

# Mike Leigh's *Peterloo*: A drama of the British working class

David Walsh  
5 April 2019

Mike Leigh's *Peterloo* is opening in New York City and Los Angeles on April 5, and more widely on April 12. This is an event of some importance. The film was inspired by important ideas and created with great seriousness and artistry.

The Peterloo Massacre took place on August 16, 1819, in Manchester, England when cavalry with sabers drawn charged into a crowd estimated at anywhere from 60,000 to 100,000 people protesting their lack of political representation and the dire economic conditions. The official death toll was 15 men, women and children killed, with an additional 400 to 700 wounded. The actual death toll was likely much higher.

The circumstances that produced the “Peterloo” event (so named, darkly and ironically, because it occurred on St. *Peter's* Field in Manchester and resembled the *Waterloo* battlefield of 1815 located in present-day Belgium) are complex and have lengthy historical roots.

The end of the Napoleonic wars, at Waterloo, in 1815 was followed by a severe economic slump in England, with chronic unemployment and hunger for many, particularly among textile workers in the north of the country. The Manchester area, often described as the first industrial center in the world, had 60 factories in 1815 employing some 24,000 workers. Over 90 percent of the factories were spinning mills.

The notorious and unpopular Corn Laws, which restricted the importation of foreign corn until the price of home-grown wheat reached a certain price, benefited the landowners and large farmers and produced famine that, in the words of one historian, “hung over the whole period like a carrion crow.”

The lack of representation in parliament was an accompanying issue that outraged reformers and working class radicals. Manchester, the second largest city in England, had no member of parliament at all. Rural areas of the country returned dozens of members while industrial cities went virtually unrepresented.

Wages were falling steadily, the factory owners were ruthless and the government was entirely indifferent to the suffering of the working population. The defeat of Napoleon and his forces and the restoration of various monarchies across Europe, codified by the Congress of Vienna, were supposed to have put an end to the threat represented by the French Revolution. But political subversion was raising its head in England itself and gaining strength within the nascent working class.

Leigh's film opens on the bloody battlefield at Waterloo. A young, evidently shell-shocked British soldier (David Moorst)

plays a few wretched notes on a bugle amid the horrific carnage. He makes his way home, on his own, to Manchester. He falls sobbing into the arms of his kindhearted mother, Nellie (Maxine Peake). The family of textile workers that receives him unexpectedly home again is suffering from falling wages and the lack of work.

Meanwhile, parliament bestows 750,000 pounds (the equivalent of more than 60 million pounds today) on the Duke of Wellington, the “victor” at Waterloo. But all is not well in the country.

The home secretary, Lord Sidmouth (Karl Johnson), warns of “seditious activity” in the North of England (“In Manchester and the surrounding towns of Lancashire, there is a sickness. A dangerous threat of rampant insurrection”) and accordingly puts a network of spies and provocateurs to work. Officials routinely intercept and read the correspondence of radical leaders. Sidmouth also orders General Sir John Byng (Alastair Mackenzie) to prepare himself for whatever actions may be necessary to suppress political opposition.

At public meetings in Manchester, speakers denounce the corrupt political system and appeal to the Bill of Rights of 1689, demanding “fair, proper and full representation—for all Englishmen.” The male members of Nellie's family, her husband Joshua (Pearce Quigley) and son Robert (Tom Meredith), are in attendance. They listen quietly and sympathize. But the practical Nellie thinks it may all be a lot of words. (“Talk. Talk. Talk ... Less talk, more action. ... Any road, they'll never give us t'vote.”)

The brutality of class rule finds expression in the courts. A woman is ordered to be whipped for public drunkenness, another is transported to Australia for 14 years over a purloined watch (“Our Lord God owns everything upon this earth, and when you steal, you rob from him”), a third is sentenced to be hanged for stealing a coat from his master (“I didn't steal it. I took it. ... He had two, I needed one. He's got one. I've got one”). The local magistrates, many of them clergymen, respond to unrest by awing the “rabble” into “submission” and wielding the “iron hand of the law.”

The magistrate Rev. Charles Wicksted Ethelston (Vincent Franklin), a real figure who aspired to be a poet and who told two Radical Reformers who appeared before him in 1819, “Some of you reformers ought to be hanged, and some of you are sure to be hanged—the rope is already around your necks,” positively swoons at his own blood-curdling rhetoric.

A potato thrown at the carriage of the Prince Regent (Tim McInnerny)—the future George IV, officially in power since 1811

owing to the madness of his father, George III—provides the government the pretext to suspend habeas corpus in 1817.

Henry “Orator” Hunt (Rory Kinnear) speaks to a London meeting attended by two representatives of reformers in the North, Samuel Bamford (Neil Bell) and the irrepressible Dr. Joseph Healey (Ian Mercer). Their generally favorable impression of his oratorical skills and personality suffers a blow when he rudely rejects their invitation for a friendly drink.

More radical leaders in the north—some, like John Bagguley, a Manchester apprentice, as young as 19—remind their listeners at a semi-clandestine outdoor meeting (observed by government agents) of what “our French brethren” have done to their monarch and aristocracy: “We must punish our mad king and his gluttonous offspring by taking off their heads!” The watchword is “Liberty or death!” The radicals are seized by police thugs and beaten in jail.

An assembly of women takes place, presided over by middle class reformers, one of whom uses somewhat turgid language: “And in order to accelerate the emancipation of our suffering nation, we do declare that we will assist the male union formed in this town, with all the might and energy that we possess, in obtaining the object of our common solicitude.” One working woman, angry and excited, shouts out that she doesn’t “understand a word you’re saying.”

Preparations for a great protest meeting in Manchester, which Hunt will address, are set in motion. It will be held on a workday. Hunt insists that no one bear arms of any kind. Bamford warns him the Yeomanry will be armed (“A large body of men are signed up, and weapons have been widely distributed amongst them”), but Hunt is adamant.

The situation of Nellie and her family has worsened. Should they participate in the meeting? It will mean losing a day’s wage and perhaps more. On the eve of the event, in one of the film’s most poignant scenes, Nellie and Joshua are in bed, in the same room as their small daughter. “Little angel ... I were just thinking, in 1900, she’ll be eighty five. ... I hope it’s a better world for her.”

The day of the massacre itself occupies a significant portion of Leigh’s film. Workers and their families show up, for the most part in a holiday mood, dressed in their finery. A huge, peaceful crowd gathers. The Yeomanry and the magistrates work themselves into a paranoid frenzy (“It is our Christian duty to bring the axe down on this riotous mob!” “Well said, sir! Well said!”). The Riot Act is readied.

The pompous Hunt begins to speak, although much of the crowd can’t even hear him. The Yeomanry, followed by the military, charges into the defenseless crowd. ...

Leigh’s film works at a high artistic and social level. He has been making films since the 1970s, most famously *High Hopes* (1988), *Naked* (1993), *Secrets & Lies* (1996), *Career Girls* (1997), *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), *All or Nothing* (2002), *Vera Drake* (2004), *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) and *Mr. Turner* (2014), but this is the first time he has directly treated a historical or political event. As he told his audience after a public screening of *Peterloo* at the Toronto film festival in September 2018, and repeated to me in a conversation, the current state of the world pushed him in that direction.

The filmmaker works directly and thoroughly with every

performer, planning and preparing each sequence. Improvisations within an initial outline help create a script. Every actor has a definite purpose and a conception of what he or she is doing. While there are obviously heightened and dramatic turning points, each distinct, individual moment is treated with considerable importance and conscientiousness. This is the opposite of sloppy or careless work, although the end result is often uneven and lively, like life.

The scenes of the public meetings and rallies are memorable, and the language and ideas are accurately and passionately reproduced, but small moments may also stand out:

–The nervous young serving maid (Byrony Miller) asked by Hunt, busy having his portrait painted, to hold down some of his “important” pages, but who is loathe to do so because “Me ‘ands are dirty.”

–In the crowd at the mass meeting, a plump, innocent brother and sister have come all the way from Wigan, a healthy walk (“You must have been up with the lark.” “Aye, set off at six”). But they’ve brought along no food (“We didn’t think to”). Nellie won’t have that and offers them bread to eat.

–Hunt grandly asks his hostess in Manchester, Mrs. Johnson (Lizzie Frain), to bring him a “light repast.” The unfortunate, harried woman whispers desperately to anyone within hearing, “What’s that?”

–The scene, noted above, in which the parents consider what the future holds for their young daughter. Leigh told an interviewer, “It was about a week away from the birth of my first grandchild... and I was thinking about... what will this world be like in 2100?”

The drama is historically and psychologically realistic. The Prince Regent and the authorities are portrayed as monstrous beings. They were monstrous beings, and this was before the hypocrisies of modern-day parliamentary “democracy,” worn incredibly thin by this point, had fully worked their way into everyday life. The ruling class brazenly and unashamedly defended repression and violence in defense of its wealth and property.

In the face of the mass murder of defenseless civilians, Lord Sidmouth, the home secretary, responded by explaining that he was “gratified equally by the deliberate, spirited manner in which the magistrates discharged their arduous and important duty on that occasion. ... I do not fail to appreciate most highly the merits of the two companies of Yeomanry cavalry and other troops employed on this service.” The government introduced new repressive measures, the Six Acts, to suppress radical meetings. Working class political opponents were thrown into jail *en masse*.

Leigh has captured the essence of the historical moment and its enduring significance. As he said to me, and as he told other interviewers, the film, he believes, is “prescient”—i.e., this history points toward the future. Historical truth, in Trotsky’s words, “the highest truth of life,” here corresponds with artistic truth.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)