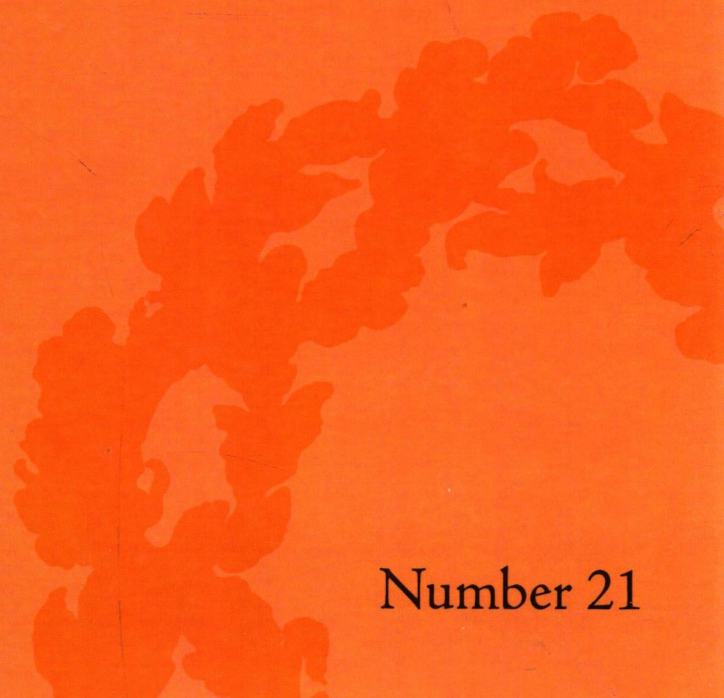


The Spirit of the Union

Gordon Pentland

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THE SPIRIT OF THE UNION: POPULAR
POLITICS IN SCOTLAND, 1815-1820

BY

Gordon Pentland



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THE SPIRIT OF THE UNION: POPULAR
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INTRODUCTION

The ‘Radical War’ – one name given to an attempted general rising in April 1820 – holds a prominent place in Scottish culture but an uneasy one in Scottish historiography. The only book-length exploration of the event, Peter Berresford Ellis and Seumas Mac a’Ghobhainn’s *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820* (1970), offers an interpretation of it as both a serious rupture in Scottish society in the form of an insurrectionary attempt nourished by nationalist and class consciousness and as a piece of ‘hidden’ history which had been intentionally exorcized from Scottish historiography.¹ In some quarters this interpretation has been challenged, but with the paradoxical effect of reducing the social and political tensions demonstrated by the event to ‘the futile revolt of a tiny minority.’² A more recent investigation of the ‘Radical War’ within the wider context of the long eighteenth century, by C. A. Whately, has gone some way to marking out a different case for the significance of the event and acknowledges its disruptive effect, but unshackles it from some of the less supportable assertions of *The Scottish Insurrection*.³ Nevertheless, as Ellis points out in the new preface of the 2001 reprinted but unrevised edition of the book, it remains the only full-length published study of ‘the last major Scottish insurrection.’⁴

The lacuna in ‘academic’ history is all the more striking given the frequency with which the attempted insurrection has appeared in Scottish politics and culture and its centrality to ‘popular’ histories of Scotland. In recent times, for example, it has provided slogans for Scottish National Party (SNP) activists and inspiration for trade unionists, while it was the fulcrum for a politically-engaged education debate in the Scottish Parliament in 2001. Outside of the explicitly political sphere, it has inspired plays, poetry, novels and paintings. Finally, calls for the commemoration of the ‘martyrs’ of 1820 have led to widely-publicized campaigns both to restore and amend existing monuments and to establish new ones (such as the monument to the ‘battlefield’ of Bonnymuir, erected in 2007). Given this pervasive presence in politics and culture, a re-examination of the event itself and its legacy provides a valuable addition to our understanding both of Scotland’s past and of its political ‘usability’. This book argues that a thorough evaluation of this crucial yet little understood and much mythologized period in

Scottish history makes a significant contribution to our understanding of politics during E. P. Thompson's 'heroic age of popular radicalism'.⁵

The book has three key aims. First, it aims to place the rising itself in its proper contexts. It does this by exploring the different modes of extra-parliamentary politics between 1815 and 1820 and paying close attention to events outside of Scotland. It thus shifts the focus from the 'Radical War' itself to the reform movements of 1816–17 and 1819–20 more generally and includes an analysis of the Queen Caroline agitation that followed the attempted insurrection. The dramatic appeal provided by the events of 1820 has tended to overshadow both the importance of the development of mass popular politics after 1815 and the revival and transformation of popular loyalism after this date. While some superb unpublished work has provided a compelling examination of the development of radical politics between 1815 and 1820, it has done so without addressing the interactions of radicalism and loyalism and without placing events in Scotland within a convincing British framework.⁶ Other work has demonstrated that events in Scotland can fruitfully be examined in the context provided not only by events in Parliament, but other popular political activity, in particular, in London and the north of England.⁷

Existing work on Scotland in this period has approached popular politics through the categories bequeathed by social history methodologies of the 1960s and 1970s. By concentrating on issues of class formation and class conflict (either explicitly or implicitly) the tendency has been to ignore the interlocutors of popular radicals, those other groups that constitute a political culture.⁸ The theoretical underpinning of the current book is provided by the 'new political history', which has been central in remodelling interpretations of English politics across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ Though there are few programmatic statements of this approach to political history its central premises are well established. First, it has been influenced by the 'linguistic turn' in the humanities, which has encouraged historians to take the study of language more seriously and to complicate the relationship between language and social being. Secondly, it has entailed emphasizing the relative autonomy of politics from underlying social structures and encouraged a sustained assault on the notion that political ideas and activities are the expressions of processes of class formation or instances of class conflict.

In terms of popular politics and radicalism the Ur-text of the new political history was Gareth Stedman Jones's influential article on Chartism, which shifted focus away from the social composition of the movement to the languages used by activists in pursuit of wide-scale political mobilization. Instead of social and economic distress being the crucial explanatory factor for Chartist mobilization, Stedman Jones reversed the equation. The key area for historians to explore, he argued, was how activists provided and disseminated languages

and ideas about politics that allowed people to make sense of this distress in political terms.¹⁰ The historiographical legacy of this approach has been a dramatic shift in focus. Political historians are now far more interested in questions of leadership, language and organization than in profiling the social constituencies of mass movements and divining their role in processes of class formation and conflict.

Stedman Jones's key insight has been applied with considerable sophistication to English radical politics for the period after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Jonathan Fulcher's work has followed Stedman Jones in eschewing the dominance of social and economic explanations for popular radicalism: 'it is the political arena which provides the crucial context for understanding the rise and fall of mass activity'.¹¹ Such an approach involves not only examining the way in which radical activists sought to appeal to the people and turn them into political actors, but how such appeals related to and interacted with the language and actions of other groups within the political culture. This compelling case to take seriously other positions – most notably those of loyalists and of both Whigs and Tories inside and outside of Parliament – has influenced the approach of this book, which aims to place radicalism within its proper political context in Scotland.

Chapter 1 examines distinctive features of politics in the immediate aftermath of 1815 and highlights important continuities with the popular politics of the preceding decades. It briefly discusses the socio-economic context in which politics was pursued but emphasizes how different political groups – radicals and reformers, Whigs and loyalists – responded both to Parliament and to the specific challenges and opportunities afforded by the cessation of hostilities. One of the key arguments is that war and the challenges involved in what one radical poet called 'this swift hitch from war to peace' dominated both political discourse and aims into the 1820s. In particular, it focuses on the relationship between 'moderate' and 'radical' reformers, both of whom pursued specific goals after 1815 and developed novel strategies to do so, but whose critiques were both premised on popular understandings of the British constitution. It also explores the rhetorical and political strategies and the geographical reach of the reform movement, all of which were crucial in the movement's claim to represent 'the nation' in 1816–17. Finally, it explores the evidence for the existence of an insurrectionary 'underground' in Scotland, which provided much of the rationale for a series of repressive legislative measures (in particular, the suspension of habeas corpus) in 1817.

Chapter 2 examines how a broadly-based reform movement came to an end in 1817. Traditional explanations focus on the role of both repression and the ebb and flow of economic conditions. The argument here will focus on politics. It will explore closely both the reaction to radicalism in terms of state trials (in

particular those of Niel Douglas, the Universalist minister and Andrew McKinlay, a weaver tried for administering secret oaths) and the encouragement of a revival of official loyalism across Scotland. Another part of the explanation, however, is provided by an examination of how Whigs and potentially sympathetic groups responded to popular politics and radicalism. The Whigs in Scotland were generally successful in asserting some leadership of reform during 1817, both by channelling it through a critique of the Scottish state and its assault on the liberties of the people and by linking it to the specifically Scottish issue of burgh reform.

Chapter 3 investigates the emergence in Scotland of the first genuinely popular political movement based around the 'mass platform', which reached its apotheosis during the second half of 1819. Once again, previous accounts have tended to ground explanations in socio-economic factors, on the premise that material distress necessarily produced political activism. While these factors will be explored, emphasis will be placed instead on the shifting relationships of different political groups and on the languages and strategies they used. 'Union' had been a key strategic goal and an end in itself for the earlier movement, but it became axiomatic during the movement of 1819, which was both socially and geographically more exclusive. It was in this year that the *Spirit of the Union* – the short-lived Scottish radical periodical from which this book takes its name – emerged, in part as a response to the problems of creating and articulating a national claim for radicals in the fraught context after Peterloo.

While the centre of gravity of the book lies in the mass political activity preceding 1820 its second aim is to provide the first full and referenced account of the rising of 1820 itself in Chapter 4. There are key problems with existing accounts. Ellis and Mac a'Ghobhainn's work was clearly based on extensive consultation of primary source material, but this was left unreferenced throughout. Through the careful examination of the surviving sources a different account of 1820 will be presented and the roles played by events in England and by purported *agents provocateurs* will be examined. The political context for radical activity described and analysed in Chapters 1–3 goes some way to furnishing this different interpretation of the events of 1820. The compelling case for the connections between Scottish and English radicals has been made for the 1790s and it is no less important in explaining some of the central events of the post-war period.¹² In particular, the idea that events in the west of Scotland formed part of an abortive 'general rising' across north Britain will be explored.

It is worth stating at this stage that I have been unable to identify or locate the *only* evidence cited by Ellis and Mac a'Ghobhainn in support of their assertion that the aims of the radicals in Scotland were nationalist and republican. This consisted of two letters about the Scottish radicals, allegedly sent by the Glasgow chief of police, James Mitchell, in March of 1820, stating that: 'Their

plan is to set up a Scottish Assembly or Parliament in Edinburgh, likewise similar assemblies are to be set up by the disaffected in England and Ireland'.¹³ Despite assiduous searching through all of those manuscript sources that appear in the book's truncated bibliography (and much else besides) I have come across neither of these letters, nor have I come across any mention of them. I make no claims or accusations. What I will say is that even if these letters do exist, they are slim testimony indeed when set against the overwhelming evidence, both in public and private statements, that radicals in Scotland generally spoke a British language of popular constitutionalism. This language was capacious enough to make room for the extensive use of the Scottish past, but its principal aim was the radical reform of British political institutions and its implications, therefore, were unionist.¹⁴

The Conclusion addresses two historical questions: what did the mass reform movement actually achieve; and how can historians explain the relative political quiescence of the 1820s during which, while reform projects abounded, there were no mass calls for political reform until the constitutional crisis of 1830–2? The conclusion incorporates an investigation of the Queen Caroline agitation, which should be seen as a period of transition from post-war politics to those of the 1820s and as far more than a 'footnote' to the mass platform agitation of 1819–20. Indeed, one recent account has interpreted it as a 'rehabilitation' of constitutionalist popular politics, which acted as a kind of balm after the violent episodes of 1817–20.¹⁵ Arguably the most important impact was from this realignment of the reform platform, which provided a model for what would happen in 1832 and also rendered radicalism an acknowledged force within the state. Above and beyond this impact, the period after 1815 emerges as one of considerable political innovation that established much of the repertoire of mass political action into Chartism and beyond.

The third and final aim of this book is to examine the long-term political 'usability' of the insurrection of 1820. A lengthy epilogue argues that the 'Radical War' has a complex legacy, which has been more politically significant than the event itself. The historicity of popular politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ensured that 1820 was used by a number of groups in different contexts and maintained a consistent presence in Scottish political culture (in spite of its later casting as 'hidden' or 'forgotten' history). The Epilogue thus shifts the focus to move onto issues of commemoration and the different political uses of the Scottish past. Existing literature on modern commemoration has tended to focus on the activities of states and political elites rather than within what Geoff Eley calls an 'oppositional public sphere'.¹⁶ An exploration of how different understandings of this period have been mobilized provides an ideal lens through which to examine radical and oppositional uses of commemoration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and addresses a significant lacuna within modern Scottish history.

1 THE FORGING OF POST-WAR POLITICS

The first step in reconstructing the politics of the early nineteenth century is to acknowledge the sheer impact of the end of the war. The transformative nature of the long French Wars (1793–1815) can scarcely be underestimated. It was an unprecedented conflict in terms of the scale of participation of manpower (and indeed womanpower), something conveyed in part by simple but striking figures. The participation rate of men of military age was one in sixteen for the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8); one in eight for the American Revolution (1776–83); but rose to one in five or six at the height of the French Wars.¹ The peacetime army of 1789 had stood at 40,000 – by 1814 it had reached 250,000. One of the most remarkable features of the period is the manner in which the British state proved capable of mobilizing manpower at those points at which French invasion seemed credible and imminent. In particular, the extraordinary mobilization of 1803–4, which saw volunteering on a huge scale, vastly increased the numbers of Britons with some military experience. While it avoided recourse to the novel French *levée en masse* the British state nevertheless managed to create the ‘armed nation.’² As J. E. Cookson has demonstrated, the participation rate of Scots in all of these various forms of martial endeavour was out of proportion to the small size of their country. As well as providing more men, proportionately, for both the officers and the rank and file of the army, they were the United Kingdom’s most enthusiastic volunteers.³

This mobilization of manpower was matched by the ability to raise resources through borrowing, and especially through taxation. Britain was the only state in Europe which, under the pressure of the French Wars, successfully transformed itself into a ‘fiscal state’, able efficiently to tax a large proportion of the nation’s wealth and combine this with large-scale borrowing. The great innovation here was, of course, the income tax, which provided a source of direct taxation between 1799 and 1816. While there were worrying signs for ministers, in attacks on corruption and ‘tax-eaters’, that the legitimacy of the public revenue was increasingly being questioned towards the end of the war, it was successfully maintained.⁴

No society could have snapped from a war demanding such a level of participation and commitment and returned to the *status quo ante*. Britain's elite was faced with challenges common to the post-war experiences of other states and, indeed, other periods.⁵ An economy geared to war, in which prices for marginal agricultural land had risen, was thrown into competition with Europe and became subject to repeated economic crises. Adding to this profound problem was the fact that thousands of men with military experience were thrust back into a turbulent civilian life and countless more people with exposure to years of military spectacle considered how best to promote and defend their interests in peacetime.⁶

The impact of demobilized soldiers, in particular, was dramatic and formed an oft-stated anxiety of contemporary observers. Between 300,000 and 400,000 ex-servicemen were demobilized in the years following Waterloo. In 1819, according to F. C. Mather, there were 61,397 out-pensioners registered at Chelsea, fully three times the 1792 figure. This continued to rise to a peak of 85,834 in 1828 and then steadily diminished after that point.⁷ Military recruitment, of course, had been strong in populous areas and the army had been a destination for many from the manufacturing communities of the north of England and south of Scotland, as well as from increasingly landless and proletarianized rural communities. These men were thrust back into an economy which was contracting as it adjusted to post-war realities, with the predictable outcome of spiralling unemployment.⁸ As Mather pointed out, to the ruling elites and nervous middle classes these ex-servicemen represented at one and the same time a threat and an opportunity. The opportunity was slowly but, in the end, successfully grasped and men of military experience were co-opted into the peacetime law and order establishment. This was, however, a gradual and uneven process with marked success only after 1819. Even if, as Cookson has argued, 'military service more obviously produced civil officers and "magistrates' men" than it did insurrectionists,' it did create both, and before the 1820s ex-servicemen were a threat to the social order as much as they were a guarantor of it.⁹

This profoundly altered socio-economic landscape was matched by an utterly changed context for the practice of politics. First, new groups emerged with novel claims on the state or with old claims strengthened and given a new validity, while at the same time governments ran the risk of becoming victims of those rhetorical and political strategies they had employed to sustain the war effort. The end of the war entailed a major shift in the political languages open to different groups. Most importantly, war had been the crucial glue that kept patriotism and loyalism in close proximity. The fit had never been exact and patriotism had remained contested throughout the war. Radicals had largely lost this contest by the mid-1790s, but there were attempts to rebuild a reform con-