



1790 engraving of a painting, now lost, by Francis Wheatley (1747-1801), titled "Riot in Broad Street," that depicts an incident during the Gordon Riots.

“ENGLAND IN BLOOD!”: The Gordon Riots, June 1780.¹

Few studies of the past make for a more witty and pleasurable historical read than Lord Mahon’s (1805-1875) seven volume *History of England, 1713-1783* (1836-1853).² The early to middle-late 18th century was filled with a host of amazing and unlikely characters who ended up wielding power over Europe, including not a few mountebanks, self-made men, and adventurers, and who sometimes rose up from the ranks to guide the fates of thrones and empires -- with mistresses and paramours frequently playing strategic parts in addition.

As well for us, it is no little helpful for students of the American Revolution to better understand the Britain the colonists (largely) originated from *and* later came to fight.

Much of Mahon’s account is understandably taken up with accounts of the Scottish rebellions; of which in the 18th century there were two, in 1715 and 1745; and which were brought about as a result of efforts to unseat the Hanoverians and place a Stuart king on the throne. The story of these uprisings oft verges on the comical; where the Scots sometimes came so mightily close to winning, but for the military incompetence of the some of the Pretender’s generals and immediate lieutenants. Scotch support of the Stuarts tended to some extent to stem from James I of England, and successor to Queen Elizabeth I, having been earlier King of Scotland (he was also, by the way, the son of Mary Queen of Scots.) Interestingly, his great-grandson James the III, the old Pretender, could have been King of England, in place of George I (from German Hanover), if he had converted to or had acknowledged the authority of the Anglican church. As it was and like his father, James II brother of Charles II and dethroned in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, he remained a steadfast Catholic. Moreover, be it noted, the Tories *of those days* often tended to be supporters of the Pretender/Stuarts.

England’s wars with Scotland were its training grounds against fighting rebels, and no doubt some of the same attitudes and practices they had and used in the Scotch rebellions was transferred to their treatment of subsequent American rebels.³ Ironically, when the British became representatives of the ‘Tories’ in the American Revolution, most Scots -- though with notable exceptions like Jonathan Witherspoon, John Paul Jones, Alexander McDougall, Arthur St. Clair, Allan McLean, William Alexander, Lachlan McIntosh, Joseph McDowell, William Campbell (to name some) -- sided with the Crown rather

¹ “England in Blood!” was the title of a handbill pass around at the time of the riots, and which, in effect, predicted the nation wallowing in gore if the Papist Relief Act of 1778 were not repealed.

² Mahon, we might in passing note, was a friend and at one time fellow traveling companion of Washington Irving.

³ Perhaps, in retrospect, because, as Dr. Johnson alleged, “they sold [out] Charles the First.”

than the Americans. And thus in an odd twist, the Crown, the foes of the Pretenders, had themselves become allied to the very Tories that were once their enemies; while the American 'Whigs' came to see George III as a kind of Pretender; with the Anglican church, at least in the eyes of American Protestant Dissenters, taking on the role of the hated Roman Catholics/Papists.

While Mahon's coverage of the rebellions of 1715 and 1745 are charged and full of thrills and pathos, he is arguably and perhaps at his most exciting and dramatic, however, in his treatment of the Gordon Riots, that took place in London in June 1780.

Compare English king Charles the First to Louis XVI, or the Gordon Riots of 1780 to the Paris mobs of 1789 and early 90s. Are these merely coincidences, or did Britain, as was so often the case in many matters, take the lead; only to have others follow? There had earlier in the century been riots in London before over excise taxes (during Robert Walpole's administration) and later over the imprisoning of free speech advocate and Parliamentary people pleaser John Wilkes, but none of these compared with the Gordon Riots. And when it comes to the Gordon Riots, it is easy to say "The de'il is in it" -- *somewhere* most assuredly. But where *exactly*? That, on the other hand is not so very easy to discern.

Lord George Gordon (1751-1793), member of the House of Commons for Ludgershall (a pocket Borough) and son of a Scottish Duke, was a vociferous critic of both the war against the rebelling American colonists and the administration of Lord North. Described as gentile and gracious, and practically raving and eccentric as a politician, throughout his life Gordon showed a marked empathy for the poor and down trodden. He was, although a Lord, a man of the people after the likes and model of John Wilkes, or at least such was his ostensible object. Yet although allied with the Whigs, he subsequently had a falling out with Charles Fox and Edmund Burke because of his extremism. For instance, he objected to Burke's economic reform bill of 1780 for not cutting more deeply into the sinecures and pensions of Royal favorites.

Of course, it was Gordon's opposition to the Papist Relief Act of 1778 that catapulted him into the spotlight that that hitherto eluded him. It can hardly be imagined that he did not know what volatile emotions he was tapping into by raising the cry of "no popery." And it was arguably this that was his aim, not fear of a Papist threat. As historians have time and again shown, the 1778 bill was relatively mild in its emancipation of Catholics, and that only applied to those willing to swear an oath of allegiance to King George in the first place. So that in short we might reasonably concluded that Gordon used the notion of papist threat to gain power; like a curious child playing with fire wanting to see what would happen if...(?) He was a demagogue: well meaning no doubt, but a demagogue all the same. And what started out as a movement on behalf of the defense of Protestantism overtime became transformed into a groundswell of anarchy and lawlessness.

And in what way specifically were Catholics a threat? For one, popery was seen by some as one of the surreptitious forces underlying Britain's war on the colonies. Some New England rebels, like John Trumbull the poet, had previously enunciated such a view. So perhaps Gordon, in secret, was targeting Britain's regrettable war effort. Conversely, possibly the threat was coming from France and Spain, now aligned with the Americans against Britain. For who (at some point during the tumult in London) were among those wearing the blue cockade of the Protestant Association? That would be ALL of the British Horse and Foot Guards sent to quell the mobs, and who, rest assured, were no friends to the American rebels.⁴

With American War not going so propitiously as first intended, with cries for reform, much of it needed, in various departments, the Gordon Riots came at the time when Britain was going through a period of very painful transition. And with thousands in London living in dire poverty, and general morals having lapsed to an all time low by the late 18th century (a point Mahon addresses in a separate portion of his works, see vol. 7, ch. LXX), there were many who felt a need to let loose and let out pent up emotions and frustrations. But there is a positive side to the shocking chaos of the riots; in that they brought Government

⁴ See *King Mob: The London Riots of 1780* by Christopher Hibbert, p. 66.

and opposition together and afforded an occasion for some to speak out from their deepest heart and take a courageous stand for law and the British Constitution.

What follows then is Mahon's account drawn from volume seven, chapter 53, of his history.⁵

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...But within a few days of the close of these transactions, they were quite forgotten in a train— new and wholly unlooked for — of affairs. Then of a sudden, like a meteor rising from the foulest marshes, appeared those fearful riots, to which the most rank intolerance gave origin, and Lord George Gordon a name. Then the midnight sky of London was reddened with incendiary fires, and her streets resounded to the cry of an infuriated mob; then our best and wisest statesmen had to tremble, not only for their lives, but for their hearths and homes; then for once in our annals, the powers of Government and order seemed to quail and succumb before the populace of the capital in arms.

In a former chapter it has been already shown how the Protestant Associations, spreading from Scotland to England, and selecting Lord George Gordon as their common chief, continued, through the year 1779, to gather strength and numbers.<sup>6</sup> The conduct of Lord George showed that he was well entitled to his post of pre-eminence in folly. During the Session of 1780, he made many speeches in the House of Commons, always marked by ignorant fanaticism, and often by low buffoonery. Thus, on one occasion, we find him call Lord Nugent “the old rat of the Constitution.” Here his meaning seems not quite clear, nor is it of the least importance to discover; but it may serve for a sample of his style. Early in the year, he had obtained an audience of the King, and read out to his Majesty page after page of an Irish pamphlet, so long as the daylight lasted. He suspected, or at least he was wont to insinuate, that George the Third was a Roman Catholic at heart. His next object was to obtain popular petitions, complaining of the recent relaxation in the Penal Laws.

It had been hoped, in the course of the last year, that some indulgence to the Protestant Dissenters might be the best means to lessen or divert their rancour against the Roman Catholics, and to convince them that no exclusive favour was intended to these last. With such views nearly the same measure of Relief from Subscription, which the Lords had rejected by a largo majority in 1772, and again in 1773, passed their House in 1779, when transmitted from the Commons, and, it is said, without debate. The indulgence was accepted, but the rancour was not removed. This plainly appeared from the great popular support with which even the wildest projects of Lord George Gordon were received. The petition which he wished to obtain from London was at this time the object of his especial care. It was invited and urged on in every manner by public advertisements and by personal entreaties. It was for several weeks in circulation, and received many thousand signatures. To give it greater force and effect Lord George, towards the close of May, convened a meeting of the Protestant Association in Coachmakers' Hall. There, after a long speech, and in a most crowded room, he gave notice that he would present the petition to the House of Commons, on the 2nd of June. Resolutions were passed that the whole body of the Association and their friends would, on that day, assemble in St. George's Fields, with blue cockades in their hats to distinguish all true Protestants from their foes. Still further to incite them Lord George added that if the assemblage did not amount to 20,000 he would not present the petition.

Accordingly on Friday, the 2nd of June, and at ten o'clock in the morning, St. George's Fields were thronged with blue cockades. They were computed at 50,000 or 60,000, and by some persons even at 100,000 men. The love of frolic and of staving had certainly brought many new accessions to their ranks. Appearing in the midst and welcomed by their enthusiastic cheers, Lord George Gordon, in the first place, indulged them with another of his silly speeches. Next, they were marshalled in separate bands, the main body marching over London Bridge and through Temple Bar to the Houses of Parliament. In this procession they walked six abreast, and in their van was carried their great petition, containing, it was said, no less than 120,000 signatures or marks.

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<sup>5</sup> For convenience of this article, all but one of Mahon's footnotes have been omitted.

<sup>6</sup> \* See vol vi. pp. 239. and 261.

London, at that period, was far from yet possessing the sturdy and disciplined police which now, on any chance of riot, or even of mere crowd and pressure, lines our streets and squares. There were only the parish beadles, and the so-called watchmen of the night, for the most part feeble old men, frequently knocked down by the revellers, and scoffed at by the playwrights, of the age. In the face of that mighty array so long previously announced, which Lord George Gordon was leading to Whitehall not one measure of precaution had been taken by the Government. They had neither sworn in any special constables nor stationed any soldiers. It must be owned, however, that the reproaches on that score came with no good grace from the lips of the Opposition chiefs, which had so lately poured forth their loudest clamours when, in the apprehension of some tumult at the Westminster meeting, a body of troops had been kept ready.

Finding no obstruction to their progress, the blue cockades advanced to Palace Yard, and took possession of the open space some time before the two Houses met, as they did later in the afternoon. Then, with only a few door-keepers and messengers between them and some of the principal objects of their fury, they were not long in learning the dangerous secret of their strength. The Lords had been summoned for that day, to hear a motion from the Duke of Richmond, in favour of annual Parliaments and unrestricted suffrage. Lord Chancellor Thurlow was ill and at Tunbridge, and the Earl of Mansfield had undertaken to preside in his place. But as it chanced Lord Mansfield was then most unpopular with the Protestant Associators, having not long since charged a jury to acquit a Roman Catholic priest, who was brought before him charged with the crime of celebrating Mass. Thus, no sooner did his carriage appear than it was assailed and its windows broken, while the venerable judge, the object of the fiercest execrations as “a notorious Papist,” made his way into the House with great difficulty, and on entering, could not conceal his torn robe and his disshevelled wig. He took his seat upon the woolsack pale and quivering. The Archbishop of York’s lawn sleeves were torn off and flung in his face. The Bishop of Lincoln, disliked as a brother of Lord Thurlow, fared still worse; his carriage was demolished, while the prelate, half fainting, sought refuge in an adjacent house, from which, on recovering himself, he made his escape in another dress (some said in a woman’s) along the leads. Lord Hillsborough and Lord Townshend, who came together, and the other Secretary of State, Lord Stormont, were roughly handled, and could scarcely make their way through the people. From Lord President Bathurst they pulled his wig, telling him, in contumelious terms, that he was “the Pope,” and also “an old woman;” thus, says Horace Walpole, splitting into two their notion of Pope Joan! The Duke of Northumberland, having with him in his coach a gentleman in black, a cry arose among the multitude that the person thus attired must be a Jesuit and the Duke’s confessor; a conclusion, it may fairly be owned, not at all more unreasonable than many others they had formed. On the strength of this, their discriminating judgment, His Grace was forced from his carriage, and robbed of his watch and purse.

Still, however, as the Peers by degrees came in, the business of the House in regular course proceeded. Prayers were read, some formal Bills were advanced a stage, and the Duke of Richmond then began to state his reasons for thinking that, under present circumstances, political powers might safely be entrusted to the lowest orders of the people. His Grace was still speaking when Lord Montfort burst into the House, and broke through his harangue. Lord Montfort said that he felt bound to acquaint their Lordships of the perilous situation in which, at that very moment, stood one of their own members; he meant Lord Boston, whom the mob had dragged out of his coach, and were cruelly maltreating. “At this instant,” says an eye-witness, “it is hardly possible to conceive a more grotesque appearance than the House exhibited. Some of their Lordships with their hair about their shoulders; others smutted with dirt; most of them as pale as the ghost in Hamlet; and all of them standing up in their several places, and speaking at the same instant. One Lord proposing to send for the Guards, another for the Justices or Civil Magistrates, many crying out, Adjourn! Adjourn! while the skies resounded with the huzzas, shoutings, or hootings and hissings in Palace Yard. This scene of unprecedented alarm continued for about half an hour.”

It was proposed by Lord Townshend that the Peers should go forth as a body, and attempt the rescue of Lord Boston. This proposal was still debating, rather too slowly for its object, when Lord Boston himself came in, with his hair disshevelled and his clothes covered with hair-powder. He had been exposed to especial danger, through a wholly unfounded suggestion from some persons in the crowd, that he was a Roman Catholic; upon which the multitude, with loud imprecations, had threatened to cut the sign of the Cross upon his forehead. But he had the skill to engage some of the ring-leaders in a controversy on the question whether the Pope be Antichrist; and while they were eagerly discussing that favourite point, he contrived to slip through them. After such alarms, however, the Peers did not resume the original debate.

They summoned to the Bar two of the Middlesex Magistrates, who declared that they had received no orders from the Government, and that, with all their exertions since the beginning of the tumult, they had only been able to collect six constables. Finally, at eight o'clock, the House adjourned till the morrow; and the Peers, favoured by the dusk, returned home on foot, or in hackney carriages, with no further insult or obstruction.

The members of the Commons, as less conspicuous in their equipages than the Peers, were not so much molested in passing to their House. But when once assembled, their danger was far greater, since the infuriated multitude, finding no resistance, burst into and kept possession of the lobby. Here they raised loud shouts of "No Popery! No Popery!" and "Repeal! Repeal!" Meanwhile, Lord George Gordon, seconded by Alderman Bull, was presenting their great Protestant petition, and moving that the House should consider it in Committee forthwith. On the other side, it was proposed that this Committee should be deferred until Tuesday, the 6th. When, however, upon this point a division was demanded, it was found impracticable. Neither the Ayes nor the Noes could go forth, thronged as was the lobby with strangers, and unable as the Sergeant-at-Arms declared himself to clear it. During the debates Lord George endeavoured to keep up the spirit of his friends by showing himself at the top of the gallery-stairs, and making several harangues to the noisy concourse in the lobby. He exhorted them by all means to persevere; and told them, from time to time, the names of the members who were speaking against them. "There is Mr. Burke," he said, "the member for Bristol;" and, soon afterwards, "Do you know that Lord North calls you a mob?" Thus, their fury increasing, the House, at intervals, resounded with their cries of "No Popery!" and their violent knocks at the door. General Conway and Lord Frederick Campbell, that same evening at supper, said there was a moment when they thought they must have opened the doors, and fought their way out sword in hand.

Lord North, however, at this crisis showed great firmness, animating the resolution of the House by his unperturbed demeanour, but sending privately, and in all haste, for a party of the Guards. Other members made it a personal matter with Lord George. Colonel Holroyd told him that he had hitherto ascribed his conduct to insanity; but now saw that there was more of malice than of madness in it; and that, if he again attempted to address the rioters, he, Colonel Holroyd, would immediately move for his commitment to Newgate. Colonel Murray, one of Lord George's kinsmen, used still bolder language: — "My Lord George, do you really mean to bring your rascally adherents into the House of Commons? If you do, the first man of them that enters I will plunge my sword, not into his body, but into yours!" Lord George appears to have been daunted. Certainly, at least, he was silenced. Indeed, in one part of the evening, he quietly went up to the eating-room, where he threw himself into a chair and fell asleep, or nearly so, while listening to some excellent admonitions from Mr. Bowen, the Chaplain of the House.

Failing the incitements of Lord George, the crowd within the lobby grew less fierce. Out of doors, moreover, great exertions were making to allay the storm. Lord Mahon, who was known to many of the people as a recent candidate for Westminster, harangued them from the balcony of a coffee-house, and is said to have done good service to the cause of law and order. In this manner time was gained, until towards nine o'clock, when an active Middlesex Justice, Mr. Addington, appeared with a party of Horse Guards. Mr. Addington told the people in the streets, that he meant them no harm, and that the soldiers should retire if they would quietly disperse, which many hundreds of them did accordingly, first giving the Magistrate three cheers. A party of the Foot Guards was also drawn up in the Court of Requests, and the lobby was now cleared; thus, at length, enabling the House of Commons to divide. Only eight members were found willing to support Lord George in his ignominious proposal for immediate deliberation, at the bidding and in the presence of the mob. Against that proposal 194 votes, including tellers, were recorded; and the House was then adjourned until the Tuesday following.

With the adjournment of both Houses, and the dispersion of the crowd in Palace-Yard, it was imagined that the difficulties of the day had closed. The magistrates returned home, and sent away the soldiers. Unhappily, several parties of the rioters were intent on further mischief. Repairing to the two Roman Catholic chapels of the Sardinian and Bavarian Ministers in Lincoln's Inn Fields and in Warwick Street — chapels which existed by the faith of treaties, and were not at all connected with the Acts of 1778 — they set them in flames. Engines were sent for, but the mob prevented them from playing; while the benches from the Sardinian chapel, being flung into the street, afforded the materials for a bonfire, as a

token of the public exultation. At length the soldiers came — too late to prevent the havoc, in time only to seize and to secure thirteen of the rioters.

Next morning the town was, to all appearance, perfectly tranquil. The House of Lords met in the forenoon, and on the motion of Earl Bathurst, agreed to an Address for prosecuting the authors and abettors of the recent outrages. The angry taunts that followed between the Government and Opposition members, may be readily conceived and need not be detailed. But it is well worthy of note, with how much of political foresight and sagacity Lord Shelburne suggested the idea of a new police. “Let their Lordships,” he said, “at least those “who are in administration, recollect what the police of France is; let them examine its good, and not be blind to its evil. They would find its construction excellent; its use and direction abominable. Let them embrace the one, and shun the other.”

Notwithstanding the general and confident belief that the disturbances were over, they recommenced, in a slight degree, that very evening in Moorfields. On the next afternoon, that is, on Sunday the 4th, they became far more serious in the same quarter. Unhappily Kennett, the Lord Mayor, was, as Wilkes afterwards complained, a man wholly wanting in energy and firmness. The first outrages within his jurisdiction being unchecked and almost unnoticed, tended to give rise to many more. Again assembling in large bodies, the mob attacked both the chapels and the dwelling-houses of the Roman Catholics in and about Moorfields. The houses they stripped of the furniture, and the chapels of the altars, pulpits, pews, and benches, all which served to make bonfires in the streets.

On the ensuing afternoon, that is, on Monday the 5th of June, a Drawing Room had been appointed at St. James’s, in celebration of the King’s Birthday. Previous to the Drawing Room a Privy Council was held, at which the riots were discussed. But as yet they were deemed of so slight importance that no one measure was taken with regard to them, beyond a Proclamation offering a reward of 500£ for a discovery of the persons concerned in setting fire to the Sardinian and Bavarian chapels. Even Lord Mansfield, who had not only seen, but felt, the fury of the mob, fell into the same error of underrating it. When in the course of this day Mr. Strahan, the printer, who had also been insulted, called upon his Lordship to express his fears from the licentiousness of the populace, the Chief Justice, we are told, treated it as a very slight irregularity.

That delusion, however, was dispelled by the events of the same day. The blue cockades, growing bolder and bolder by indulgence, mustered in high spirits and with increasing numbers. While some parties proceeded to destroy the Romanist chapels in Wapping and East Smithfield, others broke open and plundered the shops and houses of Mr. Rainsforth and Mr. Maberly, two tradesmen who had given evidence against the rioters secured on Friday night. But the principal object of attack was the house of Sir George Savile, obnoxious as the author of the first relaxation in the Penal Code. Savile House, which stood in Leicester Fields, was accordingly carried, as it were, by storm, and given up to pillage. Some of the furniture derived from the chapels or the private dwellings, was, previously to its being burned in the adjacent fields, dragged in triumph and displayed through Welbeck Street, before the house of Lord George Gordon. That foolish young fanatic now began to shrink from the results of his own rashness. In the name of his Protestant Association he put forth a handbill, disavowing all share in the riots; but he soon found how far easier it was to raise than to allay the storm.

By this time the alarm had spread far and wide. Burke, who had most zealously supported Savile in the good work of religious toleration, found it requisite, with his family, to take refuge beneath the roof of his friend General Burgoyne. Throughout these troubles, and amidst all the anxious scenes of the next day, his demeanour was courageous and composed, and his wife showed herself not unworthy such a husband. “Jane,” thus writes their brother Mr. Richard Burke, “Jane has “the firmness and sweetness of an angel; but why do I “say an angel ? — of a woman !”

On Tuesday the 6th, according to adjournment both Houses met. A detachment of Foot Guards had been ranged in Westminster Hall, and in great measure overawed the mob; nevertheless, one of the Ministers, Lord Stormont, was slightly wounded, and his carriage altogether demolished. The Peers, after a short discussion, adjourned. In the Commons, notwithstanding the alarms of personal violence, there mustered about 200 members. Lord George Gordon was there as before, decked with a blue cockade. Upon

this an independent member of high spirit, Colonel Herbert, soon afterwards raised to the peerage as Lord Porchester, declared that he could not sit and vote in that House whilst he saw a Noble Lord in it with the ensign of riot in his hat; and he threatened that, if his Lordship would not take it out, he would walk across the House and do it for him. Lord George with rather tame submission, or only yielding, as he said, to the entreaties of his friends, put the obnoxious symbol in his pocket. Neither Savile, nor yet Burke, was absent from his place. Burke, on his way down, had been surrounded by the mob, and was for some time in their hands. He did not conceal his name, nor yet dissemble his sentiments, but remonstrated with them, and they, honouring his firmness, let him go. "I even found," he says, "friends and well-wishers among the blue cockades." Of his subsequent speech that day in Parliament, he adds: "I do not think I have ever, on any occasion, seemed to affect the House more forcibly. However, such was the confusion that they could not be kept from coming to a Resolution, which I thought unbecoming and pusillanimous; which was, that we should take that flagitious petition which came from that base gang called "the Protestant Association, into our serious consideration. I am now glad that we did so; for if we had refused it, the subsequent ravages would have been charged upon our obstinacy." The Resolution to which Burke thus objects, had been moved by General Conway. It went no further than to pledge the House to consider the petitions "as soon as the tumults subside, which are now subsisting." With this promise the Commons adjourned.

While the Houses were still sitting, a portion of the mob attacked the official residence of Lord North in Downing Street. It was saved by the timely appearance of a party of soldiers. But during that afternoon, and the whole of Wednesday the 7th, the outrages rose to a far higher pitch than they had yet attained. It might be said, with but slight exaggeration, that for two days the rabble held dominion in the town. It might be said in the eloquent words of Gibbon, an eye-witness to these proceedings, that "forty thousand Puritans, such as they might be in the time of Cromwell, have started out of their graves." In truth, however, within these two days the character of the mob was greatly changed. Many of the heated, but honest, zealots of the Protestant Association had withdrawn. Their places had been filled, and more than filled, by fiercer spirits; by men who thirsted for plunder, and by men who aimed at revolution. In many cases they now bore, not only blue cockades in their hats, but also oaken cudgels in their hands. Flinging aside all future reliance on their silly tool Lord George, they were, it was clear, directed by secret, but daring, leaders of their own. Still, however, "No Popery" was their cry, and in the main their motive; it was the Reformed Faith that gave a plea for some of the worst crimes which it condemns!

On the Tuesday afternoon, about six o'clock, a vast multitude appeared in front of Newgate, shouting aloud for the freedom of their brother rioters committed on the Friday night. Mr. Akerman, the keeper, firmly refused to betray his duty or deliver the prisoners; upon which his house was attacked and presently in flames. The wines and spirits in his cellar supplied, and not in vain, opportunity for most brutal drunkenness. Meanwhile, the yells of the mob without the prison, were answered by the wild cry of the felons from within; some of these in hope of liberty, others in dread of conflagration. So strong was the prison itself that it might have been defended, at least against the rabble, by a mere handful of resolute men; such men, however, were wholly wanting at that place and time. Sledge-hammers and pickaxes were plied with slight effect against the iron-studded doors; but they were set on fire by means of Mr. Akerman's furniture, which was drawn out and piled close upon them. The flames, also, from Mr. Akerman's house quickly spread to the chapel, and from the chapel to the cells, and made a gap for the mob to enter; thus, ere long, they were in riotous possession of the prison. All the prisoners, to the number of three hundred, comprising four under sentence of death and ordered for execution on the Thursday morning, were released. No attempts were made to check, and many to extend, the flames. Thus was Newgate, at that time the strongest, and as might have been supposed securest, of all our English gaols, which had lately been rebuilt at a charge of no less than 140,000£ lorded over that night by a frantic populace, and reduced to a smouldering ruin. Within a few hours, there was nothing left of the stately edifice, beyond some bare stone walls too thick and massy for the force of fire to bring down.

On the same Tuesday evening, other detachments of the mob in like manner broke open the new gaol at Clerkenwell, and set free the prisoners. The dwellings of three active magistrates, Mr. Hyde, Mr. Cox, and Sir John Fielding, were also attacked and gutted by the rioters. In many districts the inhabitants found themselves compelled by threats to illuminate their houses. But far fiercer was the gang, which, towards midnight, gathered before the house of Lord Mansfield in Bloomsbury Square. Loud yells were raised against the Chief Justice, who with Lady Mansfield had barely time to escape by a back-door, and

take refuge in the house of a friend. Directly afterwards the mob poured in, carrying havoc and destruction through all the stately rooms. They had brought with them torches and combustibles, and kindled a fire in the street below, which they fed not only with the furniture and hangings, but with the pictures, volumes, and papers, which they tore down and threw over from the windows. Then perished an excellent library, formed by one of the most accomplished scholars of his age; books enriched by the handwriting of Pope and Bolingbroke, and of his other literary friends, or by his own notes upon the margin. Then was lost an invaluable collection of familiar letters which Lord Mansfield had been storing for well nigh half a century, as materials, it was said, for memoirs of his times. Yet amidst all this ferocious havoc well worthy of the Goths or Vandals, the leaders of the mob showed something of a higher spirit. They would not allow the valuables to be carried off as booty, declaring that they acted from principle, and not for plunder. One ragged incendiary was even seen to cast into the fire a costly piece of plate with an oath that it should never go in payment of Masses!

Unhappily, the same scruples did not apply to wine. Lord Mansfield's cellar being forced open, its contents were freely distributed, and supplied the rioters with fresh incentives to their fury. Meanwhile, the flames, extending to the mansion, reduced it long ere morning to a bare and blackened shell. Strange as it may seem, all these outrages were committed in the hearing, and almost in the sight, of a detachment of the Foot Guards, which had arrived at nearly the commencement of the fray. But they had been restrained by the doubts which then prevailed, whether the troops had any legal right to fire upon the mob, unless a magistrate were present, first to read forth at full length all the provisions of the Riot Act. When a gentleman, a friend of Lord Mansfield, went to the officer in command, requiring him to enter the house and defend it, the officer replied that the Justices of the Peace had all run away, and that consequently he could or would do nothing. When at length a magistrate was caught, and made to mumble through the clauses, the soldiers did advance and fire two volleys. It was then too late. The discharge might kill or maim some five or six poor drunken wretches, but could impress no salutary terror on the rest. They looked on without concern, some stupified and others maddened by their unwonted draughts of wine. Yet these were the very men who perhaps, a few hours before, might have slunk back in terror at the mere sight of a red coat. How forcibly do the events of that night illustrate what one of the principal sufferers by them, the Chief Justice, afterwards pronounced, that it is the highest humanity to check the infancy of tumults!

Thus did that night pass in conflagration and dismay. Next morning, Wednesday, the 7th of June, the conflagrations were arrested, but the dismay continued. The shops in most places were kept carefully closed. In many districts the householders endeavoured to secure themselves by chalking "No Popery" on their doors, or hanging blue silk from their windows. Still more effectual, perhaps, was the precaution of paying money to several of the recent rioters, who made their rounds to claim it, walking singly, and three of them mere boys; but each armed with an iron bar, torn from the railings in front of Lord Mansfield's house. One fellow, mounted on horseback, refused, it was said, to take anything but gold. Yet amidst so much of horror there were not wanting, as usual, some points of ridicule. Thus, the Jews who lived in Houndsditch and Duke's Place, sharing in the common terror, wrote upon their shutters "This house is a true Protestant." In other places the rioters, with perfect coolness and deliberation, recommenced their havoc. Dr. Johnson, who walked with a friend to see the ruins of Newgate, observed, as he went by, "the Protestants" (for so he calls them), plundering the Sessions' House, at the Old Bailey. He adds: "There were not, I believe, a hundred; but they did their work at leisure, in full security, without sentinels and without trepidation, as men lawfully employed in full day." Not less striking are the words of another eyewitness to these scenes. "If one could in decency laugh, must not one laugh to see what I saw; a single boy, of fifteen years at most, in Queen Street, mounted on a pent-house, demolishing a house with great zeal, but much at his ease, and throwing the pieces to two boys still younger, who burnt them for their amusement, no one daring to obstruct them? Children are plundering at noon day the city of London!"

In the course of this Wednesday two separate attempts were made upon the Bank of England. Here, however, a party of soldiers had been providently stationed; and the rioters were so far intimidated by the strength with which they beheld it guarded that their attacks were but feeble and soon desisted from. They were led on to the first by a brewer's servant, on horseback, who had decorated his horse with the chains of Newgate. Elsewhere the mob met with more success. The King's Bench, the Fleet, the Marshalsea, and several other prisons were forced open, and the prisoners released. The toll-gates on Blackfriars Bridge were attacked and plundered of the money they contained. All these, and some other



buildings, were then set on fire. As the night advanced the glare of conflagration might be seen to fill the sky from many parts. "The sight was dreadful," writes Dr. Johnson; and the number of the separate fires, all blazing at the same time, is computed at thirty-six. Happily this summer night was perfectly calm and serene; since the slightest wind might have stirred the flames, and reduced a great part of London to ashes. But the principal scene that night of conflagration, as of all tumult and horror, was Holborn. There the mob had burst open and set on fire the warehouses of Mr. Langdale, a Roman Catholic and a distiller, obnoxious to their attack from his religion, and still more so perhaps from his trade. His large stores of spirits were poured forth in lavish profusion, and taken up by pailfuls; the kennel ran gin, and men, women, and children were seen upon their knees eagerly sucking up the liquor as it flowed. Many of these poor deluded wretches were stirred to the most frantic fury; many more sank down in helpless stupefaction, and, too drunk to move, perished in the flames which had been kindled by themselves.

Up to nearly this time there had been disgraceful terror in the magistracy, and as disgraceful torpor in the Government. Some men thought mainly of their own escape; others seem to have imagined that the rage of the people, like some impetuous flood, must quickly exhaust itself and pass by. Even at the outset there had been no lack of military aid; this was gradually increased by expresses sent in all directions; until by Wednesday the 7th, there could be mustered even at the lowest computation 10,000 men; besides which, several large bodies of Militia had been marched up in haste from the neighbouring counties. Yet still these numerous forces could be of no avail in restoring order, so long as the scruple remained that they had no legal right to fire till one hour after the Riot Act had been publicly read. In this dilemma the first to show energy and determination was the King. It was from him, rather than from any of his subjects, that came the measures of protection so much needed and so long postponed. Till then, such had been the craven spirit of some men in authority that, according to the Duke of Grafton, in his Memoirs, even the Secretary of State's servants had worn in their hats, as a passport, the cockades of the rioters.

No further relying upon others, His Majesty, from his own impulse, called a Council, on Wednesday the 7th, and himself presiding, laid before the assembled Ministers the difficulty respecting the Riot Act. The whole Cabinet wavered, well remembering the excitement which had followed the letter of Lord Barrington in the riots of 1768, and the readiness, at that time, of juries to find verdicts against the officers and soldiers who had only done their duty. Happily for the peace, nay even the existence of London, the Attorney-General, Wedderburn, was present as assessor. When the King turned to him for his opinion, Wedderburn answered boldly, that he was convinced the Riot Act did not bear the construction put upon it. In his judgment, neither the delay of an hour, nor any such formality, is by law required when the mob are engaged in a felony, as setting fire to a dwelling-house, and cannot be restrained by other means. The Ministers, gathering firmness from Wedderburn, concurred; and the King then said that this had been clearly his own opinion, though he would not venture to express it beforehand; but that now, as supreme magistrate, he would see it carried out. "There shall be at all events," he added, "one magistrate in the kingdom who will do his duty!"

By the King's commands a Proclamation was immediately drawn up, and issued that same afternoon, warning all householders to keep themselves, their servants, or apprentices within doors, and announcing that the King's officers were now instructed to repress the riots by an immediate exertion of their utmost force. Such instructions were sent accordingly from the Adjutant-General's office: "In obedience to an order of the King in Council, the military to act without waiting for directions from the Civil magistrates." That evening, for the first time, the rioters found themselves confronted by a determination equal to their own. Bodies of Militia, or of regular troops, were sent straight to any point where uproar and havoc most prevailed. Thus, for instance, the Northumberland Militia, which had come that day by a forced march of twenty-five miles, were led at once by Colonel Holroyd into Holborn, amidst the thickest of the flames. A detachment of the Guards drove before them the plundering party which had taken possession of Blackfriars Bridge. Here several were killed by the musketry, while others were thrown, or in their panic threw themselves, over the parapet into the Thames. Wherever the mob would not disperse, the officers gave the word, and the soldiers fired without further hesitation. Only in some cases, where the rioters had succeeded in obtaining arms, was any firing attempted in return; nor could oaken sticks and iron bars withstand, for more than a few moments, the onset of disciplined troops. Then were some of the worst plunderers in their fall both punished and detected. One young chimneysweeper who was killed, was found to have forty guineas in his pocket. Appalling were the sights and sounds of that night;

sleep banished from every eye; the streets thronged with people in wonder and affright; furniture hastily removed, in apprehension of the flames; the frantic yells of the drunken, and the doleful cries of the wounded, mingling with the measured tread of the soldiers' march, and the successive volleys of their musketry; and the whole scene illumined by the fitful glare of six and thirty conflagrations.

These tumults, so culpably neglected at their outset and grown to a height that threatened "to lay waste defenced cities into ruinous heaps," could not be quelled at length without a loss of life almost as grievous as themselves. According to the Returns, sent in to Lord Amherst as Commander-in-chief, upwards of 200 persons were shot dead in the streets; and 250 were lying wounded in the hospitals, of whom seventy or eighty within a short time expired. Yet these Returns are far from conveying a full statement of the numbers that perished. They take no account of the dead or dying whom their own associates in the fray carried off and concealed. They take no account of those victims to their own excesses, who, lying helpless beside the pailfuls or kennelfuls of gin, were smothered by the spreading flames, or overwhelmed by the falling houses. Dreadful as was the loss of life that night, it proved at least decisive. The conflagrations and the plunder were stopped; the incendiaries and the robbers were scared. On the morning of Thursday the 8th of June, no trace was to be seen of the recent tumults, beyond the smouldering ruins, the spots of blood upon the pavement, and the marks of shot upon the houses. No renewed attempt was made at riot, or even at gathering in the streets. The crowds which had been "as the stars of heaven for multitude," waned like the stars before the day; and those who, on their first appearance, had wondered whence so many came, now expressed equal wonder where they could be gone. Parties of soldiers were encamped in convenient places, as in the Parks, the Museum Gardens, and Lincoln's Inn Fields, ready to act on any fresh emergency, had any such occurred. By their exertions a great number of disorderly persons, concerned in the late riots, were secured; several, it is said, being taken in the cells of Newgate, attempting to rekindle the fire in those parts which had not been totally destroyed. Volunteer associations "for the defence of "liberty and property" were likewise formed, and joined by many of those who had suffered or had feared the most from the temporary absence of the lawful powers. Throughout this day, the shops continued shut from Tyburn to Whitechapel, and no business was transacted, except at the Bank of England. But the general tranquillity soon restored the public confidence; the shops were opened the next morning, the Courts of Law resumed their sittings, and the course of mercantile affairs returned to its customary channel.

On the same day, Friday the 9th, Lord George Gordon was apprehended at his house in Welbeck Street, by a warrant from the Secretary of State. Had that measure been taken a week before, or had the House of Commons, on Friday the 2nd, exerted its own powers of commitment, as many members wished, the arrest might have tended to the repression of the riots, instead of being only the penalty for them. Lord George made no remark on his apprehension, beyond saying to the messengers, "If you are sure it is me you want, I am ready to attend you." When brought before the Privy Council and examined, he is alleged to have shown very little either of sense or spirit; and his examination having concluded, he was duly committed to the Tower, on a charge of High Treason, and escorted by a numerous guard. At the same time other measures were adopted to calm the public mind. Thus, a rumour had been circulated, that the prisoners in the hands of Government would be subject to Martial Law. Against this rumour there was levelled a hand-bill, put forth by authority, declaring that no such purpose had ever been in the contemplation of Government, and that all persons in custody would be tried in due course, according to the usual forms. Another publication of the day attempted to counteract a far more extraordinary fear. It seems to denote a vague idea in the minds of many persons, as if there might be something in the gloves which the King wore, or in the wine which the King drank, to imbue him with the errors of Popery! Certain it is at least, that the following paragraph appears in the public prints:— "We are authorised to assure the public, that Mr. Bicknell, His Majesty's hosier, is as true and faithful a Protestant as any in His Majesty's dominions. We have likewise the best authority for saying, that His Majesty's wine-merchants, and many others, are also Protestants."

Thus ended the Gordon riots, memorable beyond most others from the proof which they afford how slender an ability suffices, under certain circumstances, to stir, if not to guide, great masses of mankind; and how the best principles and feelings, if perverted, may grow in practice equal to the worst. Bitter was the shame with which the leading statesmen, only a few days afterwards, looked back to this fatal and disgraceful week. They had seen their lives threatened, and their property destroyed, at the

bidding of a foolish young fanatic, not worthy to unloose the latchet of their shoes. Such dangers might be boldly confronted, such losses might be patiently borne; but how keen the pang to find themselves objects of fierce fury and murderous attack to that people whose welfare, to the best of their judgments, they had ever striven to promote! In such words as these does Burke pour forth the anguish of his soul:— “For four nights I kept watch at Lord Rockingham’s or Sir George Savile’s, whose houses were garrisoned by a strong body of soldiers, together with numbers of true friends of the first rank, who were willing to share their danger. Savile House, Rockingham House, Devonshire House, to be turned into garrisons! Oh what times! We have all served the country for several years—some of us for nearly thirty—with fidelity, labour, and affection, and we are obliged to put ourselves under military protection for our houses and our persons!”

In these riots, so great had been the remissness and timidity of Kennett, the Lord Mayor, that, at a later period, he became the object of a prosecution from the Attorney-General, and was convicted. One of his coadjutors, Alderman Bull, a most zealous No Popery man, might even be said to have countenanced the insurrection, by allowing the constables of his Ward to wear the blue cockade in their hats, and by appearing publicly arm-in-arm with Lord George Gordon. But another City magistrate and Alderman, John Wilkes, unexpectedly came forth as the champion of law and order. With great courage — that indeed he never wanted — he went, in the midst of the disturbances, to apprehend the printer of a seditious hand-bill; and he did his duty throughout, undeterred by mob clamours, and regardless of mob applause.

When on the 19th, according to adjournment, the Lords and the Commons met, the business concerning the late riots was opened by the King in a Speech from the Throne. Addresses in reply, thanking His Majesty for his parental care and concern, were moved and carried in both Houses. The Peers, however, had some discussion as to the lawfulness of the military measures which had been pursued. Then, with his usual air of serene and stately dignity, Lord Mansfield rose. He touched slightly, but severely, upon the inaction, in the first instance, of the executive Government; “which,” however, he added, “it is not my part to censure. My Lords, I do not pretend to speak from any previous knowledge, for I never was present at any consultation upon the subject, or summoned to attend, or asked my opinion, or heard the reasons which induced the Government to remain passive so long and to act at last.” Here, it is said, there was wonder expressed by the bystanders, and scornful glances turned to the Treasury Bench. In another passage there was yet one more reflection upon the Civil Power, as liable to the charge either of neglect or “native imbecility.” But the main stress of Lord Mansfield’s speech was directed to the question of mere law. “I have not,” — thus he spoke at the outset — “I have not consulted books; indeed, I have no books to consult.” At this allusion, so gently and so gracefully made, to the recent outrage wreaked upon him, the assembled Peers, without breaking their reverential silence, showed all the sympathy that looks or gestures could express. Yet they had little cause to deplore his loss of books, when, as his speech proceeded, they found the loss supplied by his memory’s rich store — when they heard him, with unanswerable force, and on strictly legal grounds, vindicate the employment of the troops. “His Majesty,” thus did Lord Mansfield conclude, “and those who have advised him, I repeat it, have acted in strict conformity to the Common Law. The military have been called in, and very wisely called in, not as soldiers, but as citizens. No matter whether their coats be red or brown, they were employed, not to subvert, but to preserve, the Laws and Constitution which we all so highly prize.”

When Lord Mansfield sat down, the Address, which he supported, and which the Dukes of Richmond and Manchester had in some degree impugned, was carried, without one dissentient voice. Bishop Newton, who was present, records this speech as one of the finest ever heard in Parliament; and it has ever since been deemed a landmark in that sphere of our Constitutional law. At the time, however, its legal doctrines did not wholly escape animadversion out of doors; and some critics muttered that Lord Mansfield seemed to think all the law-books in the country burnt together with his own.

In the Commons, next day, the great Protestant petition was discussed; when the House agreed to five Resolutions, which Burke had in part prepared, and Lord North corrected. It is pleasing to find these two distinguished men, estranged on almost every other subject, combined on the great principle of religious toleration. There was, then, no shrinking from past merits, no subservience to mob-cries. The Resolutions did indeed declare that all attempts to seduce the youth of this kingdom from the Established Church to Popery, were highly criminal according to the laws in force, and might be a proper subject of

further regulation. But they went on to say, in terms no less full and explicit, that all endeavours to misrepresent the Act of 1778, tended to bring dishonour on the national character, and to discredit the Protestant religion. The same spirit of bold adherence to the principles, then so far from popular, of 1778, will be found to animate the speeches that night both of Lord North and Mr. Burke. With equal courage, and on still broader grounds, was put forth the argument of Fox. "I am a friend," he cried, "to universal toleration, and an enemy to that narrow way of thinking that makes men come to Parliament, not for the removal of some great grievances felt by them, but to desire Parliament to shackle and fetter their fellow-subjects."

The same praise of firmness against popular clamours, can scarcely be awarded to Sir George Savile. We find him, if not recede from his opinions, at least falter in his tone. He seemed eager to explain away his former votes, and eager also to bring in, under his own name, the Bill against Popish conversions. His Bill went to deprive the Roman Catholics of the right of keeping schools, or receiving youth to board at their houses. Music-masters, drawing-masters, and some other teachers not taking boarders, were to be exempt from penalty. But, not satisfied even with these safeguards, as they were deemed, of the Protestant faith, Sir George moved another clause in the Committee, to prevent any Roman Catholics from taking Protestant children as apprentices; a clause which Lord Beauchamp and other members opposed as a restriction upon trade. Sir George's clause being, however, carried, Burke indignantly declared that he would attend no further the progress of the measure. Finally, the Bill passed the Commons, but was lost in the Lords.

Before the end of the Session — it was closed by the Bang in person, on the 8th of July — Lord North carried an Address, that an exact account might be taken of the losses and damages in the recent riots. The claims sent in accordingly to the Board of Works by various persons, and exclusive of the cost of the demolished gaols and public buildings, amounted to 130,000£, most of which sum, as assessed, was recovered by a rate on the several parishes concerned. Both Lord Mansfield and Sir George Savile declined to send in any claim for compensation; a forbearance to their honour, considering the high office of the one and the ample fortune of the other.

Before the end of the Session, also, the measures against the rioters in custody were in active progress. It had been resolved to try the Middlesex cases at the next Old Bailey Sessions, commencing on the 28th of June; and for the cases in Surrey to issue, without delay, a Special Commission. Over this Commission the Lord Chief Justice De Grey had notice sent him that he would be required to preside. But De Grey, whose health was failing, and whose nerves were shaken, was so startled at the thought of such a task that, sooner than undertake it, he sent in his resignation. Wedderburn immediately claimed for himself the long-coveted Chief Justiceship, and he obtained it, notwithstanding Lord North's natural reluctance to forego so able a coadjutor in the House of Commons. He was further gratified with a Peerage, by the title of Lord Loughborough. His promotion was commonly approved, and drew forth warm congratulations, even from political opponents. Nor did they forbear from honourable counsels. "My Lord," wrote Burke, "I hope that, "instead of bringing the littleness of Parliamentary politics into a Court of Justice, you will bring the squareness, the manliness, and the decision of a judicial place into the House of Parliament where you are just entering."

Such high anticipations, it must be owned, were not altogether fulfilled. The speech with which the new Peer opened the Special Commission, on the 10th of July, was indeed much admired for its eloquence, and much applauded as falling in with the angry temper of that time. But, on cool retrospect, it was felt that its partial overstatements, its intemperate denunciations of men upon their trial, were far from becoming in a Judge. "At present," writes one of his successors on the Bench, "no Counsel, even in opening a prosecution, "would venture to make such a speech."

It so happened by good fortune for Lord George Gordon, that a legal technicality — and no law certainly so much abounded in these as ours — delayed the trial until the ensuing year, when a calmer temper in the public might be expected to prevail. But ere the month of July, 1780, had closed, all the other rioters in custody — no less than 135 — had been already tried. Of these about one half were found Guilty; and among the convicted — but he received a respite — was Edward Dennis, the common hangman.

Finally, after full consideration of the cases and numerous respites, there were twenty-one persons left to undergo the extreme sentence of the law.

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