

The Peterloo Massacre 16 August 1819

The significance of this event in the decision of the British Government of the time to put into motion the emigration scheme that we know as the 1820 Settlement.

This introduction to the screening of the film 'Peterloo' was compiled and presented by Avonne Pickering at our LAHS meeting in September 2019

The years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 saw the rise of famine, chronic unemployment and recession in England. This was influenced by many factors, a few of which were:

- The Industrial Revolution that caused social upheaval (but which incidentally had a far-reaching and positive effect in the Cape Colony with the erection of Bradshaw's Mill). The industrialisation was uneven and the precipitated demobilisation of soldiers added to the social upheaval
- The sudden redundancy of the frame knitters and weavers as there was no further need to supply cloth for the manufacture of soldiers' uniforms
- The enclosure system in agriculture which left farm labourers without employment
- The punitive Corn Laws

In addition, the failure of government in Georgian England to lay on rudimentary services such as refuse collection, sanitation and clean water supplies left in its wake a situation we are all too able to recognise. Soaring crime rates, civil commotion and riots became an endemic feature of life.

At the same time however, the social hierarchy had begun to change under the influence of the Prime Minister, William Pitt, whose inspired leadership greatly increased the colonial possessions.

A new era was beginning with the ideas of reform, upliftment and improvement which resulted in the expansion of the missions in the Cape Colony.

Huge political rallies addressed by popular orators petitioned Crown and Parliament for a Reform Bill and a greater say for the working man. However, the governing Tories remained repressive after Waterloo, and the social changes sought by the people and the enlightened politicians and observers were not forthcoming.

At St Peter's Fields in Manchester, on 16th of August, 1819, a peaceful rally had been called by a group known as The Manchester Patriotic Union, to demand reforms to parliamentary representation across England. The crowd was addressed by Henry Hunt, a renowned radical orator and political informer. Over 50,000 people had gathered to hear him speak. The militia present became apprehensive and intimidated and a squadron of regular cavalry was sent in by the magistrate to disperse the crowd. Fifteen people were killed in the ensuing action, although the numbers vary from 11 to 18 according to different sources. It is estimated that about 700 were injured.

This disaster was called “The Peterloo Massacre” so named in a grim reference to Waterloo fought four years earlier and whose many veterans now faced unemployment and poverty. The event led directly to the foundation of the newspaper The Manchester Guardian but had little effect on the pace of reform.

The lure of the freer, less-governed colonial environments became more attractive to the populace, as borne out by the numbers of people who responded to the Government’s proposal to attract settlers to emigrate to the Cape Colony’s eastern frontier: 90,000 applied of whom only 4,000 were selected. The settlement scheme was launched in July 1819, the year in which both the Battle of Grahamstown and the Peterloo Massacre occurred.

Professor Pat Irwin has highlighted the importance of the Battle of Grahamstown in the promotion of the 1820 Settler emigration scheme. Without a doubt, the domestic political situation in England in 1819 can be seen as an equally powerful reason to justify the decision to embark on the vague, poorly reasoned and hasty plan of emigration. It has been said that the Government was anxious to make a show of doing something for the people. Emigration was seen by many as their chance for a better life, although Radical critics of the Government argued that political reform, not emigration, was what Britain needed.

In August 2019, there were commemorative gatherings held in Manchester at St Peter’s Fields and political comparisons were drawn between the plight of the general populace then and now, in modern times. Peter Bradshaw, reviewing the film for The Guardian newspaper, says of the parallels:

“A brilliant sense of topicality pervades this passionate account of the murders of protestors at a mass pro-democracy protest in Manchester in 1819. It is Britain’s 19th century mix of Sharpeville and Hillsborough.”

In South Africa, the rising anger of people whose reasonable demands for basic services mirrors closely that of the mood of the Peterloo protestors, as does the severity of the reaction by the authorities to the protests and also their lack of addressing the reasons for them.

Peterloo was referred to in an episode of the latest of the TV series “Victoria”. A seamstress employed in royal service is a member of the Charterist group seeking the vote for men in 1848. Her answer to a question asking why she is involved with such a radical movement is that her father had been at Peterloo.

The director of the film is Mike Leigh, who grew up in Salford, near Manchester. He is an award-winning film maker with some 32 films and TV productions to his name. The starring female role is played by Maxine Peake, herself a Mancunian known for her social activism. The film was released in March 2019 to critical acclaim.

The after-effects of the war and the prevailing circumstances of 1819 are brought to life in the story of a single family living in Manchester. A son of theirs, a drummer boy in the army, has returned, physically unscathed but severely traumatised by his experiences. The family is poor and unassuming. The mother, Maxine Peake, expresses her cynicism at the proposed address by Henry Hunt to the populace as a form of protest. The authenticity of the scenes portrayed in the film is excellent and serves as a window into the circumstances in which many of the Settlers must have lived, including the style of clothes they wore and the dismal domestic situations at the time. The outfit worn by Henry

Hunt as depicted in the artist's impression of the scene on the hustings on that fateful day is faithfully reproduced in the film.

To quote from a review in Time magazine:

"the climax, as Leigh stages it, is both horrifying and moving. Peterloo shows what can happen when tyrants use brute force. It also proves the ineffectiveness of swords and bayonets or their modern-day counterparts in breaking the will of the people."

The tragic death of the drummer boy who succumbs to the injuries sustained in the melee is indeed horrifying and moving.

The LAHS was delighted to bring the film to Port Alfred. It may enable us to ponder with greater understanding on the state of the Lower Albany, our home, 200 years after the Settlers arrived.

A quote from the book "Red Dog" by Willem Anker, part novel, part historical account about the life of the rebel Trekboer, Coenraad Buys, seems appropriate as he asks the reader:

*"Do you also want to cry out? The past is not dead,
it's not even past"*



References

1. Butler, Guy. The 1820 Settlers
2. Nash, M D. The Settler Handbook
3. Anker, Willem. *Red Dog*
4. Bradshaw, Peter. *Review of the film "Peterloo."* The Guardian Newspaper, 1st September 2018

Wikipedia: The Peterloo Massacre: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peterloo _