

## The Gordon Riots

No Popery Down with it  
George the 3d is a Roman Catholick  
(1780 handbill)<sup>1</sup>

'A time of terrour' was how Dr Johnson described the Gordon riots.<sup>2</sup> Many contemporaries would have agreed. The disturbances that gripped London in June 1780 were the most tumultuous and destructive of the century. In the wake of the Commons' refusal to repeal the Catholic Relief Bill of 1778, hundreds of buildings were ransacked, Lambeth Palace, Downing Street, and the Bank of England were threatened with destruction, and the forces of law and order were paralysed, prompting finally military intervention of an unprecedented nature. In the carnage that followed over 200 people were shot dead in the street; as many died in hospital or were treated for wounds. 'Figure to yourself every man, woman and child in the streets, panic-struck,' wrote one military volunteer, 'the atmosphere red as blood with the ascending fires, muskets firing in every part, and consequently women and children lying sprawling in the streets; all the lower order of people stark mad with liquor, huzzaing and parading with flags.'<sup>3</sup> It was an unforgettable sight, which, as contemporary comment testifies, left an indelible imprint on the popular consciousness.

What are we to make of this extraordinary riot? What does it reveal about popular belief at a time of burgeoning radicalism, religious revivalism, and a divisive war? The first scholarly work on the Gordon riots, published at the time of the General Strike of 1926, focused principally on the problem of order. Like some contemporaries, it detected a distinct change in

<sup>1</sup> PRO, WO 34/103/368.

<sup>2</sup> James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1980), 1054.

<sup>3</sup> BL, MS 27828, fo. 127, cited by J. Paul de Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (London, 1926), 145.

the nature of the riot after the destruction of Newgate and other gaols. What began as an anti-Catholic protest became a frenzied bacchanalia of outcast London, a spontaneous uprising of the rabble against authority and the institutions which shaped their lives.<sup>4</sup> This theme of degeneration has remained a salient one among those who have wished to sensationalize the riots, or to propound the virtues of a policed society.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it absent from those who, linking the anti-Catholic agitations of the Protestant Association to the excesses that followed, have sought to emphasize the immaturity, volatility, and dangers of early mass movements. Writing in 1949, for example, Sir Herbert Butterfield compared the charismatic hero, Lord George Gordon, to Hitler, and lamented that so enlightened a measure as the Catholic Relief Bill should have offended 'not only rational prejudice, but deep dark passions, strange as Nazi hatreds, and as baffling as anti-semiticism'.<sup>6</sup>

The first major challenge to these interpretations came from George Rudé. Fresh from his study of the crowd during the French Revolution, Rudé embarked upon a detailed examination of the Gordon rioters and their victims. From this research Rudé concluded that the 1780 disturbances were not the product of mass hysteria, whipped by religious fanatics and sectarian fury; nor did they degenerate into looting and arson. Throughout the unrest rioters seldom deviated from their original objectives. Drawing upon a long-standing tradition of anti-Catholicism which had become embodied in notions of the Englishman's birthright, they directed their fury upon leading Catholics, their chapels, and their sympathizers. This did not mean that the rioters were simple surrogates of the Protestant Association and their radical allies in the City. Lord George Gordon and his City supporters doubtless orchestrated the riot and, initially at least, gave it moral support. But the disturbances, Rudé argued, were essentially local and spontaneous, drawing principally upon small employers, journeymen, and apprentices from the neighbourhood.<sup>7</sup> In fact the respectability of the rioters, 'sober workmen' was how Rudé ultimately characterized

<sup>4</sup> De Castro, *Gordon Riots*, esp. 235-6.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob* (London, 1956); Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of the English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750*, 4 vols. (London, 1956), iii, ch. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People* (London, 1949), 374-9; for a similar emphasis, without the Nazism, see Eugene Black, *The Association: British Extra-parliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), ch. 4.

<sup>7</sup> The central argument is set out in George Rudé, 'The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and their Victims', *Trans. Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. 6 (1956), 93-114, reprinted in *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1970), 268-92. See also id., *Hanoverian London 1714-1808* (London, 1971), 178-80, 220-7 and id., *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964), chs. 3, 13-15.