

The Gordon Riots, 1780

by Professor Jerry White

This is an opportune moment to remind ourselves about the Gordon Riots of 1780, if only because some commentators have said they are the closest historical parallel to the August Riots of 2011.

When assessing the causes of any riots I suppose we have to look at the level of structures and of contingencies.

The structural causes of the Gordon Riots lay in an unfairly-structured city of almost unimaginable inequality. And inequality was underpinned by a deeply-loathed system of 'justice', its key component the London prison system. That was not just a system enforcing the criminal law, the so-called 'bloody code'. It also provided the main enforcement mechanism to safeguard the circulation of capital through the process of imprisonment for debt.

The contingent causes were economic, political and religious. Economically, wages had been overtaken by the cost of living for much of the 1770s, and the living standards of the poor were chronically depressed. Politically, the country was in the final throes of an unpopular and humiliating war with America, where defeat had followed defeat, and where the stock of a hated government was miserably low. There had been anti-government rioting in Downing Street and Whitehall at the beginning of 1779 for instance.

Then, into an already flammable mix, was thrown the firebrand of religious intolerance. An Act to remove some disabilities from Roman Catholics in England had passed into law as a government measure in 1778. It had attracted no public hostility at the time. But in 1779 an attempt to extend its provisions to Scotland had far different results. Fierce anti-Catholic rioting broke out in Glasgow and Edinburgh, so severe that Scottish Catholics petitioned Prime Minister Lord North to withdraw the measure, which he duly did. Meanwhile in London, at the beginning of that year, a Protestant Association was formed to support the North British agitation and to begin a movement for the repeal of Savile's Act in England. From November 1779 its new president was a member of the Scottish peerage and of the House of Commons. His name was Lord George Gordon.

Gordon was then 29 years old, a former naval lieutenant, MP for a Wiltshire constituency, and the third son of a Duke. He had been a fanatical leader of the Scottish opposition to Catholic relief and was widely considered mad – at least, unhinged in matters of religion. He wore his hair long and lank like a puritan of the previous century. His speeches were wild and unbalanced. In all he made a striking martyr-like figure in the Protestant cause.

From the end of 1779 petitions trickled into parliament from 'his Majesty's loyal Protestant Subjects' for the repeal of the 1778 Act 'in favour of Popery in England'. One of the earliest came from the



Lord George Gordon. Miniature by Lucas Bateman, c1775.

Cities of London and Westminster and was presented in January 1780. This well-organised agitation by the Protestant Association continued through the next few months. It won support among protestants of many complexions. But the House of Commons, frequent witness to Gordon's absurd antics, dismissed him with derision. He did, though, give them warning enough of what was to come. In March 1780 he told the Commons 'he had 160,000 men in Scotland at his command, and ... if the King did not keep his Coronation Oath, they would do more than take away his Civil List Revenue, they were determined to cut off his head': the House politely called him to order. Two months later, on 30 May, Lord George Gordon announced he would present the petition of the Protestant Associations of London, Westminster and Southwark to the House on Friday 2 June 1780.

The arrangements for that memorable Friday were as minutely planned as much of the Association's propaganda over the past months. Advertisements and handbills called for a mass turnout of supporters at St George's Fields, south of the river, to carry and escort the petition, signed by some 44,000, to the House of Commons. Blue cockades were handed out in their thousands for people to wear in their hats. The weather was oppressively hot and thundery and had been for some days past. Even so, some 50-60,000 were said to be in

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the Fields when Lord George Gordon arrived around 11 to address his supporters, including 'a Scots division' who clustered close to their leader. From the Fields, contingents marched to London, the largest by way of London Bridge, 'through Cornhill and the city', 'with banner, flags, pennants, &c., many singing hymns, the petition carried in front like an offering. Smaller marches made their way over Blackfriars and Westminster Bridges.



Contemporary illustration of Gordon addressing an anti-Catholic rally.

Around 3 pm the columns met with 'a general shout' outside the Houses of Parliament, swirled in great numbers into Palace Yard, burst into Westminster Hall where the courts were sitting and into the approaches to both Houses. The crowds contained many of the middling sort in their Sunday best. But Samuel Romilly, then a law student, in Palace Yard to attend a debate at the House of Lords on parliamentary reform, thought many were of 'the lowest rabble'. Worse, they were furious. Bishops and other members of the House of Lords were attacked in their carriages and punched, kicked and abused – at least two had the watches picked from their pockets. Lord Mansfield, who had recently treated leniently a Catholic priest coming before him, had the windows of his coach pushed in and had to be rescued by other members. Eventually a trickle of peers made their bedraggled way into the chamber.

In the House of Commons, where members were already assembled, a noisy crowd clamoured in the lobby, where Gordon addressed them from a gallery on the progress of the debate on whether to receive the Protestant Association's petition. He was heard to tell them that the 'Scotch ... had no redress until they pulled down the mass-houses.' In the chamber, many MPs were armed with swords and were poised to draw them. One told Gordon that should any of his 'rascally adherents' come through the door into the chamber, 'the first man of them that enters, I will plunge my sword, not into his, but into your body.' That evening, amid utter confusion, magistrates and constables incapable of regaining order even with parties of horse and foot guards, the peers were able to escape from around 8.30. In the Commons, which dispersed somewhat later, Gordon lost the vote to receive his petition, mustering just nine supporters.

That same evening groups among the crowds moved northwards away from parliament and towards Holborn. In Duke Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, they forced their way through the Sardinian ambassador's residence, broke into the Roman Catholic chapel, tore out everything moveable, made a bonfire of it in the Fields and set the chapel alight. Fire engines were called out but were attacked by the crowd until soldiers arrived to protect them. Eventually, around midnight, the crowds in the Fields dispersed. Other rioters had broken into the Bavarian chapel in Warwick Street, Golden Square, sacking it and the ambassador's house nearby. Attacks on the Portuguese chapel in South Audley Street and a mass-house in Ropemaker's Alley, Moorfields, were frustrated by companies of guards. In all these places many arrests were made.

Next day, Saturday 3 June, those arrested and held overnight in the gaols were taken before the justices and released or returned to prison to await trial. Crowds of sightseers visited the ruined chapels. Rumours of fresh attacks reached the ears of Lord Stormont, Secretary of State, and magistrates, constables and troops were made ready across the metropolis. That evening crowds assembled outside the mass-house near Moorfields but no damage was done until the morning of Sunday 4 June, when the windows were broken. On Sunday evening through Monday morning the attack was urged with greater violence, the chapel broken into, the altar and pews and vestments dragged into the narrow alley and burned; a nearby Catholic school and the dwellings of local Catholics were also stoned and sacked.

By Monday 5 June trouble was moving beyond the City into Wapping where some Irish mass-houses were attacked. And on this Monday came the first signs of a shift in the rioters' quarry when the house of Justice Rainsforth, especially active in making arrests, was wrecked in Clare Street, Clare Market. There were attacks too on Sir George Savile's house in Leicester Square for his role in proposing the Catholic relief Act. Edmund Burke, his seconder, had his house in Charles (now Charles II) Street, St James's Square, protected by soldiers but had to draw his sword to fend off angry rioters who surrounded him in the street.

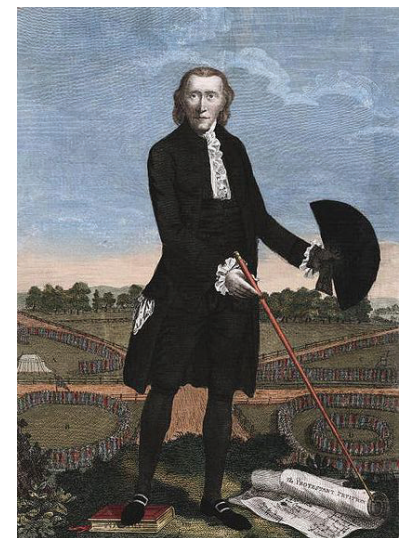


Illustration showing Gordon as the champion of Protestantism.

On Tuesday 6 June the rioters' efforts gathered strength, despite large numbers of horse and foot guards arriving in London from

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all directions. That morning a crowd of 500 or so with drums, fifes and flags gathered outside Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury's London residence, which had to be protected by the guards. Nearby, in St George's Fields where it all began, crowds assembled once more to march on parliament. Cockades and colours were still in evidence but now many 'were armed with poleaxes, cutlasses, bludgeons, &c.' Crossing Westminster Bridge they attacked MPs considered unsympathetic to repeal and any minister of Lord North's government they could lay their hands on. The poet George Crabbe, walking away from parliament, noted in his diary the first disconcerting signs of what proved now to be nothing less than an uprising of the London poor.

In my way I met a resolute band of vile-looking fellows, ragged, dirty, and insolent, armed with clubs, going to join their companions. I since learned that there were eight or ten of these bodies in different parts of the City.

For the next two nights London was submerged in the throes of civil war. By the early evening of 6 June the riot had decisively made that shift heralded by the attack on Justice Rainsforth's house the day before. First, the eye-witness accounts agree on the distinctively more ragged character of the rioters themselves. Second, there was a marked increment in the violence of the crowd and the destruction it was prepared to cause. Third, there was more attention paid to the spoils of war in theft, extortion and looting. Last, the rioters' primary target was no longer the institutions of Catholic London or the homes and businesses of Catholics and their supporters, though cries of 'No Popery' were frequently heard and such attacks continued to be made. Now the fury of this crowd turned itself most of all against the institutions of justice, cruellest symbols of class oppression in eighteenth-century London.

Justice Hyde, active that afternoon in defending peers and MPs on their way to parliament, promptly had his town house in St Martin's Street, and later his country house near Cross Street, Islington, wrecked for his pains. The crowd then moved west to Sir John Fielding's, the chief magistrate's office and house at 4 Bow Street, where furniture, wainscoting and all the papers of the office including its cache of criminal records built up over thirty years, were dragged into the street and burnt.

That night, too, the hated London prisons became the main target of the rioters – first to release the prisoners, including those arrested in the riots since 1 June, and then to destroy the prisons themselves. At 7 in the evening word ran quickly through the crowd to move to Newgate, a brand new gaol barely out of the hands of the contractors. With its great stone walls it was a daunting obstacle. But the weak point was the house of the keeper Richard Akerman, brick-built and linking the prison's two wings. Men with paving mattocks, sledgehammers and pickaxes, iron crows and bars, chisels and bludgeons, broke down the doors and window shutters, stormed the house, threw Akerman's belongings into the street and burned them. They then fired the house, broke into the prison and set that



Newgate Prison

alight too. Soon a fierce blaze spread to everything combustible in the prison itself, so fierce that some of the new-laid stone vitrified. The prisoners were led away to freedom, those awaiting execution still in their chains. George Crabbe, one of many eye-witnesses who recorded the drama of this, London's Bastille Day avant la lettre, wrote to a friend,

I must not omit what struck me most. About ten or twelve of the mob getting to the top of the debtors' prison, whilst it was burning, to halloo, they appeared rolled in black smoke mixed with sudden bursts of fire – like Milton's infernals who were as familiar with flame as with each other.

As the rioters drifted away from the empty burning gaol they called on the citizens to light up their windows in celebration of Newgate's destruction. And later that night, among the drinkers at the Bell public house, St James's Market, Thomas Haycock, a tavern waiter by calling, boasted how he'd been active in the destruction:

I asked him what could induce him to do all this? He said the cause. I said, do you mean a religious cause? He said no; for he was of no religion. He said, there should not be a prison standing on the morrow in London.

Haycock would be proved nearly right, though a little premature. Prisoners were freed that night from the two gaols in Clerkenwell but they were not set ablaze, in one case at least because it was so closely confined among poor houses. And the Fleet Prison was broken open and the debtors given time to get their goods away before it was put to the torch.

In all or many of these events the soldiers brought to relieve London looked on as fires burned and the gaols were emptied. Their officers would not order their men to fire on the crowd without instructions from the magistrates to do so. Magistrates, though, were not always readily to be found; and those that were remembered the St George's Fields Massacre and its aftermath and were understandably cautious

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too. The first shots were, however, fired this night in Bloomsbury Square and six or seven rioters were said to have been killed under the command of an officer who, by a twist of fate, was Lord George Gordon's brother-in-law.

The next day and night, 'Black Wednesday' 7 June, witnessed London's most terrible crisis in the modern period, not exceeded until the wartime blitz 160 years later.

As the day opened gangs armed with iron bars and bludgeons roamed the streets, knocking door to door and demanding money 'for the true religion' or 'the poor mob'. Damaged or destroyed buildings were systematically looted, and in the hours of darkness many houses at random were broken into and plundered. Rumours of more rioting to come swept the town. An emergency meeting of the Privy Council that morning, at the personal urging of the King, announced that the military had been given orders to shoot to kill without the need for magistrates first to read the Riot Act.

Troops, however, could not be everywhere. The London poor seemingly could. Attacks on prominent Roman Catholics resumed through the afternoon and into the evening. Notable among them was the burning of Langdale's distilleries in Holborn, their great vats of alcohol sending flames and smoke into the sky that were visible thirty miles from London. The fire spread and consumed numerous houses and business around. But the rioters' main targets were once more the machinery of judicial oppression. Justice Wilmot's police office at Worship Street, Shoreditch, was demolished and his house in Bethnal Green ransacked.

Great destruction was wreaked in Southwark. The King's Bench prison was burnt out; the ancient Borough Clink was burnt to the ground and never rebuilt; the Southwark New Prison was emptied of prisoners, the Marshalsea attacked but saved by the military, the roundhouses in Borough High Street and Kent Street pulled down and fired. And on the last night of the riots, 8-9 June, it was said that twenty spunging houses, private prisons for debtors, were destroyed in Southwark. The London gaols still standing were filled with those taken in the riots, mostly 'wretched' persons. All were heavily guarded by soldiers, as were the sheriffs' offices in the City and those police offices that had escaped destruction. Old grudges seem to have been settled under the guise of religious enthusiasm: a public house pulled down in Whitechapel was owned by a Roman Catholic who was also a Marshalsea Court officer or bailiff, his house a resort of thief-takers who 'lived "by the price of blood"'

The ferocious destruction on that night of Black Wednesday, with London ablaze at all points of the compass, now provoked a furious revenge from the military. Many rioters were shot dead on Blackfriars Bridge while they were setting the toll houses alight.



Artist's impression of the stand-off between troops and rioters.

Musket volleys and charges with fixed bayonets cleared crowds from around the burning Fleet Prison. In the City makeshift rope barriers were made in the main streets to hold off the rioting crowds and there were many casualties from musket balls in Poultry and the great streets around the Bank and Royal Exchange. About 11 pm there was a concerted attack on the Bank of England led by a man on a great drayhorse festooned with chains struck off the condemned prisoners from Newgate. Soldiers killed rioters in Cheapside, Pig Street and near the gates of the Bank. Many looters ransacking houses in Broad Street, City, were shot dead. The chaos, confusion and terror of that night and the early hours of Thursday morning witnessed the bulk of the deaths in the riots: in all, some 210 rioters shot dead in the streets; another seventy-five or so dying in the hospitals; unknown others dead from drinking neat liquor at Langdale's and elsewhere or dying at home from their wounds. Thirty years later and Londoners still recalled this moment with shuddering disbelief.

No mind can form the smallest conception of the horror of the scene; the prisons, the toll-gates on Blackfriars-bridge, the houses in every quarter of the town, and particularly the middle and lower part of Holborn, were one general scene of conflagration. Sleep was vanished from every part; the firing of the soldiers' muskets, the shouts of the rioters, the cries of the distressed, and the confusion of the people, who were every where carrying off beds, furniture, and goods, is more easy to be imagined than described.

Next day almost every shop in the metropolis was shut as Londoners held their breath in fear of the rioters' return. Skirmishes between troops and looters went on through Thursday. Some armed men exchanged musket-fire with the military at Fleet Market. There were many break-ins, with large quantities of silk stolen from a prominent manufacturer's in Pearl Street, Spitalfields, for instance.

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Searches by soldiers, peace officers and magistrates for those identified as ringleaders scoured the criminal districts of London like Black Boy Alley and Chick Lane. Yet by no means all those later charged were of this desperate class. Most were journeymen wage earners, a number were domestic or public-house servants, a few were apprentices and young boys; others were, indeed, of the marginal poor – a street seller of garden stuff, a barker at a secondhand clothes shop in Monmouth Street, a former workhouse inmate given a chance as an ostler, two casual porters, one of them ‘almost an idiot’, and a few women, one of them black, whose occupations have not come down to us.

As darkness descended on the evening of Thursday 8 June so the fears of another night of riot and destruction mounted once more.

But in fact the rioters’ strength had been exhausted in the excesses of Black Wednesday and cowed by the remorseless military now visible in force throughout the metropolis. London resembled a city recovering from the ravages of invasion and remained under something like military occupation for much of the summer to come. But despite disturbances south of the river on that Thursday night and Friday morning, and despite some threats against the London police offices, the riots were effectively over. Besides the great loss of life, one further statistic stands out: it is said that the riots ‘destroyed ten times more property than was destroyed in Paris during the entire French Revolution.’ These things alone perhaps serve to distinguish the riots this August with the Gordon Riots of 1780: but perhaps we might speculate on some points of similarity as well as the differences.



About Jerry White

Professor Jerry White teaches modern London history at Birkbeck, University of London. His London in the Twentieth Century won the Wolfson History Prize for 2001 and London in the Nineteenth Century was published to critical acclaim in 2007. The final volume in his modern London trilogy, London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing, will be published by Bodley Head in early 2012. Jerry’s web site is <http://www.jerrywhite.co.uk>