

Filming Peterloo in the Age of Brexit

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Filming *Peterloo* in the Age of Brexit

Nicholas Rogers

Peterloo, directed by Mike Leigh (London: Film4 Productions, British Film Institute, and Thin Man Films, 2018).

In his interviews on *Peterloo*, Mike Leigh insists that the event on which the film is based is a forgotten incident in British history. I was somewhat surprised at this, because I am roughly the same vintage as the filmmaker and became familiar with the story at the age of sixteen. How is it that a southerner knows the tale, when Leigh, who hails from Salford in Manchester, knows next to nothing, particularly when the event occurred a short bus ride from his home? Part of the answer has to do with secondary school examinations. I took 19th-century English political history as one of my advanced-level examinations, and Peterloo, the brutal suppression of a reform meeting in Manchester on 16 August 1819, was front and centre of any assessment of the administration of Lord Liverpool. My knowledge of the event was reinforced at graduate school, when social history became the rage. Peterloo is central to the making of the English working class. In E. P. Thompson's narrative, it occupied a critical juncture in the early working-class movement, as the mass platform of constitutional assembly began to displace the clandestine, insurrectionary impulses of Luddism and radical secret societies.¹

I don't know whether Leigh ever read Thompson's classic text, but his observation that Peterloo is not well known, even in his native Manchester, can be attributed partly to its gradual and uneven erasure from popular memory.² Celebrated by the Chartists as an unprecedented attack upon working people, particularly at moments when the rights of free speech and public assembly were threatened, the Peterloo martyrs and their flags resonated in public

1. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), 734–768.

2. Terry Wyke, "Remembering the Manchester Massacre," in Robert Poole, ed., *Return to Peterloo* (Manchester: Manchester Centre for Regional History, 2014), 116–131.

memory. By midcentury, Manchester Liberals had appropriated Peterloo as a formative step in the progress of reform, although the notion that Peterloo was in any way a “massacre” continued to be disputed by Conservatives, who managed to block suggestions that the event should inform the frescoes that decorated the New Town Hall in 1877. This contested memory meant that by the early 20th century there were only two memorials in Greater Manchester dedicated to Peterloo – more specifically, to Henry Hunt, the central speaker at the 1819 reform meeting.³ While suffragettes and left-wing groups strove to keep Peterloo in the lexicon of radical labour history, at its centenary and beyond, Peterloo did not feature in the historical pageant organized for Civil Week in 1926, the year of the general strike, or at the centenary of Manchester’s municipal charter in 1938. A painting depicting the Peterloo Massacre was commissioned for the new Free Trade Hall after the blitz of 1940, but amid controversy and hostility from the city’s Conservative faction, it was relegated to a spot in the rear foyer. The Labour-controlled council of the 1970s tried to rename Peter Street after Peterloo, but when confronted with business opposition it settled for a fairly anodyne plaque on Free Trade Hall that mentioned only the “dispersal of the crowd by the military.”⁴ Indeed, when St. Peter’s Field became a shopping precinct, it led an obscure life on the side of the Radisson hotel. In 2007, a Peterloo Memorial Campaign (PMC) was launched to produce a more robust memory of the event, and after ten years’ hard campaigning this has finally borne fruit. A landscaped hill, made from concentric steps, is in place in time for the 2019 bicentenary, close to where the massacre took place. It has taken a lot of political will to get there. Leigh’s film is part of this bicentennial effort to put a critical event in British and Mancunian working-class history firmly back in public memory. It is important to note that Maxine Peake, one of Leigh’s principal actors in *Peterloo* and a local left-wing celebrity, has performed the ritual of reading the names of the dead at the annual meetings of the PMC.

Leigh may have exaggerated the amnesia surrounding Peterloo, but he is essentially correct in asserting that the massacre has low visibility in British historical memory. It is not seen as a defining moment. Even within the left, it is not annually commemorated like the Tolpuddle Martyrs (1834), the Chartist Newport Rising (1839), or the suppression of the Levellers at Burford, Oxfordshire (1649). It struggles to achieve the status of the Scottish insurrection of 1820, an attempt by radicals in the Glasgow area to stage a massive strike and protest for working-class rights that was put down by the cavalry at Bonnymuir. This event has recently been enthusiastically endorsed by Scottish

3. One was an obelisk constructed by Chartists at Ancoats and demolished in the 1880s. The other was a plaque featuring Hunt at the entrance to the Manchester Reform Club.

4. Joseph Cozens, “The Making of the Peterloo Martyrs, 1819 to the Present,” in Quentin Outram and Keith Laybourn, eds., *Secular Martyrdom in Britain and Ireland: From Peterloo to the Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 31–55.

nationalists. In attempting to make Peterloo a symbolic element of national identity – a *lieu de memoire*, as Pierre Nora would put it⁵ – Leigh faces an uphill task.

In these days of Brexit, many Britons do not want to hear about the North, the heartland of an industrial revolution that has long disappeared and left, as its legacy, rust-belt towns like Bolton, Oldham, and Blackburn, whose populations have suffered from years of neoliberal policies. In a way, Leigh's film offers an analogue to this predicament. Wendy Ide in the *Guardian* commented on "how depressingly closely the situation of these ordinary working people from nearly 200 years ago is echoed by the present day. An out-of-touch elite pats itself on the bank balance, while the rest of the country grafts, hand to mouth, through enforced austerity."⁶ This is not the kind of thing that Tories and affluent Brexiteers want to hear as their leaders swagger recklessly about imposing a no-deal on the country if Europe does not heed their demands. The history they want bears an imperial hue, with Boris Johnson spouting Kipling in Myanmar, or it is about Britain's "finest hour" with all its Churchillian resonances. It is a history that feeds on nostalgia for the great little country Britain once was. And it is reinforced with World War II dramas on Netflix, films with Gary Oldman as Churchill or Kenneth Branagh supervising the evacuation of Dunkirk, or more episodes of *Downton Abbey*, whose bankroll is augmented by Americans salivating for aristocratic noblesse oblige. Filming working-class history is a challenge – financially and ideologically. Slumland is safest when it is cast in a melodramatic mould, like a penny dreadful.

Filming a working-class historical epic has never been easy, but it was a real risk in the current crisis confronting Britain, despite the revival of interest in left-wing Manchester. The problem is compounded by the fact that Leigh had not done one before. He made his reputation as a director of quirky, poignant, suburban satires, small-scale films with a handful of actors. Some of his films did broach historical themes: *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), a film about Gilbert and Sullivan and the making of *The Mikado*; and *Turner* (2014), a film about one of Britain's most celebrated painters, whose quest for the sublime anticipated Impressionism. But both of these are still character-driven movies in the familiar Mike Leigh mould. They are not plot-driven movies as *Peterloo* necessarily is. And while there are small crowds in both of these productions, this is nothing of the scale demanded by *Peterloo*, whose central action had to envision a rally of 60,000 demonstrators, men, women, and children, meeting to consider parliamentary reform.

Twenty per cent of the film is devoted to this dramatic confrontation between crowd and authorities, including the impassioned conversations of

5. Pierre Nora, "Introduction," in Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory*, trans. Albert Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3:ix–xii.

6. Wendy Ide, "Peterloo Review – Mike Leigh's Impassioned, Epic History Lesson," *Guardian*, 3 November 2018.

the magistrates who watched the spectacle from the window and pondered what to do. Five weeks were spent filming the massacre in which 12 people were killed at St. Peter's Field and over 650 injured or wounded.⁷ It was staged at Tilbury Docks and necessarily involved some crowd replication, fortunately with no serious injuries among the actors. It is very well executed. Leigh conveys the sense that the leaders half expected they would be arrested by the special constables who had drawn a laneway through the crowd. But they did not anticipate the violence and brutality of the military backup, first the Manchester Yeoman Cavalry, then the 15th Hussars, the latter moving forward with sabres raised before the Riot Act was read to the crowd. Leigh follows the historical consensus that it was the local men, the Manchester Yeoman Cavalry, many of whom had links to the manufacturers, who inflicted the most damage. Drunk and disorderly, their efforts to disperse the crowd quickly degenerated into sabre slashing and the trampling of demonstrators. Neither women nor children were spared. In fact, women were disproportionately victimized: they constituted one in eight of those who attended the meeting but one in three of the casualties.⁸ Age did not insulate anyone from attack either. The first casualty, historically and in the film, was an infant thrown from his mother's arms by a collision with a cavalryman in a narrow passage to the field.

In the literature on Peterloo it was sometimes claimed that the yeomanry cavalry were provoked into drawing their swords by brickbats thrown from the crowd. This was the standard conservative line until 1969, when Thompson convincingly argued that even dispassionate spectators saw no provocation. Joseph Nadin, the deputy constable assigned to arrest Hunt, contended that he could not fulfill his duty without military backup, and this paved the way for repression. Even before the cavalrymen reached the hustings they were seen slashing left and right. In Leigh's version the cavalry seem more inebriated than in Thompson's, and perhaps less malevolent. In his repudiation of the conservative position, Thompson noted that in the trial testimony following Peterloo, cavalrymen were seen singling out the well-known reformer John Saxton, trying to "run him through the body." Others, like cotton spinner William Harrison, were slashed at for simply "being there."⁹ Leigh does not

7. The standard text on the numbers is now Michael Bush, *The Casualties of Peterloo* (Manchester: Lancaster Carnegie, 2005), 44–45. Bush has also found three "disputable" fatalities and two individuals who were shot during protests on the evening of the demonstration. This brings the death toll on and off site to 17.

8. Michael Bush, "The Women at Peterloo: The Impact of Female Reform on the Manchester Meeting of 16 August 1819," *History* 89, 294 (2004): 209–232.

9. "Man versus Yeoman," *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 December 1969, reprinted in E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics* (London: Merlin, 1994), 169–192. The quotes are taken from the inquest into the death of John Lees. The view that the "massacre" of Peterloo was a radical fabrication is to be found in Robert Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).

dwell on these vindictive attacks, but he does pick up on the fact that the real flashpoint in the melee was when the yeomanry cavalry went after the flags and the caps of liberty, the symbols of working-class solidarity. This was when the repression became particularly bloody, in effect, an expression of class war. In the immediate aftermath of this bloody matinee, the word “Peterloo” was coined by James Wroe of the *Manchester Observer* to serve as an ironic counterpoint to Waterloo. It quickly caught on, signifying the establishment’s total disregard of the working-class contribution to the Napoleonic wars, its refusal to concede a measure of citizenship to men who had put themselves on the line and whose families had suffered immeasurably from wartime taxation and dearth.

The link between Waterloo and Peterloo is an important thread throughout the film. *Peterloo* begins with a shell-shocked bugler at Waterloo named Joseph, who slowly wends his way back to Manchester only to be told by his parents, Nellie and Joshua, that little has changed. Indeed, the newly enacted Corn Laws governing the price of grain ensure that food prices remain ridiculously high to boost the profits of the landlords. Postwar strife is attributed to the borough-mongers who control Parliament and suggest a direct connection between political reform and the rectification of social grievances. Leigh does not ponder the question of whether this critique is essentially libertarian or socioeconomic, populist or class-based. That is understandably left to the academics.¹⁰ So, too, is the precise role played by middle-class reformers in seeking justice for the victims of Peterloo. Joyce Marlow made much of this essentially liberal interpretation in her book celebrating the sesquicentenary of the massacre, but Leigh does not endorse this view, even though Ebury Press, which reprinted Marlow’s book in time for the film, would like us to imagine he does.¹¹ Leigh’s *Peterloo* is emphatically a working-class experience and it is noteworthy that his Waterloo veteran and subsequent victim at St. Peter’s Field is a fictional working-class lad. He is not the veteran John Lees, whose father, a small manufacturer, hired a radical attorney from London to expose the government’s handling of Peterloo at his son’s inquest.

Directing a film that is unabashedly sympathetic to the working class is going to raise hackles in Brexit-embattled Britain, where fears of socialists displacing Tory Etonians at No. 10 are driving some people over the top. In the comments that followed Ide’s sympathetic review of the film in the *Guardian*, one commenter remarked that “the working classes, as is Leigh’s wont, are painted as unfailingly warm, wise and nurturing, willing to share their last

10. There is a large literature on the language of “class.” The revisionist position began with Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

11. Joyce Marlow, *The Peterloo Massacre* (1969; repr. London: Ebury Press, 2018). The front cover of the Ebury Press edition features a quote from Mike Leigh: “This historic event is ever more relevant.”

crust of bread. Everyone else is an oily, craven, grasping bourgeois, literally cowering at the windows while the crowd gathers in the square below.”¹² Here is a sardonic class-fuelled caricature if ever there was one. It is not the only putdown of Leigh’s enterprise. There are those like Dominic Sandbrook in the *Daily Mail* who believe Leigh is trying to twist Britain’s past into “a simplistic fairy tale of protest and repression” and assert that Peterloo was really an accident and “not, by historical standards, a particularly big deal.”¹³

That said, there is the historical problem of how one might explain why class relations reached a breaking point in August 1819 and precisely what the intentions or hopes of the demonstrators were. Peterloo was a dramatic flash-point in government-proletarian relations, but it was actually one of a series of postwar popular confrontations with the state that involved local risings, a mobilizing march on London to petition the king, the election of “legislatorial attorneys” for unrepresented constituencies, even talk of a National Convention if Parliament failed in its duty to represent the people. The meeting at Manchester, in fact, was originally intended to elect a “legislatorial attorney” to match Sir Charles Wolseley’s election the previous month in Birmingham, another large city without an MP.¹⁴ Because this second election would have been branded as seditious, the organizers adopted a more anodyne stance, at least ostensibly. They reduced their aims to simply considering “the propriety of adopting the most legal and effectual means of obtaining reform in the Commons.”¹⁵ In light of news of military drilling, however, the magistrates banned the original meeting scheduled for 9 August. But under orders from Henry Hobhouse, the permanent undersecretary at the Home Office, a rescheduled meeting was allowed to proceed on the understanding that any whiff of sedition should be firmly dealt with. This encouraged Hunt, the radical orator who had just addressed huge crowds in Spa Fields, London, and had launched the mass platform to expand working-class rights, to play devil’s advocate. He impudently approached the Manchester magistrates to ask whether they intended to arrest him.

The radical riposte to government repression in the postwar years was often one of dare and defiance, and sometimes of taunt and provocation. The radicals adopted a constitutionalist idiom that stressed their historical rights as citizens going back to Anglo-Saxon times and the Magna Carta.¹⁶ Citing the

12. AdamK, 3 November 2018, comment on Ide, “Peterloo Review.”

13. Dominic Sandbrook, “Hysterical Left-Wing Attempts to Blame the Peterloo Massacre on the Evils of Capitalism Are Just ‘Twisted History,’ Says Dominic Sandbrook,” *Daily Mail*, 23 August 2018.

14. Manchester’s population was 125,000, or 150,000 if one includes Salford. Birmingham’s was roughly 106,000.

15. Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Rising* (Oxford, 2019), 229.

16. James A. Epstein, “The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” *Journal of Social History* 23, 3 (1990): 553–574.

1689 Bill of Rights, they asserted their right to bear arms and oppose domestic tyranny. They hoped to overawe a government that was militarily stretched by the unassailable moral force of numbers, armed resistance being the ultimate default position.¹⁷ It is worth remembering that one in six male adults had some experience in handling weapons as a result of the mass mobilizations of the Napoleonic wars and some ultras advocated armed rebellion. The chants of “Liberty or Death” that resounded from the moors outside of Manchester and its outlying townships were rhetorically militant, but they were not entirely bombastic. Men like John Bagguley, one of the organizers of the march of the Blanketeers in 1817, acknowledged that his rolling thunder mobilization might fail, but “three fourths of us are already organis’d,” he insisted, “for we have been in the Militia, in [the] volunteer corps & in the regular Army.”¹⁸

Such talk might have been embroidered a little by spies, who were the main source of many of these remarks, but it made the authorities increasingly jumpy. The fact that deputations marched to St. Peter’s Field in military formation, some armed with sticks despite orders to refrain from brandishing weapons, accounts for some of the alarmism expressed by magistrates; it did not help that Sir John Byng, the commander-in-chief of the regional forces, was amusing himself at the York races as the Manchester meeting approached. As John Norris, one of the few magistrates with legal training, wrote to Lord Sidmouth just prior to Peterloo, “We are in a state of painful uncertainty.”¹⁹ Leigh captures some of this in his film, although he tends to depict it as paranoia, not as a problem of how law and order might be reconciled in circumstances that teetered on civil disobedience and insurgent mobilization. And while he acknowledges the more strident demands of ultra-radicals John Bagguley and Samuel Drummond and the struggle within the radical camp over tactics, Leigh moves for closure once Bagguley and Drummond are out of the way in jail. Working-class people are then ready for an orderly demonstration; they are ably managed by their lieutenants, marching with their bands, banners, and music. They are lambs for the slaughter.

Dramatic distillation is necessary in any historical film. One cannot explore in two hours or so every contextual corner. Leigh uses debate rather than activism to illustrate the divisions among radicals – a good strategy in that it illustrates the degree to which clubbable discussion underpinned the fledgling working-class movement. Predictably it opens him up to the charge that his film is unduly wordy, with too much speechifying. Edward Porter in the

17. The government had embarked on an ambitious barracks program to ensure that troops were near disaffected towns, although it was not until the coming of the railways in the 1840s that there was an exponential leap in the efficiency of counterinsurgency.

18. Quoted in Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), 60.

19. Ian Herson, *Riot: Civil Insurrection from Peterloo to the Present Day* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 27.

Sunday Times thought the film presented “wearying, near-constant speech-making” as if one was reading a densely worded nineteenth-century political pamphlet.²⁰ In fact, Leigh’s film is not overwhelmed by talking heads. There is a balance between talk and place. Considerable care was taken to find a factory and alleys that resemble late Georgian Manchester, just as care was taken that actors spoke in an appropriate syntax and dialect. Two historians, Robert Poole and Katrina Navickas, were enlisted to show actors some of the extensive documentation on Peterloo in the National Archives and to familiarize them with the diction of the day.²¹

Dramatic distillation brings some benefits, including some colourful cameos: a vulpine Lord Sidmouth; a voluptuous Prince Regent, more interested in a tête-à-tête with his mistress than with the ministerial résumé of contemporary politics; an egotistical Hunt, doffing his white hat and sidelining the leading Middleton radical Samuel Bamford. Hunt, a metro-sophisticate who requests a “light repast” from an uncomprehending servant, is somewhat peeved that he has to spend an extra week in industrial Manchester. Yet dramatic distillation also has its costs. The legal manoeuvres before Peterloo are short-circuited. The participation of women in the reform movement is not developed, even though a few tried to break out of their role as auxiliaries to contemplate female suffrage. The presence of the handloom weavers in the agitation is underplayed. They were a critical group at the meeting at St. Peter’s Field, outworkers whose livelihoods fluctuated wildly in the boom-and-bust economy of Cottonopolis. The only real reference to them, unless one knows Bamford was a silk weaver, is the song “In Praise of the Weavers,” sung by Dorothy Atkinson, which refers to the “eclipse” of their standard of living and the hope that the “sun it will shine on the weavers again.” They were arguably more important to the agitation than the cotton operatives, who were subjected to strict surveillance by their employers and in danger of losing their jobs if they flirted with reform, especially if they had been involved in a bitter strike of the previous year.

I was expecting something on the aftermath of Peterloo, which is only hinted at in the film by the determination of the press correspondents to get the story out. In fact, the aftermath was politically seminal. The public was shocked to learn of cavalrymen sabre-cutting innocent women and children, a revulsion that spurred many women to enter politics. Despite Parliament’s move to restrict popular assembly and freedom of expression under the Six Acts, women played a conspicuous role in the agitation on behalf of Queen Caroline the following year. Among other things, over 70,000 women contributed to the addresses condemning her harassment at the hands of her reprobate husband

20. Edward Porter, “Film Review: The Nutcracker and the Four Realms; Mirai; Peterloo; Slaughterhouse Rulez,” *Sunday Times*, 4 November 2018. The same charge of wordiness could be levelled at Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom* (1995) or his *Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006).

21. Mike Leigh, interview by Joan Bakewell, Kings Place, York Way, London, 4 December 2018.

and deploring her legal censure. Moreover, the inquest of Lees, a Waterloo veteran and Oldham cotton spinner, proved to be one of the most controversial of the century, revealing the lengths to which authorities would go to frustrate an inquiry into Peterloo and stymie the radical concept of an inquest as a “people’s court.” Its inconclusive, evasive inquiry became a symbol of the corruption of the political order and an imperative for reform.²² So too did the show trials of Hunt, Bamford, and others in March 1820, at which John Tyas of the *Times* and Edward Baines of the *Leeds Mercury* reiterated their critique of the military and magistracy and, by extension, damned George IV for commending their actions. Essentially, the aftermath of Peterloo backfired on the authorities and laid the groundwork for the successful Reform agitation of 1831–32. It also solidified the sense of martyrdom that made Peterloo a potent weapon of class struggle and a “Baptismal Hour of the Labour Movement.”²³

Clearly Leigh had to stop somewhere in what was already a film of two-and-a-half hours. In a public interview staged by the Manchester People’s Museum at Kings Place, York Way, London, in December 2018, he claimed that dwelling on the aftermath of Peterloo would have made the film “dull and rambling.” He wanted to make Peterloo “an emotional place.” In an interview with Tim Lewis the same month he confessed that he did not “really think in terms of themes, but about people issues, relationship issues.”²⁴ Because his directorial style allows actors some leeway in the way they enact their roles, Leigh builds improvisation into his dramas; as a result, *Peterloo* veers toward the affective. There is no top-down authorial vision determining its course in the manner of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Queimada* (1969) or Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom* (1995). Ultimately, Leigh’s film is a family tragedy and a community tragedy, in which claims for democracy are sternly rejected by a hostile, uncaring ruling class that was quite prepared to use violence to enforce its will on an innocent population. In the foreword to historical consultant Jacqueline Riding’s book on the massacre, Leigh wrote that he hopes his film is “true to the spirit of Peterloo.”²⁵ I think it is, though the film loses some of its political edge in its sentimentality.

22. G. H. H. Glasgow, “The John Lees Inquest of 1819 and the Peterloo Massacre,” *Trans. Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 148 (1998): 95–118. A 2003 film looks at Peterloo from the perspective of the Lees Court Inquest: *The Peterloo Massacre*, dir. Justin Hardy (RDF Media, 2003), 1:14:05, posted on YouTube by “Timeline – World History Documentaries,” 21 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYoLv3b03w>.

23. This phrase is from the Quaker, conscientious objector, and ILP leader James Hindle Hudson, originally published in *Labour Leader*, 14 August 1919, cited in Cozens, “Peterloo Martyrs,” 32.

24. Mike Leigh, interview by Tim Lewis, “‘Silly Question!’ Mike Leigh Interviewed by Our Readers and Famous Fans,” *Guardian*, 21 October 2018. The comments from the York Way interview are from my notes. I was present in the audience.

25. Riding, *Peterloo*, xii.