

University of Sheffield





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Five men were executed at Newgate on 1 May 1820 for their part in an attempt to assassinate the British Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, and his cabinet of ministers. The plotters envisaged that they would lead an insurrection across London in the aftermath of their ‘tyrannicide’.

The plot is usually referred to as the ‘Cato Street Conspiracy’ after the street in London in which the revolutionaries were arrested.

The conspiracy has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, and there has been a tendency among those who have examined Cato Street to dismiss it as an isolated, forlorn, foolhardy and — ultimately — unimportant event.

The violent intent of the conspirators sits uncomfortably with notions of what it was (and is) to be English or British. It even sits beyond the pale of ‘mainstream’ radical history in Britain, which tends to be framed in terms of evolution rather than revolution. Even within a revolutionary framework, Cato Street can be discussed as the fantasy of isolated adventurers who had no contact with, or influence upon, ‘the masses’.

This conference will examine the Cato Street Conspiracy through a number of different lenses. These perspectives will shed new light on the ‘plot’ itself, its contemporary significance, and its importance (or otherwise) in the longer history of radicalism and revolutionary movements.



Keynote Speakers



Sophia A. McClennen is Professor of International Affairs and Comparative Literature at Penn State University, founding director of the Center for Global Studies, and Associate Director of the School of International Affairs. She has published ten books, over sixty essays, serves on eight editorial boards, and has a weekly column with Salon. She studies human rights, satire and politics, with two recent books on related topics *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?*, co-authored with Remy Maisel, and *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*, co-edited with Alexandra Schultheis Moore. Her next book *Globalization and Latin American Cinema* is due out at the end of 2017.

John Gardner is Professor of English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University,. He specialises in 18th-and 19th-century literature and culture, and has published widely on nineteenth-century radical politics and literature, including on Cato Street and the Peterloo Massacre. His monograph, *Poetry and Popular Protest: Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (2011) was shortlisted for the ESSE book award. He has also delivered talks at conferences all over the world, including in France, India and the United States.



Malcolm Chase is Professor of Social History at the University of Leeds. He has published widely on popular politics in the nineteenth century, including articles in *English Historical Review*, *Parliamentary History* and *Past & Present*. His books include *'The People's Farm': English Radical Agrarianism, 1775-1840* (new edition, 2010) and *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (2013). His current research project is a biography of Sir Francis Burdett.

Conference Schedule

Tuesday 12th September – Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences

12.00-13.00 **Welcome Lunch and Registration**

13.00-13.30 **Welcome Address – Professor Martin Conboy, University of Sheffield**

13.30-14.30 **Keynote Address – Professor Sophia McClennen, Penn State University**

“The Rights to Debt”

In keeping with this conference's interests in rights, resistance, and revolution and the violent ways states suppress those rights, this talk explores the connections between debt and human rights. Moving our conversation into the post World War II period, it begins by exploring the historical synchronicity between the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the development of multilateral trade agreements, specifically the GATT agreement. At exactly the same time the United Nations was concerned with developing a universal concept of human rights, the World Bank was founded with the intention of developing a globally accepted set of trade standards. The World Bank, though, was also in the lending business, and soon developed policies that created debtor nations and those nations were exactly the same ones where human rights seemed most fragile. For instance, austerity measures, which typically accompanied development loans, often did more to threaten rights than to ensure them. By developing the idea of the "indebted state" this essay traces the story of the intertwined connections between rights and debt in order to highlight how neoliberal economics have influenced and complicated these connections.

14.30-16.00

Session One - Resisting Revolt: Intelligence and Infiltration

David Cox (*University of Wolverhampton*): “Men who knew their duty and had the full power to perform it”: Sedition and the use of Bow Street Runners in its prevention, 1749-1839.

Richard Gaunt (*University of Nottingham*): When Did They Know? Intelligence, Informers and Cato Street

Neil Cobbett (*National Archives & St. Mary's University*): Fenian organisation and state counter-measures: infiltration, surveillance and provocation

16.00-16.30

Coffee Break

16.30-17.30

Keynote Address – Professor John Gardner, Anglia Ruskin University

“'The Conspiracies of 1820”

I will examine Cato street within the context of the other British conspiracies that took place in 1820. The ‘rebellions’ of Cato Street, Cathkin, Stirling, and West Riding follow remarkably similar patterns: small numbers of men, talk of entrapment, and then brutal public executions in front of massive crowds to show that any attempts at revolution would be quickly and brutally suppressed. These conspiracies resulted in the execution of eight men for High Treason in 1820—the last executions for this offence until the Easter Rising in 1916. This paper will examine these conspiracies along with new findings on Sidmouth’s spy system.

19.30-lateish

Conference Evening Meal at Zizzi's

Wednesday 13th September — Jessop Building, Room 116

9.00-9.30 Welcome Back

9.30-10.30 Keynote Address: Professor Malcolm Chase, University of Leeds

“Rethinking 1820: Cato Street and the European Perspective”

1820 was a year of unrest in the UK that had no parallel until 1848. It was also a year of European revolution: regimes were overthrown in Spain, Portugal and much of modern-day Italy, and in June French cavalry charged Parisian demonstrators when they began chanting “vivent nos frères de Manchester!” (referring of course to Peterloo).

The actions of the UK Government (led by a Prime Minister who had witnessed the storming of the Bastille in 1789) need to be evaluated in this broader context. So too do those of British revolutionary conspirators. Cato Street and the Caroline Affair too-easily distract us from the full panoply of events in 1820. However, the Government itself actively downplayed the challenges that confronted it. To do otherwise would have jeopardised its very survival in a year that combined a general election, a constitutional crisis, a surge of radicalism (both within and beyond Parliament) and several of the most overt and concerted expressions of revolutionary discontent in UK history.

I shall seek to place Cato Street in this wider context, taking as a starting point a recently discovered contemporary French print which ought to convey ‘le dessein diabolique’ of Cato Street to a continental audience.

10.30-11.00 Coffee Break

11.00-12.30

Session Two: Revolutionary Contexts

John Stevenson (*University of Oxford*): “Joining up the dots?": the Cato Street Conspiracy and the Anglo-Irish insurrectionary tradition

Timothy Murtagh (*Trinity College, Dublin*): “The Shadow of the Pike Man”: Irish Workers and British Radicalism 1800-1820

Ajmal Waqif (*Goldsmiths, University of London*): “Right to the soil throughout the world”: Spenceanism and the global experience of dispossession and revolt

12.30-13.30

Lunch

13.30-15.00

Session Three: Legacies of Insurrection

Colin Reid (*University of Sheffield*): From Cato Street to Sackville Street: The Idea of the ‘Provisional Government’ in British and Irish Revolutionary Traditions

Kieran Hannon (*Independent Scholar*): What became of the transported Cato Street Conspirators?

Jason McElligott (*Marsh’s Library, Dublin*): William Hone and the Rye House Plot of 1683

15.00-16.00

Plenary Q&A (Coffee and Cake Served)

14.30-16.00 — 12th September

Resisting Revolt: Intelligence and Infiltration

“Men who knew their duty and had the full power to perform it”: Sedition and the use of Bow Street Runners in its prevention 1749-1839

David Cox — *University of Wolverhampton*

Whilst the use of Bow Street Officers (both Principal Officers and members of the Bow Street Patrol) is well-documented in regard to the Cato Street Conspiracy, their role in infiltrating ‘seditious’ or ‘treasonable’ groups outside the Metropolis is perhaps less well-known.

This paper aims to provide an insight into the type and number of such cases that various Bow Street personnel were called upon to investigate throughout Britain. In an arguably otherwise ‘pre-professional policing’ era, the Bow Street Runners were one of the few non-military options available to both local and national government in their respective attempts to prevent ‘radical’ groups spreading seditious or treasonable unrest amongst the populace. In investigating such cases the Runners acted in both a preventive and detective capacity, in contrast to much of their other work which was largely detective in nature.

When Did They Know? Intelligence, Informers and Cato Street

Richard Gaunt — *University of Nottingham*

When the Cato Street conspirators were apprehended in a hay-loft on the evening of Thursday 23 February 1820, Lord Liverpool’s cabinet were fully aware of the plot. How and when they were cognisant of it is the subject of this paper. It is well-known that three people warned the Ministers, in different ways and at different stages, in the weeks and months preceding the dinner, of a plot to assassinate the cabinet. However, the emphasis on which warning was taken most seriously, and at which point in time, varies between accounts.

This paper explores these differences in emphasis, concentrating on the accounts given by Dudley Ryder, first earl of Harrowby, at whose house in Grosvenor Square the cabinet was scheduled to dine, and Arthur Wellesley, first duke of Wellington and Master-General of the Ordnance. Some of these differences are explained by the imperfect recollections of memory, but they also suggest the differing status and authority with which information of this kind was treated by ministers. In an age when agents provocateurs were a common resource for governments worried by extreme forms of popular radicalism, the nature and source of evidence was a matter of practical concern in securing convictions. By exploring the way in which the Cato Street intelligence was received and acted upon (or not), the paper feeds into wider debates about the nature of surveillance, intelligence and prosecution during a period of post-war radical discontent.

14.30-16.00 — 12th September

Resisting Revolt: Intelligence and Infiltration

“Fenian organisation and state counter-measures: infiltration, surveillance and provocation”

Neil Cobbett *National Archives & St. Mary's University*

In the period around 1820 there is now evidence of the use of secret agents, informers and provocateurs to foment pseudo-plots such as the Cato Street conspiracy with the aim of demonstrating the power of the State to police and suppress any radical activities considered dangerous. Later the bane of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland and Britain and both wings of Clan na Gael in the USA was the similar use of secret agents and informers or provocateurs to foment plots which could then provide justification for the suppression of parts of the movement as well as the gaining of information on its membership, sympathisers and periphery, the disruption of the movement and discrediting of elements of its leadership. Sometimes this use of agents provocateurs has been overwhelming as in the period of the Jubilee Plot. Later the Chief Secretary's Office in Dublin was privy to reports from various agencies and branches of government all indicating that the IRB was hatching a credible plot for a rebellion in 1916.

During the Troubles the British made use of informants as well as spies and of systematic surveillance and identification of republicans. After Bloody Sunday in Dublin this included the use of indirect means of intelligence gathering such that the British were able to fairly successfully continue their relentless pursuit of the IRA in Dublin which is now being seen as having been far more successful than hitherto supposed. This prompts various questions which might repay examination.

How did British penetration of the ranks of Irish radical movements by informers and agents manage to be so pervasive and how effective was it? Was such infiltration actually rendered more effective by the conspiratorial clandestine organisation? How did this work in the context of very localised structures as in Ireland or more expansive, as in America or internationally?

Is the adoption of conspiratorial, clandestine methods by radical forces really a more or less effective method of organisation than say open movements or trades unions? Does reliance on such methods make movements more susceptible to penetration by state intelligence services because of their very exclusivity and isolation in the absence of the adoption of concealment practices using host communities counter-posed and hence at least partially “alienated” from and “alien” to the state and the dominant culture? Economic reasons having possibly informed a certain proportion of informers can we draw any conclusions as to the motivation behind informing in terms of disagreement with the aims or the methods? Were there any other ideological or political factors at work?

“Joining up the dots?”: the Cato Street Conspiracy and the Anglo-Irish insurrectionary tradition

John Stevenson — *University of Oxford*

A binary view between moderate and violent proceedings is potentially too clear cut and has potentially skewed our representation of the Cato Street episode, whether in the traditional historiography or that of the traditional history of the labour 'movement'. How isolated were the ultra-radicals in the radical politics of the era. More recent political struggles, Irish nationalism, Palestine, South Africa, the Northern Ireland Troubles, the Women's Suffrage and Civil Rights Movement demonstrate that a spectrum of tactics have often coincided and been manipulated to achieve desired objectives. This paper re-examines the attitudes of radical figures, such as Place, Burdett, Bamford and Cobbett in the context of a repressive government. How realistic was it that a dramatic blow struck in London would have elicited a significant response in the country at large? Can historians be accused of simply 'joining up the dots' in supposing a large-scale response was possible to the actions of a 'splinter of a fraction'? It appears one other person did, the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth. Finally, what legacy did 1820 leave to reformers.

“The Shadow of the Pike Man”: Irish Workers and British Radicalism 1800-1820

Timothy Murtagh — *Trinity College, Dublin*

This paper examines the involvement of Irish workers in British radicalism between the passage of the Act of Union in 1800 and the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820. The paper argues that Irish artisans not only played a significant role in the creation of Irish republicanism during the 1790s, but also in the formation of later British working-class politics. As Irish proto-industrialization failed in the early nineteenth century, a variety of Irish migrant groups made their way to Britain. Whether it was Protestant linen weavers from Ulster or Catholic tradesmen from Munster and Leinster, they were all confronted with the political debates and social disruptions of the age. This paper looks at the political activities of these Irish artisans, many of whom were fleeing repression due to their role in the rebellion of 1798 or Robert Emmet's 1803 rising. In towns like Stockport or Manchester, these migrants could access a pre-existing network of Irish working-class radicals, many of whom had been allied to groups like the United Englishmen or the London Corresponding Society. As a result, there were murmurings of Irish involvement in almost all the major radical agitations or conspiracies during these years, whether it was the Spa Fields Riots, Peterloo or the Cato Street Conspiracy. In every instance the figure of the Irish migrant, usually presumed to be a former rebel, was rumoured to play a hand. This paper assesses the claims of various police informers that 'pike-men of 1798' played a role in these crucial events.

In addition, this paper attempts to reassess certain aspects of conventional labour history, which has often depicted Irish migrants to Britain as politically apathetic and removed from labour activism. In contrast, this paper examines the role of skilled Irish workers from a variety of religious and occupational backgrounds who migrated to Britain in the early nineteenth century.. The legacy of these crucial few years was immense, laying the ground work for later developments such as Owenism, the agitation for the Great Reform Act of 1832, and, eventually, Chartism. This paper argues for the evidence of sustained Irish involvement in trade unionism and radicalism during these early pivotal years, while presenting a more nuanced case for the role of Irish workers in the creation of a politics based on class.

“Right to the soil throughout the world”: Spenceanism and the global experience of dispossession and revolt

Ajmal Waqif, *Goldsmiths, University of London*

The historian Malcolm Chase has argued that “Cato Street is fully intelligible only within the Spencean context”, referring to the fact that the conspirators had been closely aligned with the Spencean Philanthropists — an ultra-radical political group which proliferated the ideas of their founder Thomas Spence in the early 19th century. Robert Wedderburn, Spencean leader and child of a Caribbean slave mother, would very likely have been involved in the Conspiracy had he not been serving a prison sentence for blasphemy at the time. Wedderburn believed that “the great majority in every nation are dispossessed of their right to the soil throughout the world”, identifying an apparently universal process of dispossession, and extending the Spencean argument for putting all lands and resources in common (or 'Spence's Plan' as it was often called) to the entire world. This view was consistent with Thomas Spence himself, who believed his Plan was “well calculated for any nation under the heavens”.

The ambit of Spencean politics was always wider than Britain, with the heady inspiration of the French Revolution perhaps being the most obvious external influence. However a significant, though under-appreciated, vector of inspiration was from the colonised and enslaved world. Spence consistently regarded Native American communities as paragons of liberty and saw his utopia as conforming to their values of equality in land. Spenceans not only had ideological connections to the Irish Rebellion of 1798, many had also actually been involved in the United Irishmen and the Despard Plot. Wedderburn made parallels between slavery in the Caribbean and the 'bondage' of the labouring classes in Britain, and was heavily inspired by the successful slave revolt in St. Domingo which featured prominently in his discussions on slavery. I will attempt to demonstrate that the Spenceans saw the global process of dispossession as producing populations of disinherited and oppressed people with comparable interests across the world. I will argue that they saw these people as taking part in comparable methods of resistance and revolt, and I will discuss how the Spenceans understood, assessed, and synthesised these experiences of resistance and revolt, incorporating them into their Plan.

In doing so, I will show that the Spenceans hinted at an ideological and strategic template for a universal theory and practise of revolution, one which aspired to unite the interests of oppressed and dispossessed peoples globally, and which ultimately propounded the Spencean utopia as the universal solution to mankind's problems. I believe such a study will shed light on the crucial place of internationalism, abolitionism, and anti-colonialism in the history of the British revolutionary tradition, as well as subvert the notion that this tradition has ever been an exclusively British affair.

13.30-15.00 — 13th September

Legacies of Insurrection

From Cato Street to Sackville Street: The Idea of the ‘Provisional Government’ in British and Irish Revolutionary Traditions

Colin Reid *(University of Sheffield)*

During the trial of Arthur Thistlewood for his part in the Cato Street conspiracy in 1820, it was alleged that his treasonous intent went far beyond the assassination of Lord Liverpool and his ministers. Thistlewood and his fellow insurgents, the prosecution asserted, wished to establish a ‘Provisional Government’ to levy war against the British Crown, and steer the unfolding revolution. This threat of an underground counter-state was used during Thistlewood’s trial to emphasise that the plot went beyond the potential deaths of the Cabinet; the Cato Street conspiracy was nothing less than an attempt to overthrow the government.

The spectre of the ‘Provisional Government’ remains one of the more enduring aspects of the Cato Street conspiracy. But the concept was nothing new in 1820, and would appear again frequently afterwards in other attempts at insurrection. The idea was borrowed from the example of the French Revolution, but first manifested itself in the United Kingdom in 1803, when the United Irishmen under the leadership of Robert Emmet staged a rebellion in Dublin. The Fenian movement created a self-styled ‘Provisional Government of Ireland’ in 1867. In 1913, a ‘Provisional Government of Ulster’ was founded by unionists in the north of Ireland eager to remain part of the United Kingdom during the Home Rule crisis; in 1916, the Easter Rising began with Patrick Pearse reading aloud the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in Dublin on behalf of the ‘Provisional Government of Ireland’.

This paper probes the idea of the ‘Provisional Government’ within the United Kingdom during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, examining its usages within varying revolutionary contexts. The establishment of an underground government, metaphysical or otherwise, sheds light on visions of the state within radical political traditions, and connects the Cato Street conspiracy to earlier and later revolutionary movements within the United Kingdom.

13.30-15.00 — 13th September

Legacies of Insurrection

What became of the transported Cato Street Conspirators?

Kieran Hannon — *Independent Scholar*

Six of the eleven people tried for their part in the Cato Street Conspiracy escaped execution. Five were transported to NSW, and one James Gilchrist was set free. Late in the evening of 1 May 1820, after the execution of their five colleagues, the 'transported conspirators' were removed from Newgate under heavy guard and transferred by coach to Portsmouth. Early next morning they were processed and later placed on the convict transport Guildford, anchored in the Solent off Spit Head.

Before the Guildford left on 14 May, conspirator Charles Cooper indicated in a parting letter: 'I do not much regret leaving England, and if the others had their wives and children with them, they would rejoice to leave the land of taxes, the country in which acts were passed to make provisions dear, and where many mechanics are starving for want of work'.

During their time in Australia the transported conspirators were given the opportunities they lacked in England. In this new environment they became respected and industrious citizens, but retained acceptance of their past and a willingness to justify their previous actions.

William Hone and the Rye House Plot of 1683

Jason McElligott — *Marsh's Library, Dublin*

British radicals of the early nineteenth century often drew inspiration from the print culture of the seventeenth century. One response, for example, to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 was a proposal to reprint *Killing Noe Murder* (1657), a celebration of tyrannicide originally targeted at Oliver Cromwell.

The leading radical publisher William Hone (1780-1842) was a collector and would-be scholar of early-modern print culture. Hone may have been involved on the outer fringes of the Cato Street Conspiracy, to assassinate the British cabinet in 1820. This paper will explore Hone's understanding of the dangers of insurrectionary politics through his knowledge of the fate of his exact namesake who was executed in 1683 for involvement in the ill-fated Rye House Plot to assassinate James, Duke of York.

This paper will consider the importance of the Rye House Plot in the context of the tradition of sectarian, religiously motivated insurrectionary moments and movements in Tudor and Stuart Britain and Ireland. It will explore the differing ways in which earlier sectarian and later political risings have been forgotten or commemorated by posterity.



Members of the Organising Committee

Professor Adrian Bingham

Professor Martin Conboy

Dr Jason McElligott

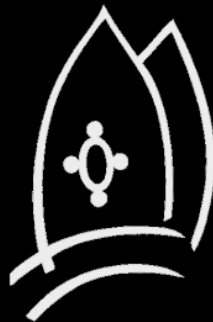
Christopher Shoop-Worrall (Conference Assistant)

This conference is organised under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of Journalism and History, University of Sheffield and Marsh's Library, Dublin.

We would like to thank sponsors from the Department of Journalism Studies and the Department of History of the University of Sheffield, Marsh's Library in Dublin and most of all the participants who have taken their time to attend and contribute to discussions.

CATO STREET & THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

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