Oxford Street, the Life Guards’ horse barracks at King Street, an oil warehouse in Southwark, and Furnival’s Inn in Holborn.2 The Portman Street barracks were selected because the ex-soldier Harrison had once been billeted there and knew through which windows one could lob fire balls into the hayloft.3 Small parties would also hijack cannon from the Finsbury Artillery barracks in the City and from the Light Horse barracks on upper Gray’s Inn Lane – the notion being that the first ‘they could easily get by killing a centinel [sic]’, and the second ‘they could get at very easily, by breaking in some small doors’.4 Thus armed, they would attack the Bank of England, Newgate prison, and the Tower of London. They would then set up a provisional government in the Mansion House, and James Ings the butcher would be its secretary. The discontented populace would surely rise behind them, the royal family would be dealt with (though nobody said how), and the people would be given back the ancestral liberties which Norman aristocrats and their descendants had denied them for centuries. Nobody spoke overtly of ‘revolution’, but whatever ensued was set to match the French cataclysm of 1789.

The conspiracy had been a long time in the making. In December 1816 its leader Arthur Thistlewood and two of his associates, an apothecary called Dr James Watson and a shoemaker named Thomas Preston, had already planned to mount an insurrection after a great reform meeting in
Spa Fields in north London. Soldiers made sure that their plan failed miserably, and in 1817 they narrowly escaped execution for treason because of it. Thereafter London’s ultra-radicals continued to meet, quarrel, and plot until they were re-energised in August 1819 by the Peterloo massacre. At a peaceful reform meeting on St Peter’s Field in Manchester, dragoons and yeomanry killed seventeen unarmed men and women and one child in arms, and grievously injured 670 more. This horror was the Cato Street conspiracy’s most immediate provocation and justification. Thistlewood made his way to Manchester and Leicester in October, and Mancunians in return visited Thistlewood. A national rising was in prospect. Floods of letters from northern magistrates and informers warned the home office that Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Clydeside were awaiting a London insurrection and would mount their own in sympathy. Trade and tavern clubs were ready for action. The London Irish were ready too, though less reliably since they mistrusted every one of the English, even poor ones.

Over the winter Thistlewood, Watson, and Preston gathered about them a hard core of supporters. It included two under-employed shoemakers, John Brunt and Richard Tidd, two ex-soldiers, John Harrison and Robert Adams (Adams had become yet another shoemaker), the butcher James Ings, a Jamaica-born cabinet-maker William Davidson, and an impoverished model maker called George Edwards. Alas for the conspirators, Edwards was the government spy and _agent provocateur_ who achieved the conspiracy’s downfall. Since early 1819 he had been reporting the ultra-radicals’ every move to the home secretary Sidmouth and the Bow Street magistrate Richard Birnie. Under their guidance he lured the conspirators into a trap.

In December, Edwards reported that they were talking of massacring the House of Commons en masse but decided against it because they didn’t have enough bullets and because Thistlewood said he wanted only to kill the ministers, not the innocent. Then they planned to assassinate the ministers while they dined at Lord Westmorland’s, only to find the house ringed by Bow Street officers. As they aimed to do the same on 1 February at a cabinet dinner at Lord Harrowby’s, George III died inconveniently, so the dinner was cancelled. Next they plotted to murder ministers individually while soldiers and police were at Windsor for the
The King’s funeral on 16 February, forgetting that the ministers would be in Windsor too. At last on Tuesday, 22 February Edwards arrived at the conspirators’ meeting place in Fox Court off Gray’s Inn Lane, to announce excitedly that he had just spotted this advertisement in the *New Times*: ‘The Earl of Harrowby gives a Grand Cabinet Dinner tomorrow at his house, in Grosvenor-square’. Harrowby would host the dinner as lord president of the privy council. At last the whole cabinet offered itself as a sitting target.

Thistlewood should have been suspicious. The *New Times* was edited by a tory loyalist; and since the advert appeared in no other paper he might have guessed that Edwards and his masters had inserted it themselves. But past delays and disappointments had brought the group to fever pitch. They swallowed the bait. Ings announced that he looked forward to cutting Castlereagh’s head off with his butcher’s knife, and the shoemaker Brunt stamped about the room declaring that he’d be damned if he didn’t believe in a God now, because for this one and only time in his life his prayers were answered. When someone questioned the wisdom of proceeding, ‘Brunt put himself into a passion, and so did all of them, particularly Harrison, who walked about the room and threatened the first man that attempted to fling cold water upon the concern, he would run him through directly with a sword.’

The privy councillors expected to attend the dinner were to include Lord Liverpool the prime minister, Lord Sidmouth the home secretary, Canning the president of the board of control, and the foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh. None would be missed. Radicals thought Castlereagh the biggest villain. As Irish chief secretary he had helped to suppress the 1798 Irish rebellion mercilessly. ‘Derry Down Triangle’, the radical journalist William Hone called him, referring to the flogging triangle on which his disciplines were delivered. Killing him would bring the Irish to their side. This was also the Castlereagh who as foreign secretary favoured reactionary governments on the continent, who spied on and plotted against the regent’s errant wife Caroline, and who introduced Sidmout’s repressive Six Acts in the Commons after the Peterloo massacre in August 1819. This last horror Castlereagh elaborately excused.
Castlereagh cut his own throat in 1822. Long-term syphilis might have been one reason for the suicide, blackmail over his intimacy with a transvestite another. But he and Sidmouth were also the most loathed men in Britain, a condition difficult to live with. After Peterloo the poet Shelley immortalised Castlereagh in his *Masque of Anarchy*:

I met Murder on the way –  
He had a mask like Castlereagh –  
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;  
Seven bloodhounds followed him.  

He tossed them human hearts to chew  
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

Byron got to the point more economically:

Posterity will ne’er survey  
A nobler grave than this:  
Here lie the bones of Castlereagh:  
Stop, traveller, and piss.

It was a bonus that the duke of Wellington and the lord chancellor Eldon would also attend the dinner. Although the victor of Waterloo was hailed by loyalists as a national hero, radicals damned him. A powerful and now forgotten streak of anti-militarism moved a populace that had been fighting for twenty years and had paid an awful price. As one ditty put it in the thick of the wars:

I hate that drum’s discordant sound,  
Parading round, and round, and round;  
To me it talks of ravag’d plains,  
And burning towns, and ruin’d swains,  
And mangled limbs, and dying groans,  
And widows’ tears, and orphans’ moans,  
And all that misery’s hand bestows,  
To swell the catalogue of human woes.  

After the peace Wellington was the master of the ordnance in a government that had levied 3,000 additional soldiers and marines to