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SHEFFIELD AND THE ENGLISH
REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION,
1791-1820

From Despard to Thistlewood and beyond there is a tract of secret history, buried like the Great Plain of Gwaelod beneath the sea. We must reconstruct what we can.

E. P. Thompson¹

Was there a secret revolutionary movement in England during the early Industrial Revolution and, if there was such a movement, must we accept that its existence would be “unprovable”?² Should we agree with a recent writer that no conclusions can be reached on such questions, the existing historical sources being so ambiguous as to allow the historian to impress his own prejudices on them?³ We believe that a rigorous study of the historical evidence of a revolutionary tradition in one region can offer an insight into this important area of English social history.⁴ The purpose of this essay will be to set the revolutionary aspect of Sheffield’s political history against a brief outline of the town’s economic development.

The industrial structure of Sheffield in this period invites a comparison with that of Birmingham and a contrast to that of the textile region around Manchester. Sheffield’s main industry was the manufacture of cutlery and tools, which encompassed a wide range of products including agricultural implements, razors, files, table knives, scissors, pocket knives, and the finest surgical instruments.⁵ The

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised ed. (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 542.

² R. Currie and R. M. Hartwell, “The Making of the English Working Class?”, in: *Economic History Review*, Second Series, XVIII (1965), p. 639. See also the remarks of J. D. Chambers in *History*, New Series, LI (1966), pp. 183-88.

³ D. Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 209-10.

⁴ This study necessitates the use of evidence of spies and informers, some of which is of questionable value. However, we have largely confined our use of such historical material to that which is supported either by subsequent events or independent corroboration.

⁵ John Robinson’s *A Directory of Sheffield* (Sheffield, 1797) lists the following numbers of firms engaged in the major cutlery and tool trades: pen and pocket knives (278), table knives (81), scissors (77), files (50), razors (43), scythes (26), sickles (25), and saws (14). On Sheffield’s economic history, see E. J. Buckatzsch,

manufacture of steel for these products formed another part of the town's industrial base. While most of the high-quality bar-iron required in the process had to be imported from Sweden, locally-mined coal was used extensively in the forges and furnaces. Of somewhat lesser importance were a group of ancillary trades which transformed the unfinished implement into a marketable product. Essentially these consisted of the manufacture of handles from wood, bone and "silver plate". From these basic materials the ancillary trades also made their own products. The "horn" industry, for example, manufactured combs and buttons, as well as bone knife handles. One of these ancillary trades, the manufacture of "silver plate", grew rapidly in the eighteenth century into a local industry of considerable significance. The process for the making of "silver plate", by the fusing of silver on a copper-alloy base, had been invented in the Sheffield area in 1743, and in the second half of the century it was widely exploited to produce a variety of domestic items including tea pots, buttons, candlesticks and knife handles. There was also a local silver trade, which by 1773 had grown large enough to warrant the setting up of a government Assay office.

Sheffield's economic growth was reflected in the rapid increase in the number of its inhabitants. Its population, exclusive of surrounding villages and townships, grew from about 25,000 in 1790 to approximately 40,000 in 1820.¹ At the same time it must be stated that this rapid economic growth was not associated with the introduction of a factory system. The application of steam power to Sheffield's industries and their re-organisation into factory units of production was of much greater significance after 1840. In the period 1790 to 1820 the workers of Sheffield were a "dependent artisanry",² rather than a factory-based proletariat. Although the typical Sheffield artisan may have owned his own tools, controlled his hours of work, purchased his raw materials, and employed apprentices, an emergent group of local merchant capitalists came to control the distribution of the finished products, as well as the circulating capitalisation of the various trades. In addition, the industrial sites and buildings, the major items of

"Places of Origin of a group of Immigrants into Sheffield, 1624-1799", in: *Economic History Review*, Second Series, II (1949); R. E. Leader, *History of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire* (2 vols; Sheffield, 1905-06); G. I. H. Lloyd, *The Cutlery Trades* (London, 1913); S. Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield* (Liverpool, 1959); W. Taylor, *The Sheffield Horn Industry* (Sheffield, 1927); A. T. Watson, *The Sheffield Assay Office* (Sheffield, 1890).

¹ In the second half of the eighteenth century the population of the town probably doubled. By 1821 the population of Sheffield and its five adjacent townships was 65,275.

² Compare the usage of this term in A. Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes and the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1964), p. 51.

fixed capital, were owned by a rentier group.¹ Increasingly, it became more difficult for a man to advance to the rank of master in his trade, and there arose a class of permanent journeymen who were discontented with both the political and the economic arrangement of society. Thus at the outbreak of the French Revolution, Sheffield was fertile ground for both radical ideas and the growth of popular political clubs.

The history of Sheffield in the early 1790's is one of violent popular disturbances paralleled by political agitations. The strength of the town's popular radical tradition in this period justifiably provoked one historian to compare it with the French revolutionary Faubourg Saint-Antoine.² In July 1791 several thousand persons were involved in a disturbance in opposition to the enclosure of the "commons and waste" lands near the town.³ Popular hostility, which included an attempt to burn down part of the residence of the Vicar of Sheffield, was directed against those local landlords who had initiated and benefited from the enclosure. While the popular grievance may have been an economic one over the loss of "rights" to the common, this affair was not without its political aspect. During the period of unrest, which lasted for three days, it was reported that the agitators had shouted out: "No King", "No Taxes", and "No Corn Bill".⁴ A contemporary visitor to the region noted: "They stuck up all over Sheffield printed Bills, with the words *No King* in large characters. This I suppose is one mode of exerting the *Rights of Man*."⁵ The violence which accompanied the Sheffield enclosure resulted in the billeting of troops in the town on a permanent basis. The officers of the garrison were very unpopular, and there were violent clashes between them and the townspeople in 1792 and 1796.⁶

These disturbances occurred against a background of widespread political unrest of which Sheffield was regarded the "storm centre". In December 1791 the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information

¹ This applies to both masters and journeymen who employed apprentices directly or indirectly through a network of sub-contracting. In reality the status of Sheffield workers ranged from wage labourers, through "dependent" artisans, to a smaller group of nearly independent artisans.

² G. A. Williams, *Artisans and Sansculottes* (London, 1968), p. 58.

³ Sheffield Register, 29 July 1791.

⁴ V. Eyre, Agent for the Duke of Norfolk, to Dundas, 31 July 1791, Home Office Papers, 42/19, Public Record Office, London.

⁵ John Barker to Thomas Carill Worsley, Esq., 29 July 1791, Manchester Central Reference Library, M 35/2/44/41.

⁶ Sheffield Register, 11 May 1792; Sheffield Iris, 1 July 1796; Sheffield Courant, 28 June 1796.

(SSCI) was founded by a group of five or six “mechanicks”.¹ By 1792 it had over 2000 members and surpassed in size its metropolitan equivalent – the London Corresponding Society. Broadly reformist in its aims, the SSCI was the hub of a radical propaganda system that centred on the press of Joseph Gales, the editor of the *Sheffield Register*, and to a lesser extent on that of the printer John Crome. In addition, the Sheffield radicals sent out “missionaries”, whose work resulted in the organisation of political societies in Leeds, Birmingham and Coventry.² The SSCI flourished in a radical artisan climate in which the writings of Thomas Paine were widely read, support for the French Revolution was strong, and “Citizen” was a popular form of address. In the autumn of 1792 there were popular demonstrations in the streets of Sheffield in celebration of the victory of the French Revolutionary armies at Valmy, and a military inspector reported from Sheffield that “the language here is the most violent and indecent that can be imagined”.³ In 1793 10,000 persons signed an SSCI petition for reform, which was rejected by Parliament as “insolent”. On 26 September 1793 Joseph Gales wrote a letter to a friend in Manchester that illustrates the relative strengths of the loyalist and democratic factions in the town:

“The C[hurch] and K[ing] party (very small indeed), accompanied by a recruiting party, with drum and fife, presented themselves before my house, and gave me most loyal music, firing and shouting: and someone was heard to say, that my house should not have a window in it that night. This circumstance [...] had the effect of calling together a wall of defense, for, about an hour afterwards, upwards of a hundred stout democrats stood before us, singing ‘God Save Great Thomas Paine!’ to the royal tune. This party increased to 500, and paraded the streets peaceably (except singing) all the day.”⁴

¹ On the history of the SSCI, see W. H. G. Armytage, “The Editorial Experience of Joseph Gales, 1786-1794”, in: *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXVIII (1951); E. Fearn, “Henry Redhead Yorke – Radical Traitor”, in: *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XLII (1968); A. W. L. Seaman, “Reform Politics at Sheffield, 1791-1797”, in: *Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society*, VII (1957); P. A. Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (London, 1918); A. V. Mitchell, “Radicalism and Repression in the North of England, 1791-97” (unpublished Manchester University M.A. thesis, 1958).

² Letters of C. Hundley of Leeds Constitutional Society, 28 May 1795, and John Harrison of SSCI, 19 March and 22 July 1793, in Treasury Solicitor 11/953/3497, Public Record Office.

³ De Lancey to Dundas, 13 June 1792, HO 42/20.

⁴ *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery*, ed. by J. Holland and J. Everett (London, 1854), I, p. 168. However, there is evidence that at least

In December 1793 the government moved against the radicals by arresting the Sheffield and Leeds delegate to the Scottish Convention. More arrests and trials followed in May and June 1794, when it was revealed that Gales's journeyman printer had offered to supply the London Corresponding Society with pikes. The plans for an English Convention had to be postponed and Joseph Gales fled to America.¹ While there was then a drastic decline in its membership, co-inciding with a "left-ward" shift in policy, the SSCI was still able to attract large crowds to its public meetings as late as December 1795.² A second wave of official repression, which would prohibit further public meetings, was on its way and a local incident of August 1795 was to have a profound effect on the future course of popular politics in Sheffield.

By 1795 the adverse effects of the war with France were being felt in Sheffield's trades and, at the same time, the price of bread reached its highest point in living memory. In the summer of 1795 Sheffield radicals had apparently succeeded in exploiting a pay dispute between the soldiers of the garrison and their officers to the extent that there was a threat of mutiny. A muster of the men on the 4 August brought matters to a head. A crowd gathered, and urged the soldiers "to push matters on" and "not to forsake them".³ When a word of command was given by an officer all of the soldiers "stood fast in a state of rebellion".⁴ Meanwhile a troop of politically more reliable local volunteers had been drawn up in case of trouble. When a few stones were thrown at the volunteers, this volatile situation erupted into a preview of the Peterloo massacre. The volunteers fired on the crowd, killing two men outright. A charge with sabres drawn resulted in the wounding of several persons. The response of the local authorities can be explained by the fears that were generated by the circulation of the following handbill before the fatal occurrence:

one, and perhaps two, organisations were formed in Sheffield by the more "respectable" inhabitants "to put a stop to those levellers". See Thomas Ward to John Moore, 4 December 1792, British Museum, Add. Mss 16920.

¹ Deposition of William Broomhead before Privy Council, 28 May 1794, Treasury Solicitor 11/963/3509, and before Sir Richard Ford, 23 June 1794, *ibid.* 11/956/3561.

² Deposition of W. Broomhead, 28 May 1794, *ibid.* 11/963/3509.

³ Sheffield Iris, 14 August 1795; see also the evidence of Sgt Hinde in "Crown Briefs", contained in James Montgomery's papers MD 1092, Sheffield Central Library.

⁴ "C.D.X.N.", "Formation and Mutiny of Cameron's Regiment in Sheffield in 1795", in: Sheffield Times, 4 October 1851. The pay dispute was settled quickly, but the regiment was moved from the town, and soon after it was broken up on account of its rebellious disposition in Sheffield.

Treason! Treason! Treason!

Against the People!

The Peoples' Humbug'd! A plot is discovered!
 Pitt and the Committee for Bread are combined
 Together to starve the Poor into the Army and Navy!
 And to starve your Widows and Orphans!
 God help ye Labourers of the Nation!
 You are held in requisition to fight in a bad cause;
 A cause that is blasted by Heaven, and damned by all good men!

Every man to his tent, O Israel;
 Sharpen your weapons, and spare not! for all
 The Scrats in the nation are united against your
 Blood! your wives and your little ones!
 Behold good Bread at Six Shillings per Stone;
 And may every wearer of a Bayonet be struck with
 Heaven's loudest Thunder, that refuse to help you!
 Fear not your lives! Aristocrats and Scoundrels,
 Cowards! Cursed be the framers and promoters
 Of the Corn Bill! And let all the People say Amen!¹

The affair of 4 August 1795, like that of Peterloo a generation later in Manchester, aroused a bitterness and hostility that survived long after the event. Joseph Mather, the radical filesmith and street-singer crystallised the popular feeling in his song:

"Corruption tells me homicide
 Is wilful murder justified,
 A striking precedent was tried
 In August 'ninety-five',
 When arm'd assassins dress'd in blue
 Most wantonly their townsmen slew,
 And magistrates and juries too
 And murder did connive."²

¹ Leeds Mercury, 15 August 1795. Other evidence of attempts to subvert the troops in Sheffield appears in De Lancey to Dundas, 13 June 1792, HO 42/20; John Harrison, A Letter to the Right Hon. Henry Dundas M.P. Secretary of State (Sheffield, 1792); Zouch to Fitzwilliam, 13 May 1792, Fitzwilliam Papers 44(a), Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, Sheffield Central Library, which are cited by permission of the Sheffield City Librarian, Earl Fitzwilliam and his trustees (hereafter F); Historical Manuscripts Commission, Dropmore, II, pp. 344-45.

² The Songs of Joseph Mather, ed. by J. Wilson (Sheffield, 1862), pp. 38-40. For a contemporary comparison of the "Peterloo" massacre with the 1795 disturbance in Sheffield, see J. Wood to Sidmouth, 24 August 1819, HO 42/193.

From this incident we can tentatively date the success of repression, on the one hand, and the birth of an ultra-radical “underground” tradition on the other.

In August 1795 James Wilkinson, the Vicar and senior magistrate of Sheffield, thought he detected “a great change in the minds and behaviour of the people”.¹ However, the Sheffield radical cause had not died as John Thelwell, the London radical, noted in September 1796: “My stay in that place was very short; but it was long enough to see there is a great body of virtue, intelligence, and well grounded principle among what may be called the Sansculotterie; but it is a body without a head. They have unfortunately no leaders.”² But some sort of leadership did survive during these years of repression. For example, an *ad hoc* committee met as the Sheffield Friends of Liberty in May 1797 and, provoked by the charges of their former comrades of the London Corresponding Society that they were “acting inconsistently with their former struggles in favour of Liberty and slackening in the hour of danger”, they replied in terms which betrayed a naive expectation of the political millennium:

“Let us wait then, with patience for the approaching crisis; and they who have so contemptuously rejected our petition will be obliged to petition us. By such a crisis, and by such alone, can this country be effectually emancipated. The arrival of such a crisis nothing can avert; unless indeed the impatience of the people should render them dupes of a Faction. Of this we see too much reason to be apprehensive.”³

Signed by William Dewsnap and William Camage, this statement seemed to represent the sentiments of the moderate, debating-club radicals who had survived the ravages of repression.⁴ The talk of “Faction” anticipated the evidence for a more violent radical leadership in which Camage was to be implicated. The revolutionary tradition was as yet only a potential force within the wider tradition of Sheffield radicalism. Vicar Wilkinson confidently wrote to the Home Office in August 1797 of the effectiveness of repression: “I am persuaded indeed that the number of disaffected at this place are diminished, or else their hopes and spirits are so much checked and abated, as to prevent them from showing themselves with so much confidence

¹ J. Wilkinson to Dundas, 11 August 1795, HO 42/35.

² J. Thelwell, *The Rights of Nature* (London, 1796), p. 20.

³ An open letter from the “Friends of Liberty” at Sheffield to the LCS dated 15 May 1797, Place Newspaper Collection, Set 38, Vol. I, f. 67, British Museum.

⁴ Dewsnap, a razor grinder, and Camage, a leather inkstand maker, were veterans of the SSCI. See Treasury Solicitor 11/956/3561.

in their cause, and audacious reliance on the strength and number of their party as heretofore.”¹

But radical sentiments persisted in the tavern underworld where the political songs of Joseph Mather, the Jacobin balladeer and filesmith, continued to be sung. In 1797 John Crome, a radical printer who had earlier worked for the SSCI, published in Sheffield a book of Jacobin verse written by one Charles Sylvester.² In addition, some Methodist ex-committeemen of the SSCI are known to have joined the radical New Connexion of their sect, the so-called “Tom Paine” Methodists.³ Against the background of increased government fears of a French invasion and internal unrest, Barlow, a self-seeking informer, came to Sheffield in September 1799. Barlow’s testimony, like that of all spies, must be regarded with caution by the historian.⁴ The fear of the debtor’s gaol caused some sensationalising in his reports, which eventually led to his dismissal from government employ. However, much of his talk of the existence of a secret committee and the involvement of SSCI veterans was based on fact.⁵ Even Thompson, a government informer, who was employed to check Barlow’s claims and who thought him “a complete alarmist”, confirmed the existence of Jacobin meetings in public houses.⁶

The existence in Sheffield of a secret organisation committed to obtaining political change by revolutionary means is first suggested in concrete terms by the events of 1800-02. The winter of 1799-1800 saw the first appearance of public soup kitchens in the town.⁷ The

¹ J. Wilkinson to Portland, 7 August 1797, HO 42/41.

² Sylvester’s authorship was reported by the informer Barlow to Sir Richard Ford, 19 September 1799, Privy Council 1/44a/161, Public Record Office. This claim is substantiated by Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 103. A copy of the original, Anon., *Poems on Various Subjects* (Sheffield, 1797), is in Sheffield Central Library. Sylvester was a journeyman silversmith, and his career is documented in Ian Inkster, “The Development of a Scientific Community in Sheffield, 1790-1850”, in: *Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society*, X, Pt 2 (1973), pp. 99-131. For Crome’s career, see J. L. Baxter and F. K. Donnelly, “The Revolutionary Underground in the West Riding: Myth or Reality?”, in: *Past & Present*, No 64 (1974).

³ See J. L. Baxter, “The Great Yorkshire Revival, 1792-6: A Study of Mass Revival among the Methodists”, in: *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, VII (1974).

⁴ On the evidence of spies and informers see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 533-39.

⁵ Barlow to Ford, September to November 1799, Privy Council 1/44a/161 and 164.

⁶ Thompson to Ford, 5 November 1799, *ibid.* 1/44a/164; see also the Further examination of James Dixon, 7 May 1798, *ibid.* 1/42a/143, for evidence of direct contact between the United Englishmen in Manchester and Sheffield radicals.

⁷ *Sheffield Iris*, 6 and 13 November 1799.

months of April, August and September 1800 witnessed market disturbances over the price of grain.¹ The September disturbance had caused a near mutiny among the local Volunteer force.² Crome the printer was bold enough to publish a satirical letter which attacked the abuses attributed to the activities of “Farmers, Cornfactors, Millers and Badgers”.³ Similar language was used in handwritten bills posted soon after in the villages to the east of Sheffield to call a public meeting to consider the high price of grain. About the same time strangers were reported in the district by a magistrate writing to Earl Fitzwilliam, the Lord-Lieutenant of the West Riding who resided at nearby Wentworth House.⁴ In November the distribution of seditious papers to the Norfolk Militia, who were billeted in Sheffield, was reported.⁵

The “hidden hand” of the revolutionaries was beginning to be felt and the harsh winter months of 1800 brought a series of nocturnal meetings. A Sheffield magistrate informed Earl Fitzwilliam of such a meeting held in the neighbourhood, where “an orator in a mask harrangues the people and reads letters from distant societies by the light of a candle and immediately burns them”.⁶ The magistrates issued a proclamation on 2 December 1800 against the holding of such meetings, but to no effect.⁷ That night, Captain Warris of the Sheffield Volunteers, a silversmith by trade, attended one of these meetings held in a field to the east of the town. In Warris’s account of the proceedings, plans were made for the manufacture of pikes by the 1000-2000 persons present. Recognized and challenged as to his intentions during the course of the meeting, he stated that he thought it was a public meeting to consider the cost of provisions. In order to defend himself he was admitted to an “inner ring” of men, but his opinions were met with derision. The leaders told him

“that they must strike at the Root of the Evil – Government [...] that William Pitt and all his measures were execrable to Human Nature. That nothing could prosper in the present hands, he would starve them all to death. That nothing would relieve

¹ Sheffield Iris, 1 May, 28 August and 4 September 1800.

² HO 42/51; F 44(d).

³ Anon., Good news for Poor People (Sheffield, 1800), copy in Sheffield Central Library. The next year Crome reprinted an old SSCI anti-war handbill, Anon., War (Sheffield, 1801), Bancroft to Portland, 29 June 1801, HO 42/62.

⁴ W. Taylor to Fitzwilliam, 21 October 1800, F 45(a). A copy of the handbill was enclosed.

⁵ Lt. Col. of Norfolk Militia to Portland, 3 November 1800, HO 42/53.

⁶ J. Lowe to Fitzwilliam, 1 December 1800, F 44(e).

⁷ Printed handbill dated 2 December 1800, F 44(e).

them but a change of Ministers, exterminating Mr. Pitt and putting Charles Fox in his place.”

They then called on the meeting to disperse to defeat the attempt to spy on them. As the crowd left, Warris was jostled and pushed by many who cried: “do him, do him”.¹ The Sheffield magistrates wrote to Earl Fitzwilliam on 8 December:

“From every information we can procure there is a system of organisation going on, secret committees and a preparation of hostile weapons. A strict watch is kept but no discovery has been made that will serve as a clue for the detection of the principal movers of these alarming proceedings.”²

Such suspicions were shared by the magistrates in several other districts in the winter months of 1800-01.³ If the indeterminate reliability of spies’ claims which formed the substance of magisterial reports can be ignored, Lancashire would seem to have contained the most disaffected districts, and most significant is the fact that the Lancashire reports suggested contacts across the Pennines with the West Riding.

In the spring of 1801 open political meetings were held in several centres of the woollen manufacturing area of the West Riding. Earl Fitzwilliam took great pains to investigate the nature of these meetings, and in April he confidently wrote to the Duke of Portland: “I can discover no grounds for suspecting the people of disposition to sedition. I speak of the West Riding.”⁴ From Lancashire, reports of the imminence of the “grand overturn” continued, and the zealous magistrates, Rev. Thomas Bancroft and Col. Ralph Fletcher of Bolton sent their agents to the West Riding in the summer and autumn of 1801, where political meetings continued to be held in secret. From Sheffield these agents sent back examples of John Crome’s recent reprints of Jacobin literature and they met William Camage, who was now alleged to be the secretary of an undefined organisation.⁵ Another of their agents, working in Nottingham, talked of the radicals procuring pikeheads from Sheffield, where “the Jacobins boasted of twenty four thousand

¹ Examination of William Warris, 2 December 1800, F 44(f).

² J. Lowe to Fitzwilliam, 8 December 1800, F 44(f).

³ See various reports in HO 42/55 and 42/61 which suggest the growth of the United Englishmen in Lancashire and the adoption of similar forms of organisation across the Pennines in the West Riding.

⁴ Fitzwilliam to Portland, 18 April 1801, HO 42/61. This followed urgent letters from West Riding magistrates, see F 45(a).

⁵ Bancroft to Portland, 23 June 1801, HO 42/62. These, who were unnamed, were probably Robinson and Bent. They were called “A” and “B” at this time.

united”.¹ Agents of Fletcher and Bancroft obtained copies of a “revolutionary plan” from different towns in the West Riding. All were similar in their meticulous instructions for taking and holding a locality when “a general attack be made at every place wherever Societies are formed at a time which is thought proper by the heads of the Societies in London”.²

In July 1801, while meetings continued, there was talk of a “general rise” for the 25th.³ Fitzwilliam wrote to the Home Office on the 1 August 1801 of “people who are now attempting to disturb the clothing part of the West Riding”.⁴ Later that month and further to the south, Fletcher’s spies, “Citizens” Bent and Robinson, who had infiltrated the United movement, first penetrated the Sheffield radical underground. Acting for the Lancashire “United”, they met the Sheffield committee and identified eight of its ten members:

Francis Moody	shoemaker
Matthew Shaw	silversmith
Thomas Troth	silversmith
Timothy Gales	pressman
John Crome	printer
William Camage	leather inkstand maker
William Wilkinson	tailor and meal-dealer for a society
John Alcock	leather inkstand maker

Four of these are known to have been members of the SSCI. Bent and Robinson claimed to have conversed with Shaw and witnessed an initiation ceremony using the United Englishmen’s oath. They were told of pikes buried in the ground and of details of the inner organisation of the Sheffield “United” men, who were to furnish “the 15th Legion, composed if possible of 15,000 men, brigaded like the London force”. They reported that the visit to London of one Caleb Taylor of Royton in Lancashire, a United delegate, had spurred the Sheffield

¹ Bancroft to Portland, 29 June 1801, HO 42/62. This was the report of an agent designated “C”.

² From a six-point “Plan for conducting the business without incommoding it by Flustration”, enclosed in one of Bancroft’s of 29 June 1801. It was alleged to be the Wakefield plan similar to the Sheffield and Leeds plan. “C” sent a similar “Plan for conducting the business without being Flustrated”, enclosed in Fletcher to Portland, 6 July 1801. Both in HO 42/62.

³ J. Walker of Halifax, land tax commissioner, to Addington, 13 July 1801, HO 42/62.

⁴ Fitzwilliam to Portland, 1 August 1801, HO 42/62. He enclosed a report from the Mayor of Leeds of “a midnight meeting near Leeds addressed by a man on horseback who claimed that the time would come when they must strike the blow or repel force by force”.

leadership into renewed activity by bringing back “a new mode of initiation”.¹

Whatever the evidence for an increase in organisational activity, tranquillity seems to have come with the ratification of peace preliminaries with France in October 1801. Even the enthusiastic Fletcher reported in early 1802 that “things were at a stand [...] that there was a want of organisation between the followers of the old mode and the new mode”.² In March 1802, however, Fletcher’s agents detected a renewal of activity. Bent, delegated by the “Manchester Central Committee” to collect cash and establish contact with West Riding radicals, brought back a document purporting to be signed by the Sheffield Committee. It was a remittance of funds to the Central Committee in Manchester and was signed in the names of:

“Chiefs”	“Committee”
William Pedley	William Wolstenholme ³
William Lee	William Lee
Thomas Troth	Henry Barlow
Edward Green	Thomas Troth
William Cochrane	Edward Green
	William Mercer
	William Pedley
	Jeremiah Elliot
	William Cochrane
	John Crome
	Benjamin Moore
	William Wrankley [Ronksley?]
	George Hawe Secretary

Underneath the signatures was the number 1615, which suggests the numbers involved in the organisation.⁴

¹ Fletcher to Portland, 31 August 1801, HO 42/62. The report claimed that every committee member was called a “conductor” and had a “commission” to bring in 100 men. Inferior officers were to command smaller groups to collect names in a register called “numbers” and to collect subscriptions.

² Fletcher to Pelham, 7 January 1802, HO 42/65. This letter referred again to Caleb Taylor of Royton and his activities. Taylor was an active radical into the 1820’s.

³ William Wolstenholme, a member of the “Tom Paine” or New Connexion Methodist Congregation at Scotland Street chapel, baptised one of his sons Septimus Bonaparte in 1801. Birth and Baptism Register of Scotland Street chapel, 1797 to 1837, Public Record Office, RG 4/2018.

⁴ Enclosed in Fletcher to Pelham, 3 April 1802, HO 42/65. Bent also provided a list of the members of the Manchester Central Committee and the Wakefield and Almondbury Committee.

In the summer of 1802 there was more talk of revolution in the West Riding. A frenzied magistrate wrote to Fitzwilliam of

“my private suspicions of secret and dangerous designs still in existence, ground on the common temper and conduct of the lower ranks, who speak constantly and steadily of the time approaching when a sudden midnight insurrection shall lead them to assert and regain their native rights.”¹

As early as July 1802 Fitzwilliam was receiving reports that anticipated what was to occur in November of that year.² Through August and September a steady stream of information came to him of nocturnal meetings held in the West Riding.³ The Mayor of Leeds, whose informants told him of local “business” committees meeting in the larger towns, surmised: “By Christmas should be able to carry their points and on one night the Rise was to take place in every quarter.”⁴ On 16 November Edward Marcus Despard was arrested at the Oakley Arms, Lambeth, on a charge of High Treason.⁵ Alleged to have been involved for two years in organising a *coup d'état* in London, Despard was to have signalled “for all England to rise” by stopping the mail coaches. The Tower and the Bank of England were to be seized and the King assassinated on his way to open Parliament on 25 November. Despard, who said little at his trial, had reportedly stated on 16 November that

“a regular organisation in the country is necessary, and I believe, is already general; and that the people were everywhere ripe and anxious for the moment of attack [...] and I believe this to be the moment; the people, particularly in Leeds, in Sheffield, in Birmingham, and in every capital town in England, are ripe”.⁶

In Sheffield it would seem that there was such an organisation – the same one that Bent had betrayed to his employers in March 1802. In late November William Lee and William Ronksley were arrested in Sheffield as leaders of a revolutionary organisation. Charges were laid on the strength of the depositions of two colliers, William and Edward

¹ R. Walker to Fitzwilliam, 13 June 1802, F 45(d).

² Anon. of Halifax to Fitzwilliam, 27 July 1802, F 45(d), warned of “the Grand business of the Revolution to be begun and completed in London”.

³ F 45(d).

⁴ W. Cookson to Fitzwilliam, 19 August 1802, F 45(d).

⁵ For the Despard affair see T. B. Howell, *State Trials*, XXVIII (London, 1820), pp. 345–528; Privy Council 1/3552 and 3553; Treasury Solicitor 11/332, Pt 1.

⁶ Examination of Thomas Windsor in Howell, *op. cit.*, pp. 398, 427.

Simnet, whose membership of the same organisation had been betrayed. William Simnet, working as a turner, had lodged with Ronksley in the autumn of 1801. Ronksley, he claimed, boasted of being a member of a society, "formed for the purpose of making this a free Nation, and that after the society had risen, it was their object to work a revolution, to take the King off his Throne and put such persons to death as refused to join them." The Simnets had been sworn in before Christmas 1801 at the house of another turner – William Lee. Three thousand spears were said to be buried in the ground, "in preparation for taking the barracks", and a cache of these was actually discovered by the magistrates.¹ The Simnets' betrayer had met them working as colliers in Chesterfield in early November 1802. He alleged they told him of their affiliation with the Sheffield society, and that it was to act "when the late disturbances happened at Woolwich, but being disappointed they deferred it till the meeting of Parliament. That dispatches were constantly sent from one society to another."² Lee and Ronksley, brought before the Sheffield magistrates, denied being involved in any recent political activities. Lee said that "when provisions became cheaper he gave up all political matters", while Ronksley piously claimed that "when the arms had been buried he hoped they would remain there forever".³ Both were given heavy sentences at the Yorkshire Spring Assizes; a fearsome reproach to those of "Despard's men" the law could not touch.⁴

After the one year Peace of Amiens, April 1802 to May 1803, England and France were again at war. But, in contrast to the 1790's, the English government enjoyed more widespread support for its war effort. Napoleon's apparent abandonment of French revolutionary ideals may have cost him whatever sympathy he might have expected from English ultra-radicals. Fear of France as a commercial rival and potential invader manifested itself as a popular anti-Gallican feeling.⁵ The wider support for the war with France coupled with a succession of good harvests to produce a period of relative domestic tranquillity.

¹ Deposition of William Simnet of Chesterfield, 25 November 1802, HO 42/66. The discovery of the arms was reported in Parker to Fitzwilliam, 1 December 1802, HO 42/66.

² Deposition of John Wilbone of Chesterfield, 23 November 1802, HO 42/66.

³ Depositions of William Lee and William Ronksley, n.d., F 45(d). Copies also in Fitzwilliam to Pelham, 7 December 1802, HO 42/66.

⁴ Leeds Mercury, 26 March 1803. In the Newcastle Courant of 19 March 1803 it was noted that "the design of these persons seems to have some connection with Colonel Despard, as they received orders from chiefs and conductors". Of one of Despard's supporters in Sheffield more will be heard below.

⁵ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 494-96.

At the same time these were years of hardship and underemployment in which it was noted:

“As for the poor, in this town, who were formerly great readers, they are reduced to ashes by the war, and if there be a spark of ethereal spirit among them, it is so hidden that the breath of heaven alone, that blew over the valley of dry bones, could quicken it into flame again.”¹

It was not until the beginning of the second decade of the nineteenth century that this situation was to change.

In common with most parts of England, the year 1812 in Sheffield was marked by the bitterest of economic distress. The price of bread soared to record heights, while under the impact of the Orders in Council the cutlery trades stagnated. These conditions resulted in the reappearance of the revolutionary tradition that had been suppressed some ten years earlier.

A popular disturbance on 14 April provided an opportunity for the politically discontented to reassert themselves. The incident began in a curious manner when dozens of labourers, engaged in the building of a new grave-yard, marched into the market to protest. The men wore “wooden clogs” on their feet, and the editor of the *Sheffield Iris* thought that their purpose was to “exhibit a spectacle of wretchedness”.² A crowd gathered and soon a traditional market disturbance was under way. But this disturbance was not simply a spontaneous “rebellion of the belly”. It was reported that two of the crowd’s “principal ringleaders” were “the most ingenious mechanics in the town, and in the week before they had received wages [...] of 4 gns and a half”.³ And indeed one of the most active men in the crowd was one Thomas Wilson, optician, of Sheffield. Further, when some arrests were made, William Denton, a servant, addressed the crowd and said that “it was a shame to bring people into a scrape and then send them to York meaning the prisoners”.⁴

The political orientation of a part of this crowd was revealed in an incident involving James Montgomery (the poet and the editor of the *Sheffield Iris*). The chivalrous Montgomery went to the rescue of a

¹ James Montgomery to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sheffield, 16 December 1808, Dove Cottage Manuscripts, Grasmere. We are indebted to Mr E. P. Thompson for this reference, which is quoted by permission of the Trustees of Dove Cottage.

² Annual Register, 1812, p. 56; *Sheffield Iris*, 21 April 1812.

³ Leeds Mercury, 2 May 1812.

⁴ Depositions of Thomas Wilson and John Poynton, Assize 45/46, Pt 1, Public Record Office.

woman grainseller who was being manhandled by the crowd. He took the woman to the safety of the *Iris* office, but re-emerged when someone threw a potato through his window. Montgomery met with a hostile reception and a friend in the crowd warned him: "Mester! Mester! get yo in – they'll mully-crush yo else!" But another person shouted out: "Nay, nay, sir we won't hurt you – you were once our friend."¹ And indeed Montgomery had once been the friend of the radical cause. In the 1790's he had been associated with the SSCI, and the *Iris* was founded as a successor to the radical *Sheffield Register* of Joseph Gales. Montgomery twice served prison terms in York Castle for his radical views. In 1795 he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for his sympathetic reporting of the crowd's behaviour in a popular disturbance. But after about 1800 he moved away from his youthful radical position and developed a conservative viewpoint. Behind the deferential form of address used by the crowd in their confrontation with Montgomery lay their former radical sympathies.

Soon after the incident concerning Montgomery, the popular disturbance of 14 April 1812 was converted into a march on the local militia depot. By now the crowd consisted of a lead group of five or six men and about fifty youths, followed by four or five thousand older men and women.² On approaching the depot they sent up three huzzas and shouted "All in a mind" to gather for the assault.³ After attacking the depot with volleys of stones, the crowd – and especially the youths – stormed the building. They overcame the guards and began to make off with the weapons and other equipment. However, they were cautioned by the older and less active members of the crowd: "Do you know what you are about? You will all be hanged, if you are caught with those arms in your hands; you had better destroy them than carry them away."⁴ This advice was heeded, and the crowd had turned to wrecking the contents of the armoury when a troop of Hussars arrived to disperse them. Of 864 weapons originally in the depot 198 were broken and 78 were stolen.⁵

The Home Office, much concerned about the widespread disorders and Luddism, had General Grey investigate the incident. He reported "that this affair was without plan or system, and I should suppose totally unconnected with the proceedings at Leeds, Huddersfield, etc.,

¹ *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery*, II, p. 331.

² *Sheffield Iris*, 28 July 1812.

³ Deposition of Thomas Flather, Sargeant in Sheffield Militia, Assize 45/46, Pt 1.

⁴ *Sheffield Iris*, 21 April 1812.

⁵ Wortley to Sidmouth, 18 April 1812, HO 42/122.

particularly as everything has since been perfectly quiet at Sheffield".¹ But what General Grey did not know was that one of the ringleaders of this disturbance was no ordinary "food rioter". John Blackwell (alias Jacky Blacker, journeyman tailor of Sheffield) was arrested at the depot with a stolen musket in his hands. He admitted to urging the crowd on in the market, but not to directing them to the depot. This, he claimed, had been the work of two persons who were not inhabitants of Sheffield. However, others arrested stated that Blackwell was "the person foremost in the said Riot and who [...] broke many of the muskets there destroyed".² The subsequent career of Blackwell and the apparent divisions within the crowd suggest that in Sheffield on 14 April 1812 an attempt was made to convert a traditional popular disturbance into mass insurgency.³

The price of grain continued to rise and there was another popular disturbance on 18 August 1812. Flour was selling at seven shillings a stone and a crowd gathered in order to enforce its sale at three shillings a stone. The local magistrates and Lord Milton, the son of Earl Fitzwilliam, tried to restore order. But Lord Milton was stoned by the crowd when he suggested they wait until the harvest was brought in. The military had to move in to protect him, and threats were made to march on the home of the Fitzwilliams at nearby Wentworth.⁴ The next day the town was quiet, but there had been reports of nocturnal meetings in the vicinity. One of these was raided by the magistrates, who arrested a man who had "been active among a party who broke into a mill at Attercliffe and forcibly took away both flour and money".⁵

In October 1812 a chance encounter in a public house provided further evidence that Sheffield's popular disturbances were connected with revolutionary political views. Thomas Asline Ward, a member of a local business family, recorded an incident in his diary which allows the historian to penetrate the opaqueness of early-nineteenth-century

¹ Grey to Sidmouth, 18 April 1812, HO 42/122. Contradicting General Grey's opinion was a report that Sheffield men had travelled to Barnsley in an attempt to organise a similar attack on that town. See Francis Wood and Lt. Col. Standle to Home Office, 15 April 1812, HO 42/122. Other accounts appear in *Sheffield Iris*, 21 April 1812, and Francis Fenton to Sidmouth, 18 May 1812, HO 50/291.

² Wakefield County Archives, Quarter Session Rolls, Informations and Examinations of April 1812 presented at Rotherham Sessions of August 1812.

³ For a different interpretation of this event, based on an incomplete examination of the sources, see M. I. Thomis, *The Luddites* (Newton Abbot, 1970), pp. 83-84 and 98.

⁴ *Annual Register*, 1812, p. 104; *Sheffield Iris*, 25 August 1812; *Sheffield Mercury*, 22 August 1812.

⁵ T. A. Ward, *Peeps into the Past* (Sheffield, 1909), p. 189.

English society. Ward debated the political issues of the day with a group of men in an alehouse, and recorded that

“It is their opinion that the kingdom cannot exist, without a change, till Christmas, and they seem scarcely startled at the idea of a revolution. Everything, they say, is wrong in this country, from the King to the Constable, and Bonaparte is an honest fellow. I insisted upon the despotic nature of the French Government, and the great freedom which we enjoyed. They would not believe me. Speaking of Lord Wellington, they said that he was driven from Madrid. I told them that he was in advance of it and pursuing the retreating enemy. They said the rich always pretended to know better than the poor, who had, or ought to have, equal rights with them – but George Foster (I suppose some alehouse demagogue) told that it would soon be ‘all over’ with Lord Wellington.”

At that time Ward was an officer in the local militia, and he recognized one of the men in the room as a “Freeman of Lincoln”, who had taken part in the disturbance of August 1812.¹

In the last week of November 1812 there was trouble at a performance at the Sheffield theatre. The officers of the garrison insisted on the audience singing *God Save the King*, but those in the gallery (i.e. the cheapest seats) objected. A guard had to be placed amongst them to maintain order, and apparently for his part in the affair John Blackwell, the radical tailor, earned the title “King of the Gallery”.²

After a brief recovery Sheffield’s trade again slumped in the general post-war depression of 1816. This period was marked by the resurgence of popular radicalism in the form of Union Societies and Hampden Clubs.³ A Sheffield Union Society was reported to have been founded in October 1816,⁴ and in the same month a petition for the redress of economic grievances signed by 17,000 Sheffielders was ignored by Parliament.⁵ Again it was John Blackwell who seized the opportunities afforded by this situation. On Tuesday 3 December 1816 there was a meeting in the Sheffield market. The orators at this gathering advised their audience to disperse peacefully and to meet again on Thursday when the results of the Spa-Fields meeting in London would be known. Blackwell ignored this plea and led a breakaway group of several hundred men through the town. At the top of a long pole Blackwell

¹ T. A. Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

² *Ibid.*, p. 196; *Sheffield Mercury*, 28 November 1812.

³ For the formation of Hampden Clubs, see HO 40/3.

⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, XXXV, pp. 415-17 and 532-33.

⁵ *Sheffield Iris*, 15 October 1816.

carried a blood-stained loaf and a sign which read “Bread or Blood”. After breaking the windows of a flourdealer this group also resolved to meet again on Thursday and began to march back to the market.¹ By this time the magistrates had organised the civil and military powers, and read the Riot Act. The special constables were ordered to clear the streets and one obstinate fellow was taken into custody. Just then, Blackwell shouted out from the crowd: “Never mind, my lads, tomorrow shall be our day.”² He was arrested and sent off to York; then the crowd dispersed.³

The next day about sixty persons attended a secret meeting outside the town, which was addressed by an “Orator”, who “recommended perseverance in meeting for the purpose of keeping the Military as much dispersed as possible, and he stated that similar meetings were held in Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham and other places”.⁴ However, he advised that violence should be avoided for the present. On the Thursday the dragoons broke up the political meeting that had been previously arranged for that day. Later the crowd managed to re-group and march through the town, but they were closely watched by the Sheffield and Rotherham Cavalry.

The Sheffield meetings of the first week of December 1816 were investigated by Earl Fitzwilliam, who found that “as far as I can collect, the proceedings at Sheffield are intended as Counterparts of those in London”.⁵ Political events in London during that week were of prime importance to both reformers and revolutionaries. On 2 December a great rally was held at Spa-Fields, where an enormous crowd was addressed by the radical orator Henry Hunt. A small group of Spencean revolutionaries attempted to transform the meeting into an insurrection which included an effort to enter the Tower of London. Rumours had spread to the provinces that something sensational was going to happen at Spa-Fields, and this was the cause of the excitement in Sheffield. Fitzwilliam, who was not an alarmist, reported to the Home Office that the Sheffield disturbance “was not the consequence of distress – not the want of employment – not the scarcity or dearth of provisions, but that it has been the offspring of a Revolutionary spirit”.⁶

¹ Sheffield Iris, 10 December 1816; Sheffield Mercury, 7 December 1816; The Times, 9 and 10 December 1816.

² Wortley to Sidmouth, 3 December 1816, HO 42/156; Assize 45/50.

³ Blackwell was tried and imprisoned in York Castle for two years.

⁴ Wortley to Sidmouth, 7 December 1816, HO 42/156. See also the reports from the other towns in this same bundle.

⁵ Fitzwilliam to Sidmouth, 7 December 1816, HO 42/156.

⁶ Ibid.

This revolutionary spirit was again in evidence in the spring of 1817 when "Oliver the spy" made his two tours of the North of England. On the first of these tours Oliver merely established contacts while travelling in the company of Joseph Mitchell – an important Lancashire "delegate". On his second trip Oliver went on alone to meet with local physical-force radicals. At Sheffield his plans went somewhat astray because the local authorities had not been informed that Oliver was in the employ of the government, and they proceeded independently on the advice of their own informer. The result was a raid on 29 May 1817 by the Sheffield magistrates on a secret meeting at a grinding wheel where Oliver himself was almost apprehended.¹

To secret meeting was attended by about two dozen delegates, who were each alleged to represent ten men. The conspirators were finalising their plans for an insurrection on 10 June, in which their objectives were to be the local barracks, the arms depot at Doncaster, and Wentworth House. Their political beliefs were outlined by one delegate:

"Our purpose for forming ourselves into a body in this manner, is to endeavour by force to effect the delieverance of our common country from the greatest Slavery and Despotism that ever was suffered to exist in it. We have no representative Body, who care for our interests in any way – and if we meet to petition we are pronounced traitorous and seditious. Our Commerce is gone, our Agriculture ruined, and our bodies liable to be thrown into prison. Where is the Briton that can or will endure this system of Tyranny and Taxation."²

The delegates fled when the magistrates arrived, but soon after seven of them were arrested.³ One of these was William Wolstenholme, who was listed along with Lee and Ronksley as a member of the Sheffield secret committee of 1802! Further, Wolstenholme was not discreet about his revolutionary pedigree as he "boasted that he was a Despard's man and had been 28 years in the cause".⁴

Typically the Hammonds emphasised Oliver's role as an *agent*

¹ J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer* (London, 1919), pp. 353-57; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class*, pp. 713-21.

² Information of Thomas Bradley, 21 May 1817, HO 42/165.

³ Those arrested were imprisoned without trial; they included two grinders, a hatter, a turner, employed as an optician's assistant, two cutlers and a mason, and two of these were on parish relief. Cases of prisoners from Sheffield, HO 42/165, and Parker to Hobhouse, 5 March 1818, HO 42/175.

⁴ Marginal notation of some official on "Information of Thomas Bradley", 21 May 1817, HO 42/165. Wolstenholme's sons, James and Thomas, were among those arrested in 1817.

provocateur in this affair. In their view, “At Sheffield, Oliver had found good if scanty material on which to work”.¹ In contrast Fremantle convincingly diminishes Oliver’s provocative role, but she says that he did offer “undue encouragement” at Sheffield.² Our study suggests that the central position so often ascribed to Oliver is an exaggeration, which ignores the strength of the local political movement.

In the first place, there is some evidence which suggests that the formation of a Union Society in Sheffield in October 1816, the disturbance of 3 December 1816 and the conspiracy of 1817 were not entirely isolated events. The president of the Union Society, Thomas Rawson, had been the object of the crowd’s attention a few days after the disturbance of December 1816. With Blackwell imprisoned in York Castle, the crowd turned to Rawson and tried unsuccessfully to elect him to some popular office.³ John Manners, the secretary of the Union Society, shared the stage at a Barnsley political meeting on 30 December 1816 with the itinerant radical Joseph Mitchell.⁴ Mitchell, who was later to introduce Oliver into radical circles, moved mysteriously up and down the country at this time. Also, when William Wolstenholme was arrested in 1817, reform literature in the form of Hampden Society publication number ten was found in his possession.⁵ The distinction, therefore, between radicals and revolutionaries was by no means clear-cut. It is probable that it was a more broadly based radical movement that harboured the revolutionary tradition.

Secondly, weeks before Oliver visited Sheffield there were signs of increased activity by a revolutionary group. As early as 30 March 1817 the local magistrates had been “apprized of the state of things at Manchester, and the connection between that place and Sheffield as to a simultaneous rising”.⁶ Bradley, the local informer, testified that he had been drawn into the conspiracy at the Blue Bell pub weeks before the arrival of Oliver.⁷ The Pentrich rebels of Derbyshire, who actually did rise on 10 June, had sent their delegates to meet the Sheffield revolutionaries at the Blue Bell.⁷ The Sheffield men had also made

¹ J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

² A. Fremantle, “The Truth about Oliver the Spy”, in: *English Historical Review*, XLVII (1932), pp. 601-16.

³ *The Times*, 10 December 1816.

⁴ *Sheffield Iris*, 7 January 1817.

⁵ Examination of W. Wolstenholme, 31 May 1817, HO 42/165.

⁶ Parker to Sidmouth, 30 March 1817, HO 42/162.

⁷ Information of Thomas Bradley, 21 May 1817, HO 42/165; see also Examination of Bradley 16 June 1817 before H. Parker, HO 40/10, where he states that the plan existed before Oliver’s arrival in Sheffield.

⁷ Examination of John Cope of Butterly, 15 June 1817, HO 42/167. The links between Sheffield and Pentrich must have been strong, because one of the

similar contacts with conspirators in Wakefield, Huddersfield, Leeds, Holmfirth and Barnsley.¹ In our view, Oliver's influence on the Sheffield revolutionary movement in 1817 was subordinate to forces that were already in existence when he appeared on the scene.

In 1819 there was a large demonstration in Sheffield to protest against the "Peterloo Massacre" in Manchester. The Sheffield reaction to Peterloo was one of universal public outrage, but the protest was a non-violent one. Even Earl Fitzwilliam publicly condemned those responsible for Peterloo, and for that act he was dismissed from his office of Lord-Lieutenant of the West Riding of Yorkshire. In the same year John Blackwell was released from prison and by 1820 had re-established himself as a local revolutionary. On 23 February the government smashed the "Cato Street Conspiracy" to assassinate the cabinet ministers and to set up a provisional government in London. Then in the first two weeks of April there was an attempted "general rising" in the North.² Insurrections occurred in the West of Scotland and in the neighbourhoods of Barnsley and Huddersfield in the West Riding. Several hundred Barnsley insurgents marched to Grange Moor near Huddersfield in the early hours of 12 April 1820. During the evening of 11 April John Blackwell led a group of Sheffield insurgents who were acting in concert with the revolutionaries in other parts of the country. What is striking about the Sheffield incident is that Blackwell, the manipulator of crowds in 1812 and 1816, depended upon a para-military group of about 200 men.

After charging about the town during the day, Blackwell and his followers assembled in the evening at predetermined points round the town. The men were armed, but committed few acts of violence. Blackwell fired off a pistol and threatened to shoot any magistrate who tried to apprehend him. Several witnesses testified to the high degree of organisation among Blackwell's men. One man stated: "The mob that was with him then fell into order, and one division marched down King-street, and another down Apple-market, and both met in the Hay-market." Another recalled that "he heard a pistol fired, and [...] saw the assembled crowd fall into regular rank, perhaps there might be five abreast". It was also testified that members of the crowd shouted: "that's Jacky Blacker, the King", "Hunt and Liberty",

Pentrich rebels escaped from the authorities for a while by hiding in Wolstenholme's house. See Lockett to Hobhouse, 10 September 1817, HO 42/170.

¹ Information of Thomas Bradley, 21 May 1817, HO 42/165; 3 June 1817, HO 42/164; 29 June 1817, HO 42/167. For Sheffield contacts with London Spenceans see Information of "G.R.", 29 January 1817, HO 42/158.

² Leeds Mercury, 8 and 15 April 1820; Leeds Intelligencer, 10 and 17 April 1820.

“when we have stopped the mail we shall do”, and “the Revolution, the Revolution”.¹

Blackwell’s immediate objective was to seize the weapons at the barracks, and after sending up a shout, “All in a mind for the Barracks”, the insurgents marched off along the Attercliffe road. But as they approached the barracks they shouted: “remember the 14th, all in a mind for the 14th”.² No attack was ever made on the barracks that night because “on the proposal of one of their leaders, it was agreed to adjourn this perilous enterprize until the next meeting”.³ The men dispersed and Blackwell was arrested the next day. A search of his place of work revealed “Several rounds of ball cartridge, a loaded pistol, and a pike of the most terrific description”.⁴ Blackwell was tried at York, found guilty, and given a sentence of thirty months in the Castle. That effectively ended his political career, and little else is known of him, but in both 1816 and 1820 the Secretary of State had considered him important enough to pay the expenses of prosecuting him.⁵ He died in the Sheffield Poorhouse in 1839, where he had spent the last eight years of his life.⁶

Almost as an epilogue to the Sheffield revolutionary tradition of this period, the following notice appeared on walls and doors of the town soon after the abortive insurrection:

BE ON THE ALERT!!!

THE BUTCHERS ARE READY FOR HUMAN SLAUGHTER
The Committee for Organization for this district make this unusual communication to their patriot fellow citizens, in consequence of our enemies having received information, from some traitor, of our intention to assert our rights forthwith, the grand central committee have thought it advisable to defer the period till the 7th day of the 5th term, at which time prepare your bodkins, tellers and feelers for execution of duties necessary for every good subject to perform.

4 term 20

J.G. Secretary.⁷

¹ “Account of the Trial of Blackwell”, in: *Sheffield Mercury*, 22 July 1820; Assize 45/53, Pt 2.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Sheffield Iris*, 25 July 1820.

⁴ *Sheffield Iris*, 18 April 1820; Depositions of Waterfall and Marshall, constables of Sheffield, Assize 45/53, Pt 2.

⁵ Hobhouse to Parker and Brown, 4 February 1818, HO 41/4; Hobhouse to Parker, 28 April 1820, HO 41/6.

⁶ T. A. Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 266; *Sheffield Mercury*, 20 April 1839.

⁷ *Sheffield Mercury*, 22 April 1820; also a copy in HO 40/12.

The continuities in personnel, ideas and tactics presented here make up the revolutionary tradition. While we have concentrated on the Sheffield evidence, a similar case could be made for other communities in the West Riding. Wakefield ultra-radicals John Smaller and Benjamin Scholes, who were listed as members of the "Wakefield and Almondbury Committee" in March 1802,¹ were also implicated in the conspiracy of 1817. This evidence is corroborated by Oliver in his memoirs of his first tour of that year:

"I found there were many among them who did not hesitate to say they were well prepared with Despard in 1802, and that Job was lost entirely by the loss of a few who had neglected to keep up a close communication between them."²

The Barnsley radicals, who were involved in the 1817 conspiracy and prominent in the 1820 rising, carried their physical-force tradition over into the Chartist period. It is interesting that there is evidence of this area's involvement in the Despard affair of 1802.³

In London the connections between the London Corresponding Society, Despard's conspiracy, the ultra-radical Spenceans of 1817 and the Cato Street plot have been established.⁴ More recently the linkages between the Spenceans and the London Chartists have been gathered together.⁵ In addition, John Foster's work on Oldham has shown that the continuity of a revolutionary tradition can be documented for Lancashire.⁶ Throughout our period there was contact between Irish patriots and English radicals, and indeed the tactic of

¹ Enclosure in Fletcher to Pelham, 3 April 1802, HO 42/65.

² Narrative of Oliver, 1817, HO 40/9. Hostile accounts of Scholes's career appear in HO 42/174 and 176. His papers were seized in 1817 and are in HO 40/9(3). Smaller was "a notorious stealer of arms in 1812", F 45(j).

³ J. H. Burland, "Annals of Barnsley", Vol. 1 (1881), p. 278, manuscript in Barnsley Reference Library. Burland records that in 1802 "Adherents of Colonel Despard held secret political meetings at Carr Green, in the township of Darton". A rising had been planned for 12 December 1802 and the Wath Yeomanry were called out. A number of pikes were discovered 35 years later at Clayton West, and these were supposed to have been used on this occasion. See also Eli Hoyle, *History of Barnsley* (Barnsley, 1924), ch. CIX.

⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, passim.

⁵ T. M. Parssinen, "The Revolutionary Party in London, 1816-20", in: *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, XLV (1972), pp. 281-82. On the communistic ideas of the Spenceans, see Olive D. Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and his Connections* (London, 1927), and "Thomas Spence", in: *Essays in Honour of William Gallacher*, ed. by P. M. Kemp-Ashraf and J. Mitchell (Berlin, 1966).

⁶ J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), ch. 5, "Class Struggle and Social Structure".

stopping the mail coaches as a signal for a rising seems to have had its origin in the Irish rebellion of 1798.¹

In dealing with secret organisations in partially literate cultures, the odds against finding such continuities must be great. We simply do not possess sources alternative to those compiled by the authorities. The fact that we have found some continuities suggests a revolutionary tradition of some strength, and this contradicts one of the main arguments of the hostile critics of Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. We would argue that far from exaggerating or even inventing this revolutionary tradition, Thompson was too cautious in his conclusions. We would go further and assert that the continuity of organisation, ideas and personnel, in short the English revolutionary tradition was even stronger than he so constructively suggested.

In summary our argument is that the continuities of our English revolutionary tradition can be documented in the regional context. Secondly, there is extensive evidence of inter-regional contacts, which suggest an elementary national revolutionary movement in the period under consideration. Thirdly, we have argued that there was no clear-cut division between the reformist and revolutionary politics at the grass-roots level. Future research into this field of English social history, we have no doubt, will increasingly show the comments of Thompson's hostile critics to be no more than particular ideological responses made without any serious consideration of the problem.

Thus far, our narrative of the history of Sheffield's revolutionary tradition has been based on the traditional methods of historical enquiry such as the cross-referencing of sources and the corroboration of testimony. A major question about this research remains unanswered: what is the significance of these conclusions for the broader perspective of working-class history? Certainly, as Edward Thompson has suggested, the "explanatory key" of nineteenth-century English popular history is not "a thin minority tradition of disaster-dogged insurrectionists".² At the same time we must assert that the revo-

¹ A. W. Smith, "Irish Rebels and English Radicals, 1798-1820", in: *Past & Present*, No 7 (1955); Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty* (London, 1969), pp. 124-25.

² E. P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 924. Of course the "disaster-dogged" revolutionaries whose careers can be documented are probably the incompetent or unlucky members of some larger group of conspirators, whose numbers can only be guessed at. Certainly the Home Office papers are filled with the names of individuals and organisations which appear only once in the records of the authorities. Doubtless there were many others whose revolutionary commitment went undetected.

lutionary tradition was a significant factor, which must be considered alongside those components such as co-operation, dissent in religion, trade unionism, political democracy, the ideas of the general strike and labour value, which were to make up the ideology of the new industrial proletariat.¹ Our research on the South Yorkshire region suggests that the revolutionary tradition appeared in a robust artisan culture and that it was based on a shared experience of economic and political exploitation. In this sense it constitutes a proto-working-class response to the advance of early industrial capitalism.

¹ On these subjects generally refer to Thompson. For specific topics, see A. E. Musson, "The Ideology of Early Co-operation in Lancashire and Cheshire", in: *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXVII (1958); T. M. Parssinen, "Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771-1848", in: *English Historical Review*, LXXXVIII (1973), pp. 504-33; I. Prothero, "William Benbow and the Concept of the 'General Strike'", in: *Past & Present*, No 63 (1974), pp. 132-71.