

## I.—NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY.

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The period with which this paper is concerned has received, among other descriptions, that of the Age of Repression. It is true that there was a certain amount of repression, but far more notable were the forces which were not repressed, which formed and symbolized the bounding vitality of the age. In Newcastle it was the age of Grainger, John Dobson and Thomas Oliver. Their work, however, was only one expression of the boldness, the optimism, the hopes and ambitions of the period. Particularly striking was the growth of societies and institutions which reflected both a wider and deeper interest in many aspects of life and a capacity for giving such interest the forms of organization. The Literary and Philosophical Society dates from 1793, but this period saw the establishment of our Society in 1813, of the Northumberland Institution for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in 1822, of the Mechanics' Institution in 1824, of the Natural History Society in 1829 and of the College of Medicine in 1834. The humanitarian tendencies of the age found expression in the foundation of the Lying-in Hospital (1803), the Benevolent Society (1807) and the Indigent and Sick Society (1827). Even more notable was the growth of religious organizations and of branches of national religious organizations. A full list would be too long to print here, but the Bible Society (1809), the Religious Tract Society (1810), the Missionary Society (1813), the Church Missionary Association (1817), the Bethel Union (1822) and the Town Mission (1829) fall especially to be noticed. Occasionally this superabundance of energy produced its own conflicts, as

when the Methodists endeavoured to "pack" the committee of the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1820 in order to substitute improving religious journals for the "licentious periodical literature" which the Society was alleged to order.<sup>1</sup> But it is sufficiently evident that unreformed Newcastle had an interest in religion, literature and the arts and something of a social conscience. It had as much, perhaps, as any comparable town and more than some. Possibly much of the credit ought to go to such men as Moises of the Royal Grammar School and John Bruce, the father of Collingwood Bruce, who started in 1806 the private school which, by the 'sixties, was recognized to be the best school of any type in the town: Newcastle was still small enough to be susceptible to the influence of a few men such as these.

But all this social and intellectual ferment, not merely in Newcastle but in England at large, raised a major question: how long would a country so stimulated, so excited, so optimistic, endure constitutional forms in national and local government which, dating from centuries back, appeared to be increasingly, indeed fantastically, incompatible with what was called the Spirit of the Age? Of the strength of this spirit Newcastle is an interesting example: it was narrowly but not ill governed; it had long enjoyed parliamentary representation; though it suffered from the economic ills which affected the country at large after 1815 (there was a seamen's strike in the coastal towns in 1815 and a keelmen's strike in 1819) it did not suffer so badly as many places did. It was forces outside Newcastle rather than within it which ultimately changed the whole civic scene.

Until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 the government of the town was vested in the mayor, the sheriff, ten aldermen and twenty-four councillors. With the exception of the aldermen, who held office for life, they were elected annually. The process of election as described (unsympathetically) by Mackenzie is too long to set out here

<sup>1</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 7 March, 1820. The attempt was unsuccessful except to the extent that *Don Juan* was removed from the shelves.

and too complicated to summarize. It was based on the elective rights of the twelve Mysteries and fifteen Bye-Trades; it involved seven distinct and preliminary elections before the final one; and, as described by Mackenzie, "the puzzling intricacy which it exhibits will be found, on examination, a despicable mockery of independence".<sup>2</sup> In practice, though not in law, the essence of the system was co-option. Municipal office passed between the members of a limited number of families, of which the Brandlings, the Bells, the Andersons, the Cooksons, the Smiths and the Claytons were among the most prominent. Thus, in 1817 Nathaniel Clayton was Town Clerk; he had held that office since 1785 and was to be succeeded in 1822 by his son John; his brother Robert was mayor and Robert's son, William, was sheriff: in the following year, although Robert and William were out of office, Henry, another son of Robert's, was sheriff.

There are one or two observations which fall to be made on the unreformed corporation. It was highly oligarchical, but, although its accounting system was not such as would satisfy a District Auditor to-day, its members do not appear to have been personally corrupt by the standards of their age or very seriously at fault by ours. It was certainly not a "Tammany Hall": on occasion there was difficulty in finding men willing to undertake offices which involved considerable obligations and (apparently) the possibility of financial loss. Moreover, the corporation did not regard itself as being merely the passive trustee of the town's property, out of which, when the legal demands of the free-men were met, it had a balance to devote to its own entertainment and benefit. It possessed sufficient sense of public obligation to devote, between 1780 and 1832, some £95,000 to "permanent and productive improvements", and by the early 'thirties at least it was taking some elementary steps

<sup>2</sup> Eneas Mackenzie: *A Descriptive Account of the Town and County of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Including the Borough of Gateshead*, p. 612 (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1827).

towards the repair and scavenging of the highways. It did not disappear by reason of its own corruption, passivity or incompetence.

The first notable attack upon it was made by Joseph Clark (1770-1851), a protégé of Wesley's, who had a bookshop and printing works in Newgate Street. In 1809 Clark published his *Address to the Burgesses of Newcastle*, in which he cited instances of the maladministration of the town's property by the Council and criticized its omission to publish annually a detailed statement of its accounts. He secured the support of the Guild (which consisted of the Mysteries and Bye-Trades, with the addition of the Companies) and a considerable measure of success in his campaign. But after being presented with silver plate for his exertions he denied the validity of many of his former arguments and ceased to be politically active. To the reformers of the 'twenties he appeared to be a renegade. He had, at the most, been the champion of the burgesses, not even of the freemen as a whole, still less of the inhabitants at large; and the Council had comfortably survived his attack.

By the beginning of the 'twenties it was possible to discern the major political groups in the town. The leader of the Tories was Charles John Brandling (1769-1826), M.P. for Newcastle 1802-1812 and for Northumberland 1820-1826; the officer commanding the Newcastle and Northumberland Volunteer Cavalry established in 1819; colliery-owner and a leading member of the "Grand Allies" of the coal trade. One of his brothers-in-law was Matthew Bell, of Woosington, whose son, Matthew (1793-1871), M.P. for Northumberland 1826-1830 and for South Northumberland 1832-1852, became an almost classic combination of the Tory country gentleman and the industrial *entrepreneur*. C. J. Brandling was one of the founders of the Pitt Club, which held its first annual dinner in 1814 and represented at that time and for some years to come the controlling forces in industry, mining and landed property in South Northumberland and North Durham.

It was not, however, an exclusively Tory club. It included a number of Whigs, such as Alderman Reed, six times Mayor between 1800 and 1832. The leader of what were called the "Old Whigs" was Sir Matthew White Ridley, who comfortably shared the representation of the town with the Tories. Somewhat further to the "Left" was such a Whig as James Losh (1762-1833), who, familiar as he is to members of the Literary and Philosophical Society, deserves a special note. Sprung from a small landed family in Cumberland he had become, in his early manhood, a member of the Society of the Friends of the People and a Unitarian: thus he represented the intellectual-reformist, upper-middle-class element in Whiggery. He practised as a barrister in Newcastle (of which he was made Recorder in 1832); became in 1825 the first chairman of the Board of the projected Newcastle and Carlisle Railway; and promoted in 1829 the Newcastle East India Association to secure free trade with India and China. His particular brand of politics, half Whig half Liberal, made him a supporter of parliamentary reform in 1830-1832 but an opponent of the ballot. Others who substantially held the same opinions were Dr. Headlam, Anthony Easterby, Emerson Charnley the bookseller, Christian Allhusen the immigrant industrialist and William Turner, Unitarian minister in Newcastle from 1782 to 1841, one of the founders of the Literary and Philosophical Society and the holder of the lectureship established by that Society in 1802 in Natural and experimental Philosophy. These were such men as Lambton may have had in mind when he said (a little condescendingly) in presenting a petition in 1820 that the petitioners

"belonged to that class of society which has not hitherto taken so great a share in the consideration of public affairs as, he was persuaded, it would be highly advantageous to the country that it should—he meant the middle class".

Somewhat further to the Left stood a man who was to play a considerable part in the life and politics of the town, John Fife<sup>3</sup> (1795-1871). Fife followed his father's profession of surgeon, was made one of the town coroners in 1819 and helped to establish what afterwards became the Eye Infirmary. He was a quick, suave man to whom popularity (for a time at least) came easily; he used his talents for political organization and manoeuvre to bring Whigs, Liberals and Radicals together.

Radicalism in Newcastle was almost entirely a post-war growth, which may be dated from 1815, when the veteran reformer, Major Cartwright, visited the town, and the Political Protestants were organized. One of their leading members was John Marshall, who in 1817 lost his post as Librarian of the Literary and Philosophical Society for publishing a *Political Litany*. Undeterred, he published in 1819 an *Address from the Reformers of Fawdon to their Brothers, the Pitmen, Keelmen and Labourers of the Tyne and Wear* and played a prominent part in the great meeting held on 11 October of that year to protest against the conduct of the Manchester magistrates. Thanks largely to the prudence of the mayor, Alderman Reed, the meeting passed off without disorder; the more fortunately because a minority of the participants in it were thought to be armed and "Crowley's Crew", from Winlaton, almost certainly were.

At that time the gap between the Whigs and the Radicals was wide. Ten years later it had narrowed, if only temporarily. Most of the Whigs had accepted the necessity for a substantial measure of parliamentary reform, while such working-class leaders as Thomas Hepburn had accepted the desirability of free trade with India. The Tories in Newcastle, as elsewhere, had been divided by the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, and in the general election of the following year Ridley was returned together with an independent Tory, John Hodgson, a lukewarm reformer, who defeated the

<sup>3</sup> There is a biography of Fife in the *Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend*, Part XLVII, pp. 12-15 (January, 1891).

sitting Tory, Cuthbert Ellison. A celebration of the July Revolution of 1830 allowed the co-operation of some of the Liberals (but not Losh) with the Radicals, and the new Common Council elected at the end of that year contained, for once, a little new blood. The old Tory organization was cracking and the Pitt Club had ceased to meet. Whigs and Liberals such as Losh, Headlam and the solicitor Armourer Donkin and such middle-class Radicals as Thomas Doubleday<sup>4</sup> took part in the town meeting of 21 December, 1830, which petitioned for reform of parliament, although there was obvious dissension on the question of the ballot. In June 1831 the Northern Political Union was founded, with Charles Attwood (who had come to Gateshead in 1811 at the age of twenty) as treasurer and Doubleday as one of the secretaries. But there was no coalition of Whigs, Liberals and Radicals: Ridley was very cool towards the Union (cooler, indeed, than Hodgson) and there were wide gaps in the line which stretched, with the assiduous John Fife in the middle of it, from Losh on the right to Charles Larkin on the extreme left. It was Larkin who, at another great public meeting on 15 May, 1832, bade King William IV remember the fate of Louis XVI. In that wild and troubled year of 1832, when the cholera claimed 801 victims in Newcastle (including Eneas Mackenzie), when the coal trade was languishing and the surrounding districts were convulsed by a lock-out at the pits, it was only with the utmost difficulty that the Reformers were kept together. In this task Fife played a major part, and it is significant that within a week of the Reform Bill becoming law he resigned from the

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Doubleday (1790-1870) was the son of one of the partners in Doubleday and Easterby, soap-makers, and was himself for a time a junior partner in the firm. His literary productions covered a wide range and included poems, plays, *An Essay on Mundane Moral Government* (1832), *The True Law of Population* (1842), a biography of Peel and numerous articles. I cannot pretend to have read more than a small part of his published work, but some of it, and particularly the biography of Peel, shows considerable judgment and discernment. His was probably one of the most active and versatile minds in Newcastle in his day, and I think that he might repay further study. He failed in business, became insolvent and ultimately had to be provided with a succession of small, salaried posts.

Northern Political Union. The ostensible ground for his resignation was that Attwood declined to pledge himself not to allow the Union to become the tool of Cobbett: the real reason was that Fife, like thousands of middle-class Liberals up and down the country, felt that, save in one essential respect, reform had gone far enough.

That exception was in the sphere of local government, and in 1833 Fife appeared as the exponent of the case of the burgesses against what he termed the "vile and corrupt" Council. In fact, the report of the Commissioners who visited Newcastle in December of that year could not be said to have exposed any "vileness", and such "corruption" as it did expose was of no great moment. Nevertheless, it was a foregone conclusion that the Municipal Corporations Act would be passed: an unsatisfactory piece of legislation which certainly established the representative principle in municipal government but did not do a great deal else. It was also a foregone conclusion that the first election held in Newcastle under the Act, in December 1835, should return a Whig-Liberal-Radical majority. The "brave new world" was inaugurated by an insensate and wasteful piece of vandalism, the sale in 1837 of the Mansion House and its contents: there has probably never been a sale in Newcastle at which collectors' items fetched as little as they did on that occasion. But despite such momentous changes John Clayton, who had frankly told the Commissioners, "I think that with elections absolutely popular it would be impossible to govern the town", continued as Town Clerk.<sup>5</sup>

The Northern Political Union also continued, but for the moment at a low ebb. Doubleday was its main prop: the *Tyne Mercury*, edited by W. A. Mitchell, withdrew its support, and the Union had to depend on itself for journalistic help in the form of ephemeral publications such as the

<sup>5</sup> John Clayton (1792-1890) held, besides almost innumerable other offices, that of Town Clerk from 1822 to 1866 and of Secretary to the River Tyne Commission from 1850 to 1874. He was interested in archæology and some of his finds in the neighbourhood of The Chesters are credited with arousing Collingwood Bruce's interest in the Roman Wall.

*Newcastle Press*, which ran from July 1833 to October 1834, and a short-lived periodical, the *Newcastle Standard*, which Larkin conducted in 1836. In the general election of 1835 two Whigs, Ridley and Ord, were returned; Hodgson losing his seat and a Radical coming at the bottom of the poll. It was still possible, as late as December of that year, for Fife to take the chair at a meeting held to welcome Daniel O'Connell, but the gap between the Whig-Liberals and the Radicals was soon to widen. Feargus O'Connor speaks of founding a Radical Association in Newcastle in 1836—presumably a branch of the Working Men's Association of the North of England. In August 1837 the vehemently Radical Augustus Beaumont appeared to contest the by-election which followed Ridley's death: he only polled 290 votes and the Conservative Hodgson (now Hodgson Hinde) defeated the Liberal; but Beaumont remained for three months and issued the first number of the *Northern Liberator* in October. It was bought at the beginning of 1838 by Robert Blakey, late mayor of Morpeth, and edited by Doubleday. 1838 was the year of the publication of the Peoples' Charter, of two great meetings in Newcastle and of the renaissance of the Northern Political Union to lead the Chartist agitation. It is interesting to observe that the impact of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, usually given as the main source of northern Chartism, had not yet been felt in practice in Newcastle, although a Union had been nominally formed in 1836.

1839 was the critical year, the year of the Bull Ring riots at Birmingham and the insurrection at Newport. Newcastle was no great way behind. In the preceding November the Union had elected the near-revolutionist, Harney, as a delegate to the Chartist Convention, and in the early months of 1839 travelling orators and agitators were rousing the pit villages in the neighbourhood of Newcastle. At a mass meeting held on the Town Moor on 20 May the audience was urged to withdraw its money from savings banks, to withdraw or be prepared to withdraw its labour and to arm

in its own defence: the Winlaton workmen were known to be making pikes and calthrops. Another great meeting was held on the Moor on 28 June, and by the beginning of July the countryside was in a ferment, increased by the news of Harney's arrest. By this time nightly meetings of the Chartists were being held in the Forth and violence was endemic. The night of 16/17 July was a particularly disturbed one, with rioters swarming through the streets, turning out the gaslights and smashing the windows of what they called the "shopocracy". The police, who were accompanied by the mayor, Dr. Fife, and by Dr. Headlam, managed to gain the upper hand and to make some arrests. On 24 July Fife called for special constables, and six hundred were sworn in and given some measure of training in the next few days. On 30/31 July the climax came in a night of wild rioting, when the Mayor, Dr. Headlam, and the Clerk to the Justices were engaged in hand-to-hand fighting in the streets, leading the police (armed with cutlasses) and the specials against the mob: infantry with fixed bayonets blocked the streets at strategic points, such as St. John's Church, and dragoons finally drove off the rioters with the flat of their sabres. That night Newcastle was under undeclared martial law, but there were no deaths and no shots were fired, although the Riot Act was read four times. Isolated disturbances occurred in the neighbourhood throughout August, but the back of the threat of physical force had been broken on that one night.

Chartism, like Jacobitism, has attracted a vast amount of sentimental interest, and the fact that most of its programme was subsequently embodied in the constitution has tended to hide the more important fact that, in its 1839 manifestation, it was neither more nor less than a revolutionary movement. Sympathy with the very considerable hardships which many working-class people were suffering is one thing: tolerance of large-scale disorder, intimidation and illicit arming is another. But it is usually the rebels and not the orthodox who win the vapid affections of posterity; what has come to

pass pales beside the imagined glories of what might have been. Chartists, Owenites, Young Englanders, Young Irelanders catch the eye; middle-class Liberals such as Fife<sup>6</sup> and Headlam have few admirers to-day. Yet it was men of their type who saved England from anarchy in 1839: the fundamental justification of parliamentary and municipal reform in the 'thirties is that, but for it, they might have been found on the other side.

In other respects the history of Newcastle under its reformed corporation was not a brilliant one. Indeed, about the middle of the century there was anxiety and ground for anxiety about the future of the town. It was fast losing its iron trade to Tees-side and, concurrently, the old sea-borne coal trade was threatened by the development of railways. It was not until 1847 that Armstrong bought the site for his works at Elswick or until 1852 that the first iron screw collier was built by Palmers. About that time it was highly arguable that Newcastle was falling back, both relatively and absolutely, in the race for material prosperity, and must take third place in the north-east to Sunderland and Middlesbrough.

Anxiety centred on the condition of the Tyne, the conservatorship of which from Spar Hawk, ten miles below the town, to Hedwin Springs, seven miles above, had been vested from time immemorial in the corporation; though not without intermittent opposition from such stalwarts as Ralph Gardner. Before the middle of the eighteenth century and increasingly thereafter the deterioration of the river was the subject of highly vocal complaint. The unreformed corporation consulted Rennie in 1813, received a report from him

<sup>6</sup> Fife was knighted in 1840, served again as mayor in 1843-1844, took a prominent part in the Anti-Corn Law agitation in the 'forties and helped in 1859 to form the 1st Newcastle Volunteer Rifle Corps, of which he became lieutenant-colonel. To Radicals and Chartists he remained for the rest of his life a political renegade, to whom the most old-fashioned Tory was to be preferred. He was probably the type of man so expert in the details of political manœuvre as to be frequently unaware of the direction of his manœuvres, but if everyone who abandoned principles to which he had declared his adherence in the highly emotional atmosphere of 1830-1832 is to be described as a renegade, England was full of renegades.

in 1816, but took almost no steps to act upon it. Its inaction was strongly criticized before the Commissioners in 1833, but although the reformed corporation was somewhat more active its activity was based on no coherent plan. As the draught of ships increased and as other ports, especially Sunderland, prepared for ships of deeper draught, the Tyne, as a navigable river, fell further and further behind. Gateshead and the Shields argued hotly that the users of the river were being sacrificed to the financial advantage of the inhabitants of Newcastle: the substantial accuracy of this assertion was borne out when Captain Washington, who conducted an enquiry in 1849, reported that since 1809 the corporation had received the amount of £957,973 from the river and had spent only £397,719 on it; the balance of over half a million having gone to save the corporation and those it represented from paying what they would otherwise have had to pay for paving, lighting, watering and scavenging the streets of Newcastle. A Bill creating a Tyne Commission on which all four towns, as well as the Admiralty, would be represented, was introduced in 1849. The predominantly Liberal corporation of Newcastle fought it with an obstinacy, an intransigence and a lavishness of expenditure which would have done credit to the most thoroughly dyed-in-the-wool Tory and the Bill failed to pass. A second Tyne Conservancy Bill did become law in 1850, but the first ten years of the life of the new authority were difficult, impoverished and unproductive. In 1859, when J. P. Ure took up the appointment of engineer to the Improvement Commissioners and substituted a policy of dredging for that of encouraging an artificially narrowed river to do its own scouring, the Tyne was at its nadir.

I have dwelt at some length on the matter of the river in order to emphasize the conclusion that those who expect steady and continuous improvement, even material improvement, in local or national affairs are bound to be disappointed. The human mind is neither comprehensive nor precise, the collective mind still less so: at any given

moment it may be acting energetically and decisively in one direction and lethargically and confusedly in another. Newcastle, which had been quick to see the opportunities presented by the railway, was remarkably indifferent (save as an immediate source of income) to the river.

The depression about the future of the town which I have noted was increased by calamities, avoidable and unavoidable. The scarlatina epidemic of 1845-1847 and what was called the Irish fever of 1846-48 apparently led to some slight improvement in sanitary measures; on the strength of which the town congratulated itself on escaping very lightly in the cholera epidemic of 1849. It had nothing to congratulate itself upon in the autumn of 1853, when there were 1,533 deaths from cholera in a little over two months. The mortality rates of 1 in 43 in St. Nicholas's Parish and 1 in 189 in Jesmond give some idea of the conditions prevailing in the congested districts in the lower part of the town; which neither the achievements of Grainger, Dobson and Oliver nor the sanitary measures of the corporation had perceptibly improved. The great fire of October 1854, which spread across the river from Gateshead and destroyed half a million's worth of property on the Quayside and in the congeries of slums behind them, was another heavy blow. One finds Newcastle writers of that period very much on the defensive, anxious to clear the town from the reputation for bad luck or bad management which they felt it had acquired. What we casually describe as mid-Victorian complacency was not, in fact, the most obvious characteristic of Newcastle a century ago. I leave with you the picture of a generation anxious, to some extent disillusioned, certainly stripped of much of the febrile optimism of the 'thirties; but self-reliant, trusting in life and its capacity to manage life, filled with a sturdy hopefulness which the next half-century was largely to justify.