Chapter Twelve
Class and the State

What is Freedom? Ye can tell. That which Slavery is too well. For its very name has grown, to an echo of your own.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

On a cloudless, late-summer day, a large crowd dressed in their ‘Sunday best’ arrived in Manchester in orderly fashion, gathering at St. Peter’s Field to hear from leaders of the reform movement, most notably Henry Hunt, who had been invited by Joseph Johnson, leader of the Manchester Patriotic Union, to address the crowd on the urgent necessity of parliamentary reform. In his letter of invitation, Johnson had described the wretched conditions of the working population in Lancashire: “Nothing but ruin and starvation stare one in the face, the state of this district is truly dreadful, and I believe nothing but the greatest exertions can prevent an insurrection. Oh, that you in London were prepared for it”.

This letter was intercepted and copied by the authorities and mistakenly taken to mean that an actual insurrection was being planned. The gathering was first set to take place on 2 August 1819, but faced with delays the organisers postponed it seven days whereupon the authorities banned the gathering but subsequently allowed for an event to take place on 16 August. By 1 pm, when Hunt’s carriage arrived, there were possibly more than fifty thousand

2. As quoted in Reid 1989, p. 115.
assembled, an impressive gathering, no doubt aided by the fine weather. The participants were drawn mainly from the towns surrounding Manchester and the level of organisation and discipline also alarmed the authorities. Seeing Hunt’s warm reception from the crowd, the local magistrate William Hulton issued a warrant for his arrest, along with Johnson and two other organisers. Sixty members of the Manchester Yeomanry were summoned and ordered to arrest Hunt. They rode their horses along the narrow route toward the hustings and when members of the crowd linked arms to prevent their progress, they began striking at the crowd with their sabres. Although they soon succeeded in arresting Hunt, Johnson and several others, the crowd resorted to pelting them with bricks and stones, whereupon they began cutting at the banners and flags. Hulton then ordered the Fifteenth Hussars to disperse the crowd. They charged St. Peter’s Field from the eastern end while the Cheshire Yeomanry charged from the southern end, swinging their sabres as they went. Ten minutes later, the crowd had left the square, leaving behind approximately a dozen dead, over six hundred injured and a river of blood.3

‘Peterloo’, the name immediately given to the massacre, occupies a place of far greater importance in British history than the so-called Gordon Riots of 1780, even though the number of those left dead in 1780 was vastly greater. One obvious reason for this is that the crowd in Manchester had formed an orderly assembly, a fact which evoked immediate indignation and outrage amongst the poor and working classes across Britain. Derry argues that ‘panic and incompetence explain what happened, rather than brutal designs upon the common people . . . Had the advice of the home office been followed by the Manchester magistrates, there would have been no Peterloo incident’.4 Undoubtedly a level of incompetence, as well as the over-readiness on the part of the authorities to suspect a violent plot where there was none, both played a role in precipitating the tragedy. When put in the context of the extensive measures of repression enacted by the Liverpool Government, however, Peterloo can also be seen as a point where the potential for the application of brute coercion by the state against unarmed subjects was realised. The hardened class attitudes were reflected in the fact that no aid to the victims and their families was later forthcoming from the government, while the incident was almost immediately met with a further tightening of legislative repression in the form of the Six Acts. Had Peterloo been seen by the Government and the ruling classes as merely a tragic mistake, the response would

3. Thompson 1991, p. 754. By the end of 1819 the Peterloo Relief Committee had authenticated 421 claims (with another 150 cases still awaiting investigation), among which 161 victims had received sabre wounds and over a hundred were women or girls. The Peterloo Relief Committee was not affiliated with the Government.