PRIVILEGE

‘Up to the treaty of Tilsit, the wars of France were essentially defensive; for the bloody contest that wasted the continent so many years was not a struggle for pre-eminence between ambitious powers, not a dispute for some accession of territory, nor for the political ascendancy of one or other nation, but a deadly conflict to determine whether aristocracy or democracy should predominate; whether equality or privilege should henceforth be the principle of European governments.’[1]

‘This animal is very bad; when attacked it defends itself.’[2]

England’s wars against Napoleon can be summed-up in one word: privilege. Those that had it - the aristocrats and the Monarchy - were determined to defend it with every resource that was available to them and so the continent of Europe was plunged into warfare for two decades. As in every war, it was the common people who suffered most - but no one seems to care about them. As Nietzsche says in *Twilight Of The Idols*: ‘Danger, disquiet, anxiety attend the unknown - the first instinct is to eliminate those distressing states… Because it is at bottom only a question of wanting to get rid of oppressive ideas, one is not particular about what means one uses to get rid of them…’[3] Thus resulted the wars, the assassination attempts and the black propaganda that the English oligarchy resorted to in their efforts to get rid of Napoleon and the hated notion of democracy.

Human beings do not like change and disruption and as they age they resent it all the more. Those that ‘have’ fear the ‘have nots’ and project onto them an animus that results from their own insecurity. To the European Royals and their aristocracies, therefore, the peasants were always revolting whether or not they were actually up in arms against their oppressive rulers. Those that had wealth and power wanted to keep it and they wielded it with a righteous sense of their own superiority and entitlement. They saw themselves as eminently worthy of their privileges and convinced themselves that their high status was solely a result of their own incarnate wisdom, qualities and accomplishments.

As Carl Sagan says in *The Dragons of Eden*: ‘In general, human societies are not innovative. They are hierarchical and ritualistic. Suggestions for change are greeted with suspicion: they imply an unpleasant future variation in ritual and hierarchy; an exchange of one set of rituals for another, or perhaps for a less structured society with fewer rituals. And yet there are times when societies must change… much of the difficulty in attempting to restructure America and other societies arises from the resistance by groups with vested interests in the status quo. Significant change might require those who are now high in the hierarchy to move downward many steps. This seems to them undesirable as is resisted.’[4]

People like to feel important and not to feel small and insignificant. They want their lives to have meaning and purpose. Similarly, societies need a focus and a reason to exist. Yuval Noah Harari explains the importance of this in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*: ‘Since large-scale human cooperation is based on myths, the way people cooperate can be altered by changing the myths - by telling different stories. Under the right circumstances myths can change rapidly. In 1789 the French population switched almost overnight from believing in the myth of the divine right of kings to believing in the myth of the sovereignty of the people.’[5]

The British collective myth has endured and appears to be much more long-lasting: Napoleon was seen as an existential threat to this nation, an ogre who threatened to trample our cherished liberties into the dust. None of this was true. The vast majority of the British people had no basic rights at all, millions lived in utter squalor, deprivation and misery, many literally starved to death during periods of economic turmoil and hardship. Yet they cheered the victories of Nelson and Wellington while remaining virtually enslaved by their aristocratic masters. They kissed the metaphorical

chains, doffed a respectful forelock, and shook the hands of those who wielded the whip of social control.

Harari also states a basic truism: 'Yet it is a proven fact that most rich people are rich for the simple reason that they were born into a rich family, while most poor people will remain poor throughout their lives simply because they were born into a poor family.'[6] As Robert Louis Stevenson once said, it is as if the rich rise above a cloud and no longer see the people beneath them. It was not apartheid however, it was more like a caste system - the British poor were there to be used and taxed by the state and otherwise kept in their place.

Harari says this of Wellington: 'When the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon's nemesis, enlisted in the British army at the age of eighteen, he was immediately commissioned as an officer. He didn't think much of the plebeians under his command. 'We have in the service the scum of the earth as common soldiers,' he wrote to a fellow aristocrat during the wars against France. These common soldiers were usually recruited from among the very poorest, or from ethnic minorities (such as Irish Catholics). Their chances of ascending the military ranks were negligible. The senior ranks were reserved for dukes, princes and kings'.[7] To them that hath shall be given.

This higher status and extravagant self-opinion led to an overweening arrogance amongst the British upper classes that coloured and blighted our history for centuries. As their empire expanded they saw themselves not only as the greatest power and most civilised nation upon the earth, but as the most advanced and civilised nation that had *ever* existed. In 1834 Henry McClellan, a young man from Boston who had come to study here after graduating at Harvard, reported: 'In England, condition, title and wealth are everything; character, person, humanity comparatively nothing. All yields to the dazzle of wealth and hereditary influence. This aristocracy predominates everywhere'.[8] Things had certainly not changed since Wellington was a young man. He for one liked things exactly as they were and throughout his life he found any talk of change absolutely abhorrent.

The famous American artist George Catlin was likewise upset when he visited this country. In 1842 in a letter to his father he said: 'I am…sick of the insolence of wealth and the wretchedness of poverty which belongs to this great polished nation, with its boasted institutions - its wealth, its refinements, its luxuries.'[9] As Peter Pagnamenta adds in *Prairie Fever*: 'Catlin's nephew Burr was also indignant about the inequalities he saw in London, with the destitute starving in the streets, 'while the Lords and Gentry are giving their Grand Balls and Soirees and spending thousands nightly.'[10] What bliss it was that dawn to be alive, but to be rich was very heaven,

Laurence James in *Aristocrats, Power, Grace & Decadence*, states that: 'A new breed of aristocrat appeared in the sixteenth century… The modern aristocrat shared with his ancestors the conviction that virtue was genetically transmitted, was proud of his ancestry and believed that leadership in war and peace was his birthright.'[11]Thus was the British aristocrat born, in the best of all possible worlds.

By 1714 there were only 250,000 voters, less than five percent of the population.[12] However, 'What is beyond doubt is that the aristocracy did enjoy an astonishing ascendancy in public life thanks to those networks of obligation and reciprocity, which, together with adroit Parliamentary and electoral management, kept it in power.'[13] James lauds them because: 'Aristocratic politicians had overseen the transformation of Britain into a commercial, industrial and maritime power and contrived and implemented the strategies which facilitated imperial expansion…'[14] But then, no one else had been given the chance and the history books do not tell of the tens of thousands of ordinary people who eked out an existence in the shadows while their betters basked in their own reflected glory.

Captain Gronow gives an interesting perspective: 'I have lived long enough to find hundreds of my countrymen participating in a real knowledge of the French, and believing with me that they are

a brave, intelligent and generous nation… They are less prejudiced than we islanders, and are much more citizens of the world than ourselves. I have received an immense amount of courtesy in France; and if there be less solid friendship - which, however, in England is based too often on a similarity of birth, position and wealth - in France, you have, at least, a greater chance than in England of making a friend of a man who neither looks to your ancestors nor your amount of riches before he proffers you the most sincere intimacy and, if necessary, disinterested aid, purely on the ground of your own merit and character,'[15] He also adds: 'Intelligent Englishmen have lived long enough to appreciate the genius of Napoleon I… But I remember a period when probably not a dozen Englishmen could have been found to speak of the first emperor with the most ordinary common sense.'[16]

Gronow also speaks of the sheer brutality then prevalent in the British Army. One man who forged coins was given an incredible 800 lashes for making counterfeit Spanish dollars out of pewter spoons. He makes his own feelings on this matter perfectly clear: 'As he had before been convicted and flogged, he received this terrible sentence and died under the lash. Would it not have been better to have condemned him to be shot? It would have been more humane, certainly more military and far less brutal.'[17]

William Napier who served with Wellington in the Peninsular War and who wrote a six volumed history of that war, contrasted the life of lowly 'army scum' with that of the glittering British aristocracy that whipped them as if it had been a sport: 'Napoleon's troops fought in bright fields, where every helmet caught some gleams of glory; but the British soldier conquered under the cool shade of aristocracy. No honours awaited his daring, no despatch gave his name to the applauses of his countrymen; his life of danger and hardship was uncovered by hope, his death unnoticed.'[18]

Every French soldier knew that he had 'a baton in his knapsack' and that their acts of courage and individual bravery would be noticed and perhaps even rewarded. Captain Coignet as a filthy impoverished boy looked after oxen in the depths of a forest where the bright eyes of wolves blinked back at him in the darkness. This unlettered nobody joined the Grand Army and had adventures galore across Europe and into Russia, gaining the Legion of Honour and eventually becoming the chief wagon master for the Emperor himself. Lasalle's exploits were renowned throughout the military service, as were those of Lannes, Murat, Ney and many more. A one-time grubby smuggler called Massena held the destiny of France itself in his hands at Zurich and became a Marshal under Napoleon.

The disparity in income between the rich and the poor in those days was almost unbelievable. Thanks to his victories in the Peninsula, Wellington went from being Viscount Wellington of Talavera to Duke of Wellington in only five years. The financial rewards that accompanied these titles were extremely generous. He got £400,000 'to buy estates to uphold the 'dignity' of his dukedom.'[19] This was a colossal sum. Even in 2022 this would be a very decent windfall, back in the early C19th it was riches beyond the wildest dreams of ordinary people.

There is always a difficulty in trying to convert sums from the past into today's money. Edward Ist spent over £1,000 on some of his Welsh castles in the Middle Ages. This would not even buy a dog kennel in London today. In Wellington's time, £1,000 would be approximately equal to £1,000,000 now - so he was given, in effect, £400 million in our money. This could have fed all the poor in this nation for years - but that is another story. Just like the British Government 'found' £400 billion during the recent Covid crisis, those in power in the C18th and C19th could always find plenty of cash for 'one of their own'.

Great Britain's decimal currency became legal tender on February 15th 1971. No one under the age of sixty can remember 'old money' - the pounds, shillings and pence. But to give a little context, when the author went to teacher training college in 1973 the starting salary for a newly

qualified teacher was just £1,300 - £26 a week. It is around £30,000 today. Since the 1970s there has been massive inflation and money has lost a lot of its value. As I write Great Britain is facing this same problem all over again. But it was pounds, shillings and pence that existed for most of our history.

Young Arthur Wellesley played the fiddle as a boy and he was quite good at it. The common people thought that most of the politicians of the day were 'on the fiddle'. Corruption, sinecures, rotten boroughs and graft were endemic in the 'Mother of Parliaments' - another of our sacred institutions. Meanwhile, as depicted in Hogarth's famous print 'Gin Lane', the poor were reduced to drowning their sorrows, getting drunk for a penny and dead drunk for tuppence.[20] Even babies were given gin to quieten them down and quell their hunger pangs. What hell it was that dawn to be alive - and to be poor.

When William Pitt the Younger died in 1806, the British Parliament 'found' £40,000 to pay off his debts. Those in power can always feather their nests even if the British taxpayers end up feeling like plucked chickens. It makes one wonder, how on earth could an individual, leave alone someone who was Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury, accumulate debts of £40,000 in the early C19th. Pitt liked his port - but that is £40 million today!

Gronow says of Wellington: 'Throughout the whole of his eventful career, the Duke of Wellington always placed first and foremost, far above his military and social honours, his position as an English gentleman.'[21] Nelson wallowed in the same privileged font: '…like most great men, he took for granted that all those above or below him in rank and station should be subordinate to his whims and actions. He could only accommodate himself to being subordinate to his King, the King and Queen of Naples, and the exhilarating influence of Lady Hamilton… in fact Nelson could not tolerate being placed in a secondary position by any one.'[22] Nelson sometimes said that he hated the French as the Devil hated holy water.[23] And it goes without saying, that God was on the side of the English.

When it came to the Royal Families of Europe, this innate blue-blooded arrogance reached stratospheric levels. Runciman contrast these vapid nonentities with Napoleon: 'Well may the crowned heads of Europe have feared this man, whose genius put all their mediocre and unenlightened achievements in the shade. Had they been blessed with the same visions as he, they would not have opposed but co-operated with him, by introducing into their own constitutions saner laws such as some of those of the Code Napoleon. But instead of this, they began a campaign of press vilification, and Napoleon's every act was held up as the deed of a monster of iniquity. Plots, open and secret, to dethrone him. Were continually in progress, only to be frustrated by the genius of the man of the people'.[24]

We must remember too, that Britain and France had been fighting each other for centuries. In *The Sunday Times* of July 4th 2021, in his regular column, the American Irwin Stelzer comments on Andy Haldane's final speech as Bank of England chief economist: 'He reminded his audience that when the Bank was founded, in 1694, it had an additional objective, "fighting the French." '[25]

At the time, the whole of Europe recoiled after hearing of the Reign of Terror in France. However, in *The Wars Against Napoleon*, Ben Weider and Michel Franceschi point out that: 'Britain had quietly encouraged the disorders of the Revolution in order to weaken France. The records of a Russian diplomat include the following information: "The English agents Clark and Oswald are members of the Jacobin Club. It would have been more honourable [for Britain] to make war on France than to foment the troubles and massacres that have horrified all humanity." '[26]

Tim Clayton opens the can of worms in regard to the culpability and influence of British spies in his book *This Dark Business*. The blurb of this volume encapsulates the politics of the period succinctly: 'This Dark Business tells the story of the British government's determination to destroy

Napoleon Bonaparte by any means possible. We have been taught to think of Napoleon as the aggressor - a man with an unquenchable thirst for war and glory - but what if this story masked the real truth: that the British refused to make peace either with revolutionary France or with the man who claimed to personify the revolution was the reason this great war continued for more than twenty years. At this pivotal moment when it consolidated its place as number one world power, Britain was uncompromising. To secure the continuing rule of church and King, the British invented an evil enemy, the perpetrator of any number of dark deeds; and having blackened Napoleon's name, with the help of networks of French royalist spies and hitmen, they also tried to assassinate him.'[27]

It is now time to look beneath the cloud and see how ordinary folk were living in Georgian England. The poor had very few choices to make and very little control over their own lives. As J.L. and Barber Hammond say in *The Village Labourer*: 'The upper classes…considered that it was the duty of the poor man to adapt himself, his tastes, his habits, and his ambitions, to the arrangements of a society which it had pleased Providence to organise…'[28] As we shall see, these humble souls had God and the Church ranged against them, as well as the aristocracy and the Government.

Pitt abandoned his scheme for reforming the Poor Law, excusing himself by saying that he had no experience of their conditions. This, lest we forget, was the same man who died owing £40,000. So, for once, he was telling the truth. Fox was far more sympathetic. Considering Whitbread's Bill of 1795, he said that 'it was not fitting in a free country that the great body of the people should depend on the charity of the rich.'[29]

In fact, the condition of those at the bottom of the social pyramid seemed to be getting worse year on year. The country was going through the throes of both the Agrarian Revolution and the Industrial Revolution as well as the chaos and disruption that resulted from the wars against France and Napoleon. The Agrarian Revolution was accompanied by a spate of enclosures that stripped from the poor many of their ancient rights. Common fields and woodlands vanished and the jobs they had provided vanished too. Small farmers lost their land and itinerant labourers lost employment. This also led to another insidious development - the landless workers and farmers sank even deeper into the social abyss. To the wealthy they were even further beneath contempt, out of sight and out of mind: 'Writing towards the end of the ancient regime, Cobbett maintained that in his own lifetime the tone and language of society about the poor had changed very greatly for the worse, that the old name of 'the commons of England' had given way to such names as 'the lower orders,' 'the peasantry,' and 'the population,' and that when the poor met together to demand their rights they were invariably spoken of by such contumelious terms as 'the populace' or 'the mob.'[30] The results of all this were manifold: 'In short, by degrees beginning about fifty years ago the industrious part of the community, particularly those who create every useful thing by their labour, have been spoken of by everyone possessing the power to oppress them in any degree in just the same manner in which we speak of the animals which compose the stock upon a farm. This is not the manner in which the forefathers of us the common people, were treated.'[31]

In villages prior to enclosure everyone knew their neighbours and rubbed shoulders with them on a daily basis. Small farmers, cottagers and labourers all lived a similar existence. Some had domestic plots of land on which they grew vegetables and crops for subsistence while on other occasions they might do part-time work on someone else's land. Most of them would have been on first name terms and the concerns of one - the weather, the quality and price of land, the condition and health of stock etc. - would be the concern of them all. They would also have met socially and there was a definite sense of community and belonging. Now, everything seemed to be changing for the worse: 'This is perhaps only another way of saying that the isolation of the poor was becoming a more and more conspicuous feature of English society.'[32]

On March 17th 1821, the very year that Napoleon died (after all, wasn't everything supposed to be his fault?) Cobbett wrote about this matter to Mr. Gooch: 'I hold a return to *small farmers* to be *absolutely necessary* to a restoration to anything like an English community; and I am quite sure, that the ruin of the present race of farmers, generally, is a necessary preliminary to this…The life of the husbandman cannot be that of a *gentleman* without injury to society at large. When farmers become *gentlemen* their labourers become *slaves*…You, Sir, with others, complain of the increase of the *poor-rates*… But, you seem to forget, that, in the destruction of the small farms, as separate farms, small-farmers have become mere hired labourers…Take England throughout *three farms have been turned into one within fifty years*, and the far greater part of the change has taken place within the last *thirty years*; that is to say, since the commencement of the deadly system of PITT. Instead of families of small farmers with all their exertions, all their decency of dress and of manners, and all their scrupulousness as to character, we have *families of paupers*, with all the improvidence and recklessness belonging to an irrevocable sentence of poverty for life.'[33]

As if the contrast between the rich and the poor were not clear enough: 'The eighteenth century was the century of great mansions, and some of the most splendid palaces of the aristocracy were built during the distress and famine of the French wars.'[34] As a result of all this: 'The rich and the poor were thus growing further and further apart, and there was no one in the English village to interpret these two worlds to each other.'[35]

At the same time, the clergy in the Established Church of England knew which side their bread was buttered on and they were very anxious to be thought well of by the aristocracy whose habits they aped and whose social occasions they also loved to grace with their presence. Meanwhile, in their sheer misery and in a world that was turned upside down, the common people might try to turn to the only thing that could give them a little comfort and hope - their parish church and a fragile belief in a benevolent God. But there was precious little comfort and succour to be found within the cold dark mansions of the Almighty.

There is an old saying in English that: 'It never rains but it pours,' and many ordinary families found themselves swamped by a tsunami of misfortune. Many parsons were not to be found in their parish churches and the vast majority of them were utterly indifferent to the predicament faced by thousands of their fellow mortals. The old habit amongst aristocratic families was to send the oldest son into the Army and the second son into the Church. And to these entitled people it was the wealth that went with these sinecures that was of concern, not the lives of those who went to church on Sunday. On paper, the grand Anglican Establishment might be expected to have more than a passing interest in the souls of their flocks, but, in reality, they proved beyond all doubt that they themselves did not have a heart: 'The association of the Anglican Church with the governing class has never been more intimate and binding than it was during the eighteenth century. This was true alike of bishops and of clergy. The English bishop was not a gay Voltairean like the French, but he was just as zealous a member of the privileged orders…'[36] There was a clear distinction here on either side of the Channel: 'In the Revolution the common clergy were largely on the side of the peasants. Such a development was inconceivable in England.'[37]

Clerical benefices were tossed around and dealt with like playing cards in a game that only benefitted the rich. Many already fantastically wealthy people garlanded themselves with one glittering sinecure after another: 'There were three Pretymans dividing fifteen benefices, and Wellington's brother was Prebendary of Durham, Rector of Bishopwearmouth, Rector of Chelsea, and Rector of Therfield. This method of treating the parson's profession as a comfortable career was so closely entangled in the system of aristocracy, that no Government which represented those interests would ever dream of touching it.'[38] The filthy rich appeared to be making a clean sweep of everything.

To add insult to injury, it was the poor who were then preached at - they simply could not be left alone to wallow in their many miseries - the great and the good also liked to tell *them* how to behave: 'In one respect the Church took and active part in oppressing the village poor, for Wilberforce and his friends started, just before the French Revolution, a Society for the Reformation of Manners, which aimed at enforcing the observance of Sunday, forbidding any kind of social dissipation, and repressing freedom of speech and of thought whenever they refused to conform to the superstitions of the morose religion that was then in fashion. This campaign was directed against the license of the poor alone.'[39] Ah what bliss is was that dawn to be alive - and to be a hypocrite was very heaven.

The rich could get away with murder - and they did - witness that flogging of 800 lashes, leave alone the 2,000 dead at Copenhagen in 1807. It was like a time-travelling early version of 1984. Good was what the upper classes called good and benefitted them the most while bad was what they disliked and what might harm their interests. But punishment was usually meted out to those far below them in rank and station. Wellington liked to brag about how the playing fields of Eton inspired his men at Waterloo, even though none of the 45,000 Prussians who saved his bacon on that day actually went there. However, in public schools they did have whipping boys, and the elites that flourished in them and gained power soon learnt how to put the blame for things that went wrong on somebody else.

Wilberforce has had a good press because of his principled stand against slavery and there is a museum in his honour in Hull on the east coast of England. However, this fixation of his with cowing the poor, suppressing their voices and bludgeoning them with his own form of righteous religion reflects rather badly on him. It was hypocritical to the nth degree: 'Men like Wilberforce and the magistrates whom he inspired did not punish the rich for their dissolute behaviour; they only found in that behaviour another argument for coercing the poor. As they watched the dishevelled lives of men like George Selwyn, their one idea of action was to punish a village labourer for neglecting church on a Sunday morning.'[40] A bit like the man who loses an argument with his wife going immediately to give his dog a good kicking.

The result of all this litany of woe is lamentable and reminds one that 'the good old days' were only so if one was very rich, and in power: 'Thus all the influences of the time conspired to isolate the poor, and the changes, destructive of their freedom and happiness, that were taking place in their social and economic surroundings, were aggravated by a revival of Puritanism which helped to rob village life of all it natural melody and colour.[41]

One man who tried to give them a voice and to speak up on their behalf was William Cobbett already mentioned above. In 1795 he was: 'a fierce champion of English institutions, and a fierce enemy of revolutionary ideas…'[42] However, unlike Coleridge, Stoddart, Wordsworth and Southey who began as 'men of the people' but who later sold their souls for the glint and lucre of patronage, Cobbett's damascene conversion went the other way: 'In 1810 Cobbett was rapidly making himself the most powerful tribune that the English poor have even known.'[43] His paper the *Political Register* was inaugurated in 1802. He was still a Tory then but the more he studied society, the greater his opinions diverged from what they had been before: 'He saw in 1816 that the nation had to choose between its sinecures, its extravagant army, its ruler's mad scheme of borrowing at a higher rate to extinguish debt, for which it was paying interest at a low rate, its huge Civil List and privileged establishments, the interests of the fund-holders and contractors on the one hand, and its labourers on the other.'[44]

The industrial and rural poor had no representation in Parliament at all. Not only did they have no voice, nearly everything that was said in the House of Commons and the House of Lords seemed to go against their best interests. When the poor resorted to the only forms of protest available to them,

gatherings, strike and marches, they were beaten into submission by ruthless force as at Peterloo in 1819 after having been accused of fomenting revolution. This claim was reinforced by the egregious use of agent provocateurs who were paid to encourage trouble and strife amongst the poor and then disappear, leaving them to suffer the inevitable consequences.

Too often history just seems to be about kings and queens, conquerors and great military leaders, the history of the common people is often completely unknown, ignored or simply unwritten. As the Hammond's indicate, the beginning of the C19th was certainly no golden age for them: 'During the years between Waterloo and the Reform Bill the governing class was decimating the village populations on the principal of the Greek tyrant who flicked off the heads of the tallest blades in his field; the Game Laws, summary jurisdiction, special commissions, drove men of spirit and enterprise, the natural leaders of their fellow men, from the villages where they might have troubled the peace of there masters. The village Hampdens of that generation sleep by the shores of Botany Bay.'[45]

They then compare this country in 1830 with the countries in Europe that had 'suffered' under Napoleon: '…Europe had been overrun by war, and England alone had escaped what Pitt had called the liquid fire of Jacobinism. There had followed for England fifteen years of healing peace. Yet at the end of all this time the conquerors of Napoleon found themselves in a position which they would have done well to exchange with the position of his victims. The German peasant had been rescued from serfdom; Spain and Italy had at least known a brief spell of less unequal government. The English labourer alone was the poorer; poorer in money, poorer in happiness, poorer in sympathy, and infinitely poorer in horizon and in hope.'[46] His standard of living in 1830 was less than it had been in 1795.[47]

Yes, it was all Napoleon's fault, or perhaps, as Rhett Butler said to Scarlett O'Hara, the rich farmers, politicians and aristocrats just 'don't give a damn'.

The condition of the poor in the rapidly growing towns and cities was just as bad, if not worse. At least there was fresh air in the countryside and *that* was still free. When multitudes of impoverished people were crammed into damp, derelict squats and hovels in giant metropolises disease could spread with alarming rapidity. Ill-fed, weak and emaciated people who were forced to drink filthy fetid water would soon succumb to typhoid and cholera, and in those days it was a case of no work no pay, there was precious little charity amidst the dark satanic mills. The industrial Revolution made this country great but it decimated and destroyed the working poor who pulled shifts of twelve hours or even more amidst the noisy, clanking machinery, with no thought given to personal safety at all. Even the children were forced to do whatever work they could find in order to feed their families. It was indeed, a hand-to-mouth existence. And the common people seemed to be getting even poorer. In contrast the salaries of judges were raised three times by Act of Parliament in 1799, 1809 and 1825. The wages of upper class officials had also gone up substantially. Landlords and those in the governing class had done extremely well. Throughout the land mansions and palaces had appeared like a glittering rash, and superb libraries and art galleries blossomed within these illustrious habitations. Rest assured that M'lud Wellington was living with the 'dignity' to which he had grown accustomed. So much for freedom and equality and those much vaunted and cherished English liberties, in truth the rich and the poor seemed to be living in parallel universes.[48]

As well as the great social and economic changes caused by the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions, the ordinary folk of Britain had to endure the consequences of decades of senseless warfare against France and Napoleon. It should come as no surprise therefore, that when Fox did not live long enough for England to benefit from Napoleon's offers of peace: 'Napoleon never ceased to deplore the impossibility of coming to any reciprocal terms with England so long as Pitt's

influence was in the ascendant, and he and a large public in France and in this country profoundly believed that Fox had not only the desire but the following, and all the diplomatic qualities to bring it about. Any close, impartial student of history, free from the popular prejudices which assailed Napoleon's origin and advent to power, cannot but concede the great possibilities of this view.'[49]

Of course, at the top of the social, economic and political pyramid was the King George III and he despised Fox so much that peace with France was virtually impossible. After the death of Fox there was no chance at all of a cessation of hostilities on the British side. In contrast, Napoleon liked to keep his emotions under control. Napoleon believed that to: 'Surmount great obstacles and attain great ends.(sic) There must be prudence, wisdom, and dexterity. We should do everything by reason and calculation, estimating the trouble, the sacrifice, and the pleasure entailed in gaining a certain end, in the same way as we work out any sum in arithmetic by addition and subtraction. But reason and logic should be the guiding principle in all we do. That which is bad in politics, even though in strict accordance with law, is inexcusable unless absolutely necessary, and whatever goes beyond that is criminal.'[50]

As we have seen, if you are at the very bottom of the social pyramid it is extremely hard to extricate yourself from that predicament. The vast majority of the poor were illiterate. To improve both their economic and social status they needed an education. Of course, they had no funds to spare for this themselves as they lived such a wretched day-to-day existence, meanwhile, the state had no intention of providing a universal education system. The very opposite was the case. The country's elite as a whole not only detested their social inferiors as a group, they were dead set against them 'bettering themselves' as we English say. Here is a quote from a High Tory in 1827: 'As education has increased amidst the people, infidelity, vice, and crime have increased. At this moment the people are far more vicious and criminal, in proportion to their numbers, than they were when comparatively uneducated. The majority of criminals consist of those who have been 'educated.' '[51] This comment reveals an innate fear of the masses as a whole, and a more specific reaction to their middle-class and more vocal leaders like Cobbett and Henry 'Orator' Hunt. Those at the very top had a dread and loathing for 'organised labour' and in particular those brave individuals who spoke up on behalf of the common folk.

Things were very different for the blue-blooded oppressors of the poor. It wasn't so much that they were 'born with a silver spoon in their mouth', it was more like a silver shovel. Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh, studied at St. John's College, Cambridge and toured Europe as a young man. At the age of twenty-one he was given a seat at County Down in Ireland. It was thought that his election cost the Marquis of Londonderry £60,000. In 1794 Castlereagh also got the seat of Tregony in the House of Commons. Henry Addington, Lord Sidmouth went to Winchester School before going on to Oxford University. He was only thirty when Pitt suggested he become Speaker in the House of Commons. For this one post he was paid a salary of £6,000 a year and with this instant fortune he purchased a large estate for himself in Reading. Robert Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool, was educated at Charterhouse and then Christ Church, Cambridge. At the age of twenty he was given the seat of Appleby, a pocket borough owned by Sir James Lowther. The Mother of Parliaments had a very privileged brood. The average wage for a working man at the time was 10 shillings a week, less than £30 a year. These scions of the British aristocracy gave themselves the equivalent of millions of pounds a year in today's money and begrudged the poor a few extra pennies a week to pay for bread and the bare necessities of life.[52]

The early C19th was a very hard time for the common people. As noted above, the Agrarian Revolution forced a lot of people to leave the land and seek jobs in the burgeoning new industrial towns and cities. But the industrial Revolution in turn led to the hated Factory System that bled the impoverished workers dry. Industrial unrest and terribly low wages were exacerbated by the rise of

the new machines which put thousands of workers out of their jobs. The group known as The Luddites sprang out of this general hardship. It was named after the mythical Ned Ludd and its object was to turn back time and give the workers more control and say in their own lives. Starving, and unemployed and underemployed men, became machine breakers. In their desperation, worried to death about their half-starved families and the constant decline in their parlous standard of living, they resorted to violence as no other recourse was left open to them. Factories and the dwellings of the Masters were also attacked and burnt. The employers and the Government responded with brute force and hundreds of men were hanged, hundreds more were transported to Australia - the land Captain Cook claimed for George III in 1769 - the year that Napoleon was born.

In 1811 the first threatening letter signed by 'General Ned Ludd' was sent to employers in Nottingham. Wages had not only failed to rise in line with prices, they had been cut to ensure greater profits for the factory owners. Two hundred stocking frames were destroyed and the authorities responded by employing 400 special constables to protect property. The Prince Regent (in debt as always) offered £50 to encourage 'giving information on any person or persons wickedly breaking the frames'. Luddism now spread throughout the country and the unrest led the government of Spencer Percival to declare machine-breaking a capital offence in February 1812. Some 12,000 troops were ordered to the areas where the Luddites were active. Ironically, the same year Napoleon invaded the northern wastes of Russia, the British Government invaded the North of England to suppress its own people. Fourteen people were hanged on one day in York alone.

The decade 1810-1820 was not only the coldest decade of the C19th, the continent was in the last throes of the so-called Little Ice Age which played havoc with normal weather systems. There were widespread crop failures and wheat prices soared. No father could stand by and watch his family starve, so in desperation they attacked the very machines that were putting them out of work.

In 1817 the Radicals John Johnson, John Bagguley and Samuel Drummond organised a march from Manchester to London to highlight the problems of unemployed spinners and weavers. They planned to present a petition to the Prince Regent - the triumph of hope over experience if ever there was one. To fend off the cold the participants were told to bring a blanket hence the march became 'The Blanketeers March'. Spies working for the notorious Manchester Magistrates said that violence was planned on the journey south so great efforts were made to ban the procession. Nevertheless, some 10,000 people met at St. Peter's Field in Manchester to see the demonstrators off and listen to speakers on March 10th 1817. The King's Dragoon Guards were sent in to arrest the ring-leaders and twenty-nine men including Bagguley and Drummond were taken into custody. The march still went ahead followed by the menacing cavalry which eventually attacked those involved. At Stockport several people received sabre wounds and one man was shot dead. It was an eerie presentiment of what was to occur two years later. Furthermore, the event persuaded the Manchester Magistrates to form the soon-to-be infamous Manchester and Salford Yeomanry.The stage had been set for brutal and bloody repression on a massive scale.[53]

After Napoleon's fall from power the European elites were quick to go back to the future. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814 they tried to regain all their former wealth and power: 'The agreement reached at Vienna resulted in the reinforcement of hereditary rule and the suppression of liberal and nationalist sentiments in Europe.'[54] The Corn Laws of 1815 benefitted rich farmers and landowners but meant huge rises in the price of bread for the masses. In Britain it was obvious that social reforms were necessary but when the economic recession of 1817 led to unrest the Government did the opposite and suspended Habeas Corpus after a missile had been thrown at the Prince of Wales's coach when he was on his way to open a new session of Parliament. Now people could be held in jail indefinitely without trial. The incompetence and self-interest of British politicians infuriated the people.

The Government of Lord Liverpool seemed addicted to repression. The Gagging Acts soon followed. Meetings of fifty or more people were banned and magistrates were told to arrest anyone spreading seditious libel - basically any criticism of the King, the Church and the Government was outlawed. We should perhaps pause a little here to remind ourselves just how many times the elites of the time and many later British historians have drooled over our supposed 'freedoms' and how Britain was purportedly a beacon of liberty as opposed to the wicked tyranny of Napoleon.

To suppress free speech taxes were raised on newspapers. This had first occurred in 1712 and slowly risen over the subsequent years. By 1815 the duty was 4d a copy making a typical paper cost 6d or 7d. This was a lot of money at the time especially for the poor. John and Leigh Hunt who published the *Examiner* called it a tax on knowledge. Many radicals simply ignored the law. Jonathan Wooler published the *Black Dwarf* at 4d unstamped. Richard Carlile went to extraordinary lengths to publish the *Republican*. He was arrested, tried and found guilty of publishing blasphemy and seditious libel. He was given three years in jail and fined £1,500 - an incredibly severe punishment. Yet he went on writing material for the *Republican* whilst in jail. His wife was the new publisher. Jane Carlile was also jailed for two years so Mary Carlile, Richard's sister took charge! He had called for financial assistance from the public while incarcerated and over £500 a week was soon being sent to his shop in Fleet Street. The *Republican* far outsold *The Times* - the Government mouthpiece.[55]

Richard Carlile wrote in the *Republican* on October 4th 1820: 'Let us then endeavour to progress in knowledge, since knowledge is demonstrably proved to be power. It is the power knowledge that checks the crimes of cabinets and courts; it is the power of knowledge that most put a stop to bloody wars'.[56] In July 1831 *The Poor Man's Guardian* stated that: 'Defiance is our only remedy; we cannot be a slave in all; we submit to much - for it is impossible to be wholly consistent - but we will try the power of Right against Might; we will begin by protesting and upholding this grand bulwark of all our liberties - the Freedom of the Press - the Press, too, of the ignorant and the Poor. We have taken upon ourselves its protection, and we will never abandon our post: we will die rather.'[57]

William Cobbett had continued to champion the downtrodden masses. In his *Political Register* in November 1816 he said: 'You have been represented by the *Times* newspaper, by the *Courier*, by the *Morning Post*, by the *Morning Herald*, and others, as the scum of society. They say that you have no business at public meetings; that you are a rabble, and that you pay no taxes. These insolent hirelings, who wallow in wealth, would not be able to put their abuse of you in print were it not for your labour.' And he added in his *Thirteen Sermons* in 1822: 'The man who can talk about the honour of his country, at a time when its millions are in a state little short of famine; and when that is, too, apparently their permanent state, must be an oppressor in his heart; must be destitute of all feelings of shame and remorse; must be fashioned for a despot…'[58]

By 1819 things were bound to come to a head. Bad weather, bad pay, bad governance had all been added to the mix. Half-frozen and half-starved wraiths with no prospects, no votes and no future had simply had enough. To go against a government that had shown its mailed fist already time after time took a great deal of courage. Even so, the vast majority of people looked for change without violence. They wanted their voices to be heard, they wanted improvement not destruction. However, their 'betters' saw only ill will and potential rebels wherever they looked. Sir John Byng wrote to John Hobhouse in July 1818 about the Manchester Spinners' strike: 'The peaceable demeanour of so many thousand unemployed men is not natural; their regular meeting and again dispersing shows a system of organization of their actions which has some appearance of previous tuition.'[59] The view from the other side was aired forcefully in the radical newspaper *The Black Dwarf* on September 30th 1818: 'The master spinners are a class of men unlike all other master

tradesmen in the kingdom. They are ignorant, proud and tyrannical… there is an abominable combination existing amongst the masters, first established at Stockport in 1802, and it has since become so general. As to embrace all the great masters for a circuit of many miles round Manchester.' In other words a cartel was in operation that was designed to keep the workers in their place. *The Black Dwarf* then goes on to describe the conditions for the workers: 'The workmen in general are inoffensive, unassuming, set of well-informed men, though how they acquire their information is a mystery to me. They are docile and treatable, if not goaded too much; but this is not to be wondered at, when we consider that they are trained to work from six years old, from five in a morning to eight and nine at night.' If work disputes were taken to the local magistrates they invariably sided with the employers. The paper concludes: 'These evils to the men have arisen from the dreadful monopoly which exists in those districts where wealth and power are got into the hands of the few, who, in the pride of their hearts, think themselves the lords of the universe.'[60]

On August 16th 1819 tens of thousands of people gathered peacefully at St. Peter's Field in Manchester to listen to speakers and demand the right to representation in Parliament and the vote. The sheer numbers terrified the magistrates who persuaded themselves that revolution was at hand. They had already gathered together four squadrons of cavalry of the 15th Hussars, numbering 600 in all; hundreds of infantry; 400 men of the Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry; 400 special constables; a detachment of horse artillery with two cannons and 120 men of the newly created Manchester and Salford Yeomanry. Two of the well-known speakers were 'Orator' Hunt and that hero of free speech, Richard Carlile, and there were also several press representatives there. Barely had the first words been addressed to the meeting when at 1-30pm the magistrates decided to disperse the crowd. The special constables prepared the way for the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry who were intent on arresting Hunt. Chaos ensued when the cavalry used sabres on unarmed members of the public. Some 18 people were killed and around 500 were wounded, some 100 being women. One of the victims had fought at Waterloo.[61] Events had proved that: 'Liverpool's government was now willing to use the same tactics against the British people that it had used against Napoleon and the French Army.'[62]

Despite a national outcry, the Government doubled-down and made excuses for the massacre. Lord Castlereagh said in the House of Commons on May 16th 1821: 'They were a great mass assembled for purposes of intimidation and in order to bring on a revolutionary movement; and if the design had not been repressed at Manchester, it would have broken out into rebellion, and instead of the blood that had been shed there, torrents of blood would have burst forth…The magistrates had not employed a greater force than was necessary, and had not called assistance in until the danger to the yeomanry required it…The bloodshed was not occasioned by the magistrates, but by those who under the mask of reform, had no other object than rebellion.'[63] This tissue of lies came to the attention of Shelley who was in Italy and he responded immediately with his famous poem *The Mask of Anarchy*:

' …I met Murder on the way -
He had a mask like Castlereagh -
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven blood-hounds followed him…
Last came Anarchy; he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood;
He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse
And he wore a kingly crown:
And in his grasp a sceptre shone;

On his brow this mark I saw -
'I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!'[64]

The British Government was prepared to sanction murder in its defence of aristocratic privilege. Lord Liverpool himself had justified the attack in a letter to George Canning on September 23rd 1819: 'The accounts of the proceedings at Manchester will of course have reached you, and will probably have in some degree alarmed you. You will naturally ask whether the proceedings of the magistrates at Manchester on the 16th were really justifiable? To this I answer, in the first instance, that all the papers on which they proceeded were laid before the Chancellor, and the Attorney and Solicitor-General, and that they were fully satisfied that the meeting was of a character and description, and assembled under such circumstances, as justified the magistrates in dispersing it by force… and I am sorry to say that, notwithstanding the support which they have received, there prevails such a panic throughout that part of the country that it is difficult to get either magistrates to act or witnesses to some forward to give evidence, and that many of the lower orders who were supposed loyal have joined the disaffected, partly from fear, and partly from a conviction that some great change was at hand.'[65]

The heavy handed tactics used by Liverpool's Government were obviously backfiring and doing nothing to calm the situation. To make matters even worse the Government rushed through The Six Acts in November 1819. The Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth announced the details in the House of Commons. The Training Prevention Act prohibited military training and drilling on pain of seven years' transportation to Australia; the Seizure of Arms Act gave local magistrates the power to search all people and households for arms; the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act banned meetings of more than fifty people without the consent of a magistrate; The Misdemenanours Act was designed to speed up the administration of justice; The Blasphemous And Seditious Libels Act increased the punishments for publishers of such literature to fourteen years' transportation; and the Newspapers And Stamp Duties Act increased taxes on publications not already covered by the law. Publishers had also to pay a large bond in advance. It was now very clear that the price of privilege was repression.[66]

Back in 1791 Thomas Paine had written in his *Rights Of Man*: 'What is government more than the management of the affairs of a Nation? It is not, and from its nature it cannot be, the property of any particular man or family, but of the whole community, at whose expense it is supported; and though by force or contrivance it has been usurped into an inheritance, the usurpation cannot alter the right of things.' He added: 'Sovereignty, as a matter of right, appertains to the Nation only… The Romantic and barbarous distinction of men into Kings and subjects, though it may suit the condition of courtiers, cannot that of citizens; and is exploded by the principle upon which Governments are now founded. Every citizen is a member of this Sovereignty, and, as such, can acknowledge no personal subjection; and his obedience can be only to the laws'.[67]

We have seen just how 'free' the common people were when ruled by a mad King and an angry aristocracy. Almost never in the field of human history have so many people been held back by the selfish interests of so few. Aristocratic privileges crushed the hopes and aspirations of millions of ordinary people and the high and mighty lauded over their victims with disinterest or contempt. The mythical and much vaunted 'British freedoms' vanish like a tenuous mist under the strong light of investigation. Men like Liverpool, Castlereagh and Sidmouth were a blight on the history of this nation. In every grubby nook and cranny inhabited by the benighted poor they saw the spark of revolution and the flame of revolt, when in actuality all they saw were the heated figments of their own imaginations. The truth is that it was they who were revolting, as rulers and as human beings.

Long after the death of Napoleon things remained just the same in Britain. In 1842 in the Second National Petition put forward by the National Charter Association, this is what was said about our

precious Parliament: ‘The House of Commons, which is said to be exclusively the peoples! There are two hundred and five persons who are immediately or remotely related to the peers of the realm. That is contains 3 marquises, 9 earls, 23 viscounts, 27 lords, 32 right honourables, 63 honourables, 58 baronets, 10 knights, 2 admirals and 108 patrons of church livings. There are little more than 200 of the 658 members of your house who have not either titles, office, place, pension, or church patronage.’[68]

C. 2022
John Tarttelin M.A. History
Author of The Real Napoleon: The Untold Story

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6. Ibid. p. 152-153
7. Ibid. p. 174-175
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11. James L. *Aristocrats, Power, Grace & Decadence* p. 97-98 (Abacus, London, 2009)
12. Ibid. 147
13. Ibid. 187
14. Ibid. 187-188
15. Gronow Captain *The Reminiscences Of Captain Gronow* p.35-36 (The Folio Society, London, 1977)
16. Ibid. 36
17. Ibid. 17
18. Napier W.F.P. *Peninsular War* (1810), Vol.ii, Book xi, Chap.iii
19. James op.cit p.201
20. Tuppence is ‘two pence’ in old money. Just to remind readers, there were 12d (pence) to the shilling and 20 shillings to the pound - £.s.d. until February 15th 1971.
21. Gronow op.cit. p.59
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52. Spartacus Educational www.spartacus-educational.com See pages on Lord Castlereagh; Lord Sidmouth; Lord Liverpool and Pocket Boroughs
53. Spartacus Educational: See pages on The Luddites; Industrial Unrest; The Blanketeers; Lord Castlereagh; Lord Sidmouth; Lord Liverpool
54. Spartacus Educational: See pages on Lord Castlereagh
55. Spartacus Educational: See pages on William Cobbett; Gagging Acts; Habeas Corpus; The Six Acts; and The 1815 Stamp Act
56. Richard Carlile in the *Republican* October 4th 1820 See Spartacus Educational on Richard Carlile
57. *The Poor Man's Guardian* July 1831 See Spartacus Educational on The Poor Man's Guardian
58. William Cobbett: See Spartacus Educational
59. Sir John Byng: Spartacus Educational: See pages on Industrial Unrest
60. *The Black Dwarf*: Spartacus Educational: See pages on Industrial Unrest
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62. Spartacus Educational: See pages on Lord Castlereagh
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