'The Diabolical Cato-Street Plot': The Cato Street Conspiracy, 1820[1]

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At around 7.30pm on Wednesday 23rd February 1820, a dozen Bow Street Runners in plain clothes, led by George Thomas Joseph Ruthven (1792-1844), stormed into a 15½ foot by 11 foot hayloft above a small stable on Cato Street, off the Edgware Road in London. Their target was a group of some two dozen armed conspirators, led by Arthur Thistlewood (1774-1820), who were making final preparations to assassinate the British cabinet. The men were to call at the home of Lord Harrowby, the Lord President of the Council, in Grosvenor Square, which was about ten minutes' walk away. There, they would make pretence of delivering a despatch box, before storming the house and capturing the cabinet, who were expected to dine with Harrowby that evening. The plotters intended this as the first act in an insurrection which would lead to the firing of several buildings across the capital, the seizure of weapons (including at the Artillery Ground in Finsbury), the capture of the Mansion House and the Bank of England, and the Declaration of a Provisional Government. Coming barely a month after the accession of King George IV, the insurrection would be symbolised by the beheading and subsequent public display of the heads of Lord Sidmouth (Home Secretary) and Lord Castlereagh (Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons), two leading members of the increasingly unpopular Tory government.[2]

The Cato Street Conspiracy, whose bicentenary falls in 2020, is one of the more remarkable episodes in a decade of insurrectionary plots and stillborn revolutions dating back to the Luddite disturbances of 1811 and encompassing the Spa Fields Riot (1816), the March of the Blanketeers (1817), the Pentrich Rebellion (1817) and the Peterloo Massacre (1819). The conspiracy was once seen as the last hurrah of post-war British radicalism, before the calmer days of the 1820s put the reform agenda into abeyance, or as a colourful but essentially eccentric episode in the reign of George IV. However, it is now

understood as the product of a metropolitan radical movement, the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, whose championing of the views of Thomas Spence (1750-1814), favouring substantial redistribution of land, found renewed support during the post-war years of austerity and hardship following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.[3]

As soon as the Bow Street Runners entered the building in Cato Street, they faced resistance. A look-out offered stout obstruction on the ground floor and, after climbing the ladder into the hayloft, the candles were extinguished by the conspirators as they fought their assailants and attempted to make a hasty retreat. Within minutes, one of the Runners, Richard Smithers, was stabbed by Thistlewood. 'O God I am -' he proclaimed, before falling down dead. Though he was the only fatality that evening, he was not the only Runner to be injured. Smithers' colleague Wright was stabbed, another (Ellis) was wounded in the knee, two more (Westcott and Brookes) were shot, neither fatally, and another (Surnam) received a head wound. The other Runners – Salmon, Townsend, Woodbury, Brooks and Gill - must have considered themselves fortunate to escape the confrontation without injury.[4]

Matters were made worse by the fact that the expected military assistance from the Coldstream Guards failed to materialise. The Guard, which was based at Portman Street barracks, under the command of Captain FitzClarence, an illegitimate son of the Duke of Clarence (afterwards William IV), mistook the correct end of the street and were thus delayed in coming to the scene. The east end of Cato Street led into John Street, the west end into Queen Street, both of which ran into the Edgeware Road. The stable was the first building on the right, on entering from John Street, and was opposite to the *Horse and Groom* public house, from which the Runners had watched the arrival of the conspirators during the early evening. Events were co-ordinated by Richard Birnie, the Bow Street Magistrate, on whose authority the order was given for the Runners to apprehend the conspirators.[5]

The state of preparedness of the authorities can be explained by the fact that, though the conspiracy had genuine roots in metropolitan radicalism, events that evening had been engineered through the intervention of George Edwards (c.1787-1843), an *agent provocateur* in the pay of the government. Edwards had been identified as a useful informer as early as 1818 but his value rose through 1819 as metropolitan radicals ruminated upon a plan of action following the bloodshed at St Peter's Field in Manchester. During the autumn of 1819, plans were afoot for some sort of retributory justice – either through assassinating individual ministers or else a collective execution of the cabinet *en masse*. Amongst the leading conspirators, who were later arrested for their part in the Cato Street affair, Thistlewood argued for patience, in order to mature plans to their fullest extent, whilst John Thomas Brunt (1782-1820), a shoemaker, and James Ings (1794-1820), a butcher, sought swift retribution.[6]

In the closing months of 1819, ministers reported their suspicions of being watched by men as they went about their business. The Home Office papers reveal that, amongst cabinet ministers, Castlereagh, Harrowby, Mulgrave and Westmorland were all watched by the conspirators, in the weeks preceding the attack on Cato Street. There is also some evidence that the assassins considered attacking the cabinet when they dined at Lord Bathurst's house at 9 Mansfield Street. However, thanks to an advertisement in the *New Times*, on 22nd February 1820, announcing the cabinet's intention to dine at Grosvenor Square the next evening, the assassins changed their plans. The advertisement – which appeared in none of the other major London dailies – was engineered by the government. Edwards was quick to draw it to the attention of the plotters, who were on the verge of breaking-up because of disagreements over their plans. Clearly, the government needed as many of the more militant radicals to strike as possible, in order to undermine the leadership and solidarity of the Spencean movement. The subsequent assassination of Charles-Ferdinand de Bourbon, duke de Berry, a member of the French Royal Family, on 14 February 1820, was a reminder of the personal risks attending ministers and

members of the royal family, on both sides of the English Channel, at this time. Little wonder that the British cabinet took divine service in the Chapel Royal, St James, on the Sunday after their attempted assassination (27 February), to give thanks for their salvation.[7]

Thistlewood escaped Cato Street on the evening of the 23rd but was arrested the following day, without resistance, at No. 8 White Street, Moorfields, by the Bow Street Runners Bishop, Salmon, Lavender and Ruthven. Sidmouth had lost no time in issuing a £1000 reward for his capture and threatened anyone harbouring or assisting him with the penalties for High Treason. Thistlewood was the leader of the conspiracy, in the government's eyes, the man who had murdered Smithers, and, moreover, had a long and chequered history, especially where Sidmouth was concerned.[8]

Thistlewood was raised in Lincolnshire, the son of a respectable land steward. He entered the militia (both for West Yorkshire and Lincolnshire) but, radicalised through exposure to the ideas of the American rebels and the French revolutionaries, it was alleged that he had served the revolutionary cause by enlisting in the French army. It was also suggested that Thistlewood had lost a fortune – his first wife having had a life interest in a substantial estate until her death – and this further alienated him from respectable society. Whatever the roots of his discontent, Thistlewood was amongst the leading Spencean radicals who were put on trial for their part in the Spa Fields Riot of December 1816. He was acquitted, alongside James Watson and Thomas Preston, after the exposure of John Castle as a government agent and the discrediting of his evidence in the eyes of the jury. After challenging Sidmouth to a duel, for some perceived slight, Thistlewood was imprisoned for a year (1818-19), before making his way back to the centre of the Speancean organisation. Thistlewood, who was 5 feet 10 inches tall, was described as having a sallow complexion, dark hair, hazel eyes, a wide mouth, and a scar below his right jaw.[9]

In addition to Thistlewood, Ings and Brunt, eight other men stood trial for High Treason, for their part in the conspiracy, at the Old Bailey in April 1820. Richard Tidd (1773-1820), a bootmaker, and William Davidson (1781-1820), a Jamaican-born black immigrant, were condemned to death alongside their compatriots. Five others – Richard Bradburn (a carpenter), Charles Cooper (a bootmaker), John Harrison, John Strange and James Wilson (a tailor) were transported for life. James Gilchrist (a bootmaker) was not convicted and therefore released.

In conducting the trials, the government brought four charges of High Treason against the conspirators – conspiring to depose the King and conspiring to levy war for the purpose of compelling the King to change his measures and counsels were charges derived from the Treason Act passed during the wars with Revolutionary France, whilst the charges of conspiring the death of the King, and levying war, were based on the older statute for Treason, dating from the time of King Edward III. Each of the five men sentenced to death was found guilty of High Treason, but on different counts – Thistlewood and Brunt of conspiring to levy war and of levying war, Ings of conspiring to depose the King and conspiring to levy war, and Tidd and Davidson of conspiring to levy war. The Under-Secretary at the Home Office, Henry Hobhouse, was unimpressed with the jury's scruples:

> in this self-sufficient age, when juries are not content to take the law from the Judges, it is vain to expect that any men shall be convicted under the Statute of Edward III unless he meditates a direct attack on the King's person, and such an attack the modern traitors either never mention or expressly disavow, well knowing that if they can overset the House of Commons, the destruction of the monarchy and the peerage must of necessity ensue.

To Hobhouse, it was clear that, in all five cases, the jury's predisposition was against conviction, and only 'the irresistible strength of the evidence' helped to secure guilty verdicts. That evidence relied not on the *agent provocateur* Edwards, whose name was raised in court by the prisoners in their defence, but

on the willingness of the conspirators John Monument, a shoemaker, Robert Adams, and John Hall, to give evidence against their co-plotters in exchange for pardons.[10]

The five men were condemned to be hanged and beheaded at Newgate on 1 May 1820. The Privy Council ruled that none of the prisoners should be drawn on the hurdle nor their bodies subjected to quartering, after the usual fashion of being 'hanged, drawn and quartered' for their crimes. The men were hanged by James Botting, before a masked figure with a carving knife conducted the grisly work of decapitation. Such was the skilfulness with which this was completed, that suspicions soon centred on a range of respectable surgeons, who were singled out as likely executioners. In the most extreme example of misidentification, Thomas Wakley, a respectable surgeon who afterwards founded *The Lancet*, was physically assaulted to the point of near-castration, and his house set on fire. It was subsequently stated that the masked executioner was a man named Tom Parker.[11]

The five conspirators had gone to their deaths demonstrating different characteristics. Ings sang 'Give me Death or Liberty' on the scaffold and Thistlewood made the mysterious (and possibly religious) remark 'We shall soon know the grand secret' but Davidson was amongst the most composed, and outwardly religious, of the men. The diarist Robert Raikes, who attended the execution with Lord Alvanley, observed that Davidson 'alone seemed to be impressed with a sense of his awful situation; his lips were in continual motion, and he was evidently occupied in silent prayer'. The bodies of the five men were buried within the prison walls at Newgate, with quick lime thrown into their coffins in order to prevent their 'resurrection' by body-snatchers or by those keen to make martyrs of them. Smithers, the murdered Bow Street Runner, had already been buried at St Margaret's, within the vicinity of Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, on 2nd March.[12]

Before their deaths, John Adolphus, the defence counsel for the five men, had the foresight to ask each of them for their autographs, which he then issued in facsimile to some chosen friends. Thistlewood

wrote 'Oh! what a mine of mischief is a Statesman!' (doubtless with Sidmouth in view), Davidson, tellingly, wrote 'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger in a strange land', and Ings proclaimed 'I ham [*sic*] a Murdered man', naming 'Mr Edward' [*sic*] as the man who had condemned him to death. On this occasion it was Brunt, rather than Ings, who proclaimed, in print, 'Oh give me Death or Liberty'.[13]

Despite subsequent attempts to bring Edwards, the *agent provocateur,* to account for his activities, the government ensured that he escaped, by way of Guernsey, to the South African Cape, where he lived out his days until his death in 1843. Two decades earlier, the essayist and poet Charles Lamb had consigned Edwards, alongside his fellow government informers, 'Oliver' the Spy and Castle, to the deepest pit of hell:

> I saw great Satan like a Sexton stand
> With his intolerable spade in hand,
> Digging three graves. Of coffin shape they were,
> For those who, coffinless, must enter there
> … 'These graves', quoth he, 'when life's brief oil is spent,
> When the dark night comes, and they're sinking bedwards,
> —I mean for Castles, Oliver, and Edwards'.[14]

Meanwhile, the five men transported to Australia, for their part in the conspiracy, forged new and, in some cases, highly respectable afterlives. They travelled out on the convict transport 'Guildford' from Portsmouth on 14th May 1820. Strange subsequently became chief constable of the Bathurst district of New South Wales and forged a reputation as 'the terror of bushrangers'. He was known as the 'Cato Street Chief' and was supported in his work by Wilson, who became 'an active and brave constable'. Meanwhile Harrison, 'a gaunt muscular man, upwards of six feet in height, with large black eyes starting

from his head, and thick jet-black hair hanging in profusion over a pale and rather forbidding visage' was the principal baker in Bathurst, known for being a 'well-conducted man and…industrious', although extremely litigious. He would frequently have cases brought by his customers, 'who complained that his bills displayed great skill in *addition*, but that they also showed he had been but very imperfectly acquainted with the rule of *reduction*'.[15]

Cato Street itself enjoyed a momentary fame before passing into history. In 1975, on the same day that Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party, *The Times* reported that the Greater London Council (subsequently abolished by Thatcher in 1986) was to erect a memorial blue plaque at the old stable on Cato Street, which was then 'a run-down furniture store'. The buildings in the mews were largely modern maisonettes and town houses but the 'infamous 1a' remained much as it was at the time of the plot. The newspaper reported that 'few people in the neighbourhood…knew much about its notorious past', although a man living on the street 'reacted sharply to a question about what he knew of the local plot to assassinate the Cabinet: "Not me, I don't know anything about it, but it doesn't sound half a bad idea, would you say?"'. The subsequent history of terrorist plots targeted at British politicians, from the Brighton Bomb in October 1984 to the mortar attack on Downing Street on 7 February 1991, to more recent threats against Prime Minister Theresa May, demonstrate how 'contemporary' the issues, and methods, of the Cato Street conspirators, remain to this day.[16]

The Author

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[1] Thomas Preston, *A Letter to Lord Viscount Castlereagh; Beinq a Full Development of all the Circumstances Relative to the Diabolical Cato Street Plot* (London: Thomas Preston, 1820).

[2] The standard history remains John Stanhope, *The Cato Street Conspiracy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962). 'Stanhope' was a pseudonym for the writer John Langdon-Davies. A more recent history is M. J. Trow, *Enemies of the State. The Cato Street Conspiracy* (Barnsley: Wharncliffe Books, 2010).

[3] For older views, see Alan Smith, 'The Cato Street Conspiracy', *History Today,* 3 (December 1953); for new thinking, Malcolm Chase, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015 edition). For Spencean radicalism, Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm, English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[4] See Stella Rhys, 'George Thomas Joseph Ruthven and the Cato Street Conspiracy', *North West Kent Family History,* 8 (1998), 45-48.

[5] Percy Fitzgerald, *Chronicles of Bow Street Police-Office* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), Volume 2, 151-164.

[6] See Chase, *1820¸* for a detailed history of these events.

[7] It was only eight years since Spencer Perceval, the Prime Minister, had been assassinated in the lobby of the House of Commons: David C. Hanrahan, *The Assassination of the Prime Minister: John Bellingham and the Murder of Spencer Perceval* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 edition).

[8] Sidmouth's notice appeared in *The London Gazette,* 24 February 1820.

[9] David Johnson, *Regency Revolution: The Case of Arthur Thistlewood* (Salisbury: Compton Russell, 1974).

[10] Arthur Aspinall, (editor), *The Diary of Henry Hobhouse, 1820-1827* (London: Home and Van Thal, 1947), 21-22.

[11] S. Squire Sprigge, *The Life and Times of Thomas Wakley* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1897), 40-61.

[12] Fitzgerald, *Bow Street,* 160-164.

[13] Emily Henderson, *Recollections of the Public Career and Private Life of the late John Adolphus* (London: Cautley Newby, 1871), 113. Adolphus sent a copy to the Duke of Wellington: University of Southampton, Wellington Papers, WP1/660/1, letter enclosing printed facsimiles of the handwriting of the Cato Street conspirators, December 1820.

[14] Fitzgerald, *Bow Street,* 152.

[15] Roger Therry, *Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Residence in New South Wales and Victoria* (London: Sampson Low, 1863), 96-99.

[16] *The Times,* 11 February 1975.