

RIOTS AS A MEASURE OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

PART II*

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4. *A New Thrust in the Riots from 1716 to the 1770's: Attack on Methodists*

The emerging Whig supremacy that followed the Hanoverian succession removed the threat to the Anglican Church from Catholics and Dissenters alike. These religious minorities could now be tolerated. But hatred ran deep, and sporadic riots against them continued throughout the reigns of the first two Georges. From 1716 to the 1770's, however, the riots against Methodists were more frequent and more severe than those against the old religious minorities.

This revival movement that began to sweep England following the conversion of John Wesley and then the field preaching of George Whitefield in 1739 was never a political threat. In fact, the political conservatism and authoritarianism of Methodism was so strong that some historians consider the stability of England during the French Revolution a result of the Methodist influence. But Methodist revivals often did threaten the dominant position of local Anglican leaders and aroused the suspicion of the high church Tory squirearchy.

A few examples of Methodist persecution give support to the statement of W. E. H. Leckey that "there were few forms of mob violence they did not experience."¹³ In 1744 a Methodist preacher

* The first part of this article was published in *AUSS* 14 (1976): 289-300.

¹³ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, New ed., 7 vols. (London, 1897-1899), 3: 71.

named Seward was killed at Monmouth. John Wesley narrowly escaped death on several occasions when riots broke out following his preaching. A serious riot occurred in Norwich in 1752. The cause was the preaching of Mr. Wheatley, a Methodist who was having a great impact on the town. From November 21, 1751, to July 9, 1752, high church mobs harrassed the Methodist meetings. Throughout the period the mayor tried to keep the peace, but with little success. Crowds usually numbering around 300, but on occasion reaching 3,000, gathered regularly on Sunday morning to assault those who came out to listen to Wheatley's sermons. For a time in February riots occurred daily. During the riots there were numerous assaults and at least one rape. Wheatley himself was severely beaten. The mobs also attacked other Dissenting meeting houses and the homes of many of the leading Dissenters. The constant turmoil, however, never completely escalated into a primary riot. Numerous arrests, the presence of some dragoons, and the fact that the riots had a limited objective prevented these disorders from becoming a primary riot.¹⁴

The decline of riots against Catholics and Dissenters after 1716 should not lead us to believe that primary riots were less frequent. If anything, they were more frequent. But from 1716 to the time of the American Revolution, economic and political disputes were greater irritants to urban workers than were religious minorities. The weaver riots in London in July and August of 1736 and the great riots for "Wilkes and Liberty" during the years 1768 to 1774 are examples. The Wilkite mobs, among the most famous in English history because of their political importance, were just huge crowds of political demonstrators who happened to turn a bit violent. They intended to insult, not to kill and destroy, though

¹⁴ *A True and Particular Narrative of the Disturbances and Outrages . . . in Norwich* (London, 1752). For an account of a similar disturbance at Sheffield in 1743 see the passage from Charles Wesley's Journal, quoted in *English Historical Documents 1744-1783*, ed. D. B. Horn (New York, 1957), pp. 388-389.

some of that did happen along the way.¹⁵

5. *The Final Riots Against Catholics and Dissenters*

The lack of primary riots against Catholics and Dissenters indicates that the conflicts of the 17th century, the Reformation legacy, were declining. There remained, however, two great riots near the end of the eighteenth century which marked the end of religious riots in English history. The first of these two riots was directed against Catholics. It was not that Catholics were any longer a threat to the Anglican establishment, but a residue of the hatred that had so marked the 17th century remained, a hatred kept alive by Guy Fawkes Day celebrations and still seen in Ulster today.

The Gordon Riots, the most severe riots in English history, kept London in turmoil from June 2 to 8, 1780. The violence commenced when the mad Scot, Lord George Gordon, assembled a crowd of 60,000 at St. George's Fields, Southwark, to obtain signatures for the petition to Parliament prepared by his Protestant Association and calling for the repeal of recently passed measures that gave Catholics partial relief from the restrictions on their civil rights.¹⁶ The crowd quickly became a riotous mob threatening the House of Commons. Gangs began to split off and attack the private Catholic chapels attached to foreign embassies. For five days the mob ran rampant throughout the metropolis. The magistrates and constables, unwilling to ask for military force to assist them, could not keep order except in the morning hours when most of the rioters rested. The riots reached a climax on Wednesday, June 7. That day George III took the matter into his own hands and ordered the military into the city. By that evening a camp of 10,000 troops was forming in Hyde Park.

¹⁵ George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763-1774* (Oxford, 1972).

¹⁶ The Act of 1778 repealed portions of the Act of 1699-1700 that condemned papists keeping schools to perpetual imprisonment and disabled all Catholics from inheriting or purchasing land.

On the next day the soldiers stopped the last of the looting and destruction.

No one knows how many died in these riots. Estimates run as high as 1,000. The military killed 210 on the spot, and many more died in the crush of burning and falling buildings. The riots left extensive and widespread destruction in the City, Middlesex, and outparishes. The mobs had first pulled down Catholic chapels and schools and then turned their attention to the homes and property of Catholic merchants, businessmen, and shopkeepers, and the houses of some of the justices who opposed them. The mobs commenced their destruction with the now-customary pattern of gutting the buildings and burning the contents in the streets, but as the riots proceeded looting became more general and fires began to spread to surrounding houses. This happened when the works of the Catholic distiller, Thomas Langdale, were burned, consuming £38,000 worth of gin; the fire spread to twenty-one neighboring houses. Eight prisons were also fired after about 1,000 prisoners had been released. The destruction of the riot was later estimated at nearly £100,000—£63,000 in private property and £30,000 in public buildings.¹⁷

The widespread loss of life and property shocked contemporaries, but not until George Rudé undertook a study of the rioters has the behavior of the mob been fully understood.¹⁸ Rudé discovered no trace of a plan; apparently each group recognized a "captain," usually a local man who emerged as leader on the spot, and attacked buildings near where they lived. About 70 per cent of the rioters came from the wage-earning class of apprentices and artisans. In this largest of all English riots the destruction was directed. Rudé has proved by a careful

¹⁷ Two valuable books cover in great detail the Gordon Riots. J. Paul de Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (Oxford, 1926) and Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780* (London, 1958).

¹⁸ George F. E. Rudé, "The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and their Victims," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Fifth Series* 6: 93-114.

comparison of where property was destroyed and where Catholics lived that the riots were primarily anti-Catholic, and that they were directed only against rich Catholics. The mobs had no intention of making general war on the 14,000 Catholics who lived in the metropolitan area. They limited their attacks to the priests and teachers and the rich. Generally, the mobs followed the pattern of pulling down the buildings and burning the wreckage in the streets. Fires spread only by accident. Rudé also asserts that the rioters rarely looted and plundered. They destroyed the wealth in the streets rather than carrying it off.

The Gordon Riots were the last primary riot directed against Catholics; and even so, only Catholics of influence were targets of the mob. Eleven years later the last great riot against the Dissenters occurred, in Birmingham. Like the Gordon Riots, this riot was not a reaction to any growing threat from Dissent, though the general hostility towards Dissenters had been exacerbated by their recent agitation for repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.¹⁹ The riot against the Dissenters was called forth by a new fear of revolution, this time the political revolution taking place in France.

The riot began on the night of July 14, 1791, after the Birmingham Dissenters had held a public dinner to commemorate the fall of the Bastille two years before. For the next four days the mob handled Birmingham as they chose. The magistrates, at first unenthusiastic supporters of order, rushed bands of constables from one place to another but usually arrived after the mobs had left.

The major buildings destroyed included three meeting houses and fifteen private homes. Most of the latter were not just single

¹⁹ The Test and Corporation Acts dated from the reign of Charles II. They prohibited Dissenters from holding municipal offices, accepting civil or military offices under the crown, or sitting in Parliament without partaking of the Anglican communion. Though these acts were largely circumvented, the Dissenters bitterly resented them. Attempts to have them repealed had failed in 1787, 1788, and 1790.

family dwellings, but great multi-story estates. One owner later received £10,000 in damages.²⁰ The most famous dwelling destroyed was the house, irreplaceable library, and scientific laboratory of Dr. Joseph Priestly. One contemporary writer states that besides these great houses destroyed, perhaps 160 houses of lesser Dissenters were pulled down. Even if this writer exaggerates by 100 per cent, the loss was great. The only estimate of casualties comes from the same source: sixty killed and many more wounded.

The behavior of the mob fits the pattern that we have seen in the other great primary riots. Though there was some plundering, the main motive seems to have been indignation. The rioters carefully avoided setting fire to houses when this would threaten neighboring dwellings,²¹ and they left alone the Methodists and followers of the late Countess of Huntingdon who assured the mobs that they were for Church and King. Most of the destruction was directed against Dissenters and others who applauded the French Revolution. The mobs numbered about 2,000 hard core rioters, with an additional 8,000 on several occasions.²²

Significantly, the last primary riot directed against a religious minority, the Birmingham Dissenters, occurred when Englishmen were becoming aware of the threat which the doctrines of the French Revolution were posing to established institutions. The slogan of the rioters, "Church and King," was appropriate, as the Dissenters were seen to be a threat not only to the Anglican Church but also to the Monarchy. The last violent attack on an old danger had become intertwined with a new fear. But the riot was still clearly an attack by the forces of order against the elements of change.

²⁰ In all the claims for damages came to £35,095/13/6. The amount paid was £26,961/2/3.

²¹ Most of the large houses were fired, but they were fairly isolated dwellings. Only one threatened to catch a neighboring house on fire.

²² *An Authentic Account of the Riots in Birmingham, on the 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th Days of July, 1791 . . .* (Birmingham, 1791).

6. *An Era of New Issues*

The nearly twenty-five years of war against France and the rapid industrialization of England that marked the turn of the century altered this. The new conflicts in society no longer revolved around religion. It is interesting to note that Englishmen experienced a religious revival in the 19th century that in magnitude rivaled the Reformation of the 16th century. But Religion was no longer an issue which produced riots, Ireland excepted. Indeed, the 19th century saw even greater assaults on the privileged position of the Anglican Church. And valiant defenders rallied again and again to defend the "Church in Danger." But the mass of urban dwellers were no longer committed to this establishment, at least with sufficient zeal to riot in its defense. The issues which now called forth the violence of the populace were economic and political. And the mobs rioted in demand for change, not in opposition to it. The violence at Spa Fields and Peterloo, and at Bristol and Nottingham in 1831, were not in support of the establishment against a religious minority, but rather a blow from below against the establishment itself.

The new issues can be clearly seen in the biggest riot of the reform period, the Bristol riot of 1831. A fitting conclusion to this study of religious riots is a brief look at this great riot. The Birmingham riot of 1791 was the last urban riot of the old regime; the Bristol riot of 1831 was a typical riot of the modern age.

The riot, in support of the reform movement which would culminate in the Great Reform Bill of 1832, started on October 29, 1831, the day appointed for the opening of the Commissions of Assize in Bristol. Sir Charles Wetherell, an unflinching anti-reformer and M. P. for Bristol, was expected in Bristol to preside over the Commission in his capacity as Recorder of the city. The reformers hoped that the people of Bristol would give him some demonstration for the reform bill to prove their desire for reform. Everybody expected trouble: the magistrates had appealed to the Home Secretary for military protection, and the Political

Union (the reformers) had demanded that the magistrates resign if they could not keep order by themselves in their own town.

On Saturday morning, the 29th, Sir Charles arrived in Bristol. The magistrates had prepared thoroughly, and they succeeded in escorting him safely through the huge hostile crowds that had gathered along his route to the Guildhall. But such confusion reigned that Sir Charles was forced to adjourn the court till Monday. After the gentlemen had moved with some difficulty to the Mansion House, the mob, numbering 2000 or 3000, began pelting the building with stones. The constables beat them off, but that night they returned in larger numbers and drove the constables into the house. The soldiers that had been procured in case of trouble protected the Mansion House throughout the night, but in the city there was scattered fighting. The next morning the riots began in earnest with a vigorous attack that left the Mansion House in ruins. By afternoon smaller mobs were moving against new targets. Soon all the prisoners in Bristol had been liberated and their prisons burned. The reluctance of the soldiers to fire seemed to encourage destruction. By nightfall the toll houses, the Bishops Palace, and private dwellings of anti-reformers all over the city were being looted and burned. The rioters normally took out the plate, valuables, and furniture, then set fire to the house with torches and inflammable liquid. The customs houses went next. By Sunday night all of Queen's Square, one of the largest and most fashionable squares in the city, was in flames.

Before daybreak on Monday, numerous people were coming into the city to join the rioters, and plundering increased all over town. But in the afternoon, yeomanry from surrounding towns began to arrive, and in association with the regular troops started to clear the streets. The mounted troops charged repeatedly to break up the mobs while about 5000 citizens armed with staffs and badges stationed themselves at strategic points throughout the city to keep the mobs from regrouping. Gradually the

streets were cleared. By Monday night only the crackling of the still-burning buildings greeted the troops riding in from towns as far away as Plymouth. Even a frigate was ordered into the King's Road in Bristol Channel.

The destruction and loss of life was immense. Virtually the entire of Queen's Square, about 150 yards on a side, was consumed by fire, and throughout the last night six huge fires cast dancing light over the looting and fighting. Neither public nor private property, neither rich nor poor, were safe. The city looked like a sacked citadel. The fighting—which was not simply charges breaking up mobs, but repeated attacks against barricades—had taken many lives. Perhaps 500 died in the battles with the military or in the crashing, burning buildings. Many more were wounded. Though much property was later recovered, a parliamentary commission set the damage at £68,208/1/6. Five of the twenty-six rioters capitally convicted eventually died for their crimes. Many others finished their lives in Australia. During the days of the Bristol riots, riots also broke out at Dorchester, Derby, Bath (when a mob tried to keep troops from leaving for Bristol), and Nottingham (the Duke of Newcastle later received £21,000 for the burning of Nottingham Castle).²³

The difference between the Birmingham and Bristol rioters is obvious. The first rioted to shouts of Church and King, the second rioted to cries of Reform and King. The first rioted against change, and demonstrated discipline; the second rioted for change, and lacked discipline.

7. In Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that primary riots—religious or non-religious, and whatever the objective—were not the characteristic

²³ *The Bristol Riots, Their Causes, Progress, and Consequence*, by a Citizen (Bristol, 1832); *A Plain Account of the Riots at Bristol*, etc. (Bristol, 1831); John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887); *Bristol and Its Environs: Historical, Descriptive and Scientific* (London, 1875), p. 65; A. C. Wood, *A History of Nottinghamshire* (Nottingham, 1947), pp. 304-307; Roland Mainwaring, *Annals of Bath, From the Year 1800 to the Passing of the New Municipal Act*, etc. (Bath, 1838), p. 375.

forms of violence during the turbulent period of the Reformation. Secondary riots were frequent during that period. There were numerous rural disorders, even insurrections against royal authority, but the Tudors kept the cities under control. In the 17th century religious conflicts were the major cause of primary urban riots, indicating that religion was the major divisive issue in urban society. In every case the rioters committed their violence in support of the Anglican center against Puritans, (and later Dissenters) on the left and Catholics on the right. Moreover, in every case except for the "Mutiny" in London in 1848 when the Puritans controlled the government, the violence was disciplined; it was directed against specific targets, not against authority generally. This violence came to an end shortly after the Hanoverian succession which secured the safety of the Anglican Church. Thereafter, till the last quarter of the 18th century, economic and political questions were the cause of the great riots in English cities. Then in one last outburst, the mobs assaulted Catholics in 1780 and Dissenters in 1791, the rioters again demonstrating the discipline characteristic of their 17th-century predecessors.

These last riots marked the end of religion as an issue of such deep-rooted concern to the urban masses that it could trigger violent outbursts. Thereafter new issues, economic and political, occupied the attention of the English working class. With the growth of class consciousness the enemy was no longer religious minorities; rather, it was the established order itself, the authority that had been for 250 years so important to the mass of Englishmen as a bulwark against threats, real or imagined, from Catholics and Dissenters.

(Concluded)