X.—THE LAST DAYS OF THE UNREFORMED CORPORATION OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE.

By Michael Cook.

ABBREVIATIONS OF REFERENCES.

CA—Abstracts of the Chamberlains' Accounts of the Income and Expenditure of the Mayor and Burgesses of Newcastle . . . by the Auditors.
CCB—Common Council Book.
MCI—Report of the Evidence and Discussions during the Official Investigation into the Affairs of the Municipal Corporation of Newcastle upon Tyne . . . 1833 (Newcastle, 1834).
NCA—Newcastle upon Tyne City Archives.
NJB—*Northern John Bull.*
TM—*Tyne Mercury.*

The political history of the city of Newcastle contains a number of puzzling features in the conduct of certain local bodies in the decade and a half before the passing of the Municipal Reform Act of 1835. The political complexion of the aldermen, the Common Council and the burgesses, their attitude to contemporary movements, for religious freedom, for Parliamentary reform and the like, were not consistent, and there was a constant and sometimes illogical changing and regrouping of the members of both bodies. To a large extent, no doubt, these vagaries are explicable only in terms of private personalities, with their friendships and animosities, their family and business cares, and as far as this is so, they will probably never be penetrated. A good deal of explanation can be given, though, by looking closely at the legal and constitutional

framework that enclosed the men who were leading local events.[1]

At the Municipal Corporations Inquiry in 1833, the Town Clerk said to the commissioners, while describing the procedure for electing the mayor, that

> "he would remark, that while public politics had nothing whatever to do with the election, local politics had. By the charter of James, a concurrent jurisdiction is given to the mayor and burgesses in guild, the exercise of which was considered a dangerous measure to the town. The concurrence of the mayor is necessary."[2]

In fact, the whole of the borough constitution was in a state of crisis, which can probably be dated from 1809 (the attack of Joseph Clark and the auditors upon the Common Council) but which intensified in seriousness from the early 1820's and came to a climax in 1832-3, shortly before the death of the old chartered corporation in 1835.

From first to last, the struggle centred on the office and person of the mayor, which gave him in Newcastle a pre-eminence not accorded to the chief magistrate of every borough. His duties naturally included the presidency of every formal public activity in the town. It was accepted that he must preside at any public meeting requisitioned by a sufficient number of respectable people, as well as at public meetings of burgesses upon particular questions. The use of this quasi-constitutional device of the public meeting was growing rapidly, here as elsewhere, in this period. Thus on 10 March 1829,[3] a party of liberals requisitioned a public meeting in the guildhall on the question of Catholic relief. The "anti-Catholic" party heard of this in time to persuade the mayor, Thomas Shadforth, to move it to the Forth, where a much greater crowd could assemble. There his worship duly presided while many of the politically active men spoke

[1] The main personalities and events are described by Professor W. L. Burn in *Arch. Ael.*, 4 ser., XXXIV (1956), pp. 1-13.

[2] MCI, p. 12.

[3] Richardson's *Local Historian's Table Book*, Vol. IV, p. 15.

across him in hot debate. There was a large procession of liberals from the Turk's Head to the ground, under James Losh—a former "Friend of the People"—Thomas Headlam—later one of the principal respectable Radicals—and W. H. Ord of Whitfield—a violent Radical, though a country gentleman.[4] The "anti-Catholics", already in possession of the field, had no such powerful speakers. Their most notable leader on this day was Joseph Clark, who would later in this paper have been called an opposition burgess. They were nevertheless a majority. Next day this majority was backed up by resolutions from all four parish vestries; but on 14 March the Common Council, by contrast, petitioned in favour of Catholic relief.[5] This episode has been described to show a picture of the cross-currents and movements of opinion between which the mayor had to keep the balance. It was in connexion with elections and Parliamentary reform that the majority of meetings were held in the succeeding years, and the mayor presided both at special meetings held to present petitions to Parliament, or, with the sheriff, as an official at nominations and at the poll. It is true that party political bodies, such as the Northern Political Union, generally preferred to hold meetings under the chairmanship of one of their members, such as John Fife, Charles Attwood, Dr. Headlam or even Charles Larkin; and it is true that the great meetings of disaffected workpeople, pitmen or keelmen, held usually on the Town Moor, were outside the framework of public life in the borough; but nevertheless the mayor—as in other places—was accepted as the public spokesman of the opinion of the inhabitants on all questions of general interest.

In March 1832 it fell to the mayor, Archibald Reed, to lead a posse of special constables to assist in the eviction from their homes of the striking pitmen; and next month he led a military expedition across the river to Friar's Goose, in order to suppress rioting. That year the Common Council

[4] NJB, January 1831, p. 145.
[5] NCA, CCB 1824-31, p. 441.

passed a formal vote of thanks to "the garrison of Newcastle" for providing this soldierly retinue.[6] These aspects of the mayor's duties, of course, did not pass away in 1835, as the later career of John Fife, for example, witnesses.

The mayor was the presiding officer of the Common Council. Of the conduct of individuals in this office, there is nothing to be discovered, except that occasionally a mayor might commit the corporation to some course of policy. The most important case of this occurred in May 1825, when Cramlington bought 50 shares in the Newcastle and Carlisle railway in the corporation's name.[7] This action led to fateful consequences after the reform. The actions of such men as Sir John Fife, in the elected Council, suggest, if there is any analogy, that the mayor's part was by no means limited to impartial presidency. The formal record in the Common Council books is not informative enough on debating procedure.

More importantly, the mayor had to preside over the burgesses in their thrice-yearly guild meetings. About some of these meetings we know quite a lot. In 1833 Clayton said, "It has always been the practice of the burgesses to take that opportunity [of the guild] of bringing their grievances before the governing body, and we have sometimes some rather warm discussions (Laughter)."[8] This was a considerable understatement. The guilds, more and more as the years went on, were almost uncontrollably violent, and appeared very like the "bear-gardens" of certain large vestries in unincorporated towns.[9] It was in presiding over these assemblies that the true mettle of the man was proved. There were many changes of temperature in the guildhall. When Aubone Surtees was mayor in 1821-2, a stark coolness prevailed. The stewards resolved not to accompany him on the annual excursion up and down the river on Ascension

[6] NCA, CCB 1831-5, p. 148; Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
[7] NCA, CCB 1824-31, p. 41.
[8] MCI, p. 34.
[9] S. and B. Webb, *English Local Government, The Parish and the County* (London 1906), p. 94.

Day, and in this they were tacitly supported by the Common Council itself. That year the populace had to do without its customary games and races at Newburn and the King's Meadows. Surtees refused to live in the Mansion House, or to keep up the usual state. Yet, at the end of his year, the stewards formally thanked him—a thing not usual—and refused to thank the sheriff, Alfred Hall, who was a liberal, and who had kept up the feasting neglected by the mayor.[10]

Next year, relations between mayor and burgesses were perhaps at their most cordial, under Robert Bell. At the Easter guild of 1823 we have a clear picture of Bell acting as the dispenser of corporation patronage amongst the burgesses, listening to their complaints, even calling in and publicly rebuking the town surveyor, and freely debating the needs of the Common Council, and this in spite of the surliness of the new Town Clerk, young John Clayton.[11]

This brings us to the personal problem of the mayoralty, which was the crucial factor in local politics. Plainly the office was not one eagerly sought after. The growing difficulty of obtaining suitable mayors and aldermen brought the whole constitution of the town into danger; and in the end it was only the appearance of a small group of willing and suitable aldermen that staved off a collapse in the three years before the reform.

The mayor was one of the ten aldermen (eleven, counting him), who were elected for life. As our period opens, the corporation was feeling the first pangs of its recruitment difficulties.

> "For many years past, Newcastle has been in great want of active and independent magistrates. The gowns of three aldermen have been lately hawked about every street in Newcastle. . . . Never was Newcastle so much at a loss for a mayor for next year. . . . Alderman Cramlington was the only alderman who would consent to stand."[12]

[10] TM, 30 April 1822, 15 October 1822, 5 November 1822.
[11] TM, 15 April 1823.
[12] TM, 26 August 1823.

In the Easter guild of 1823, Robert Nichol asked for a stipendiary magistrate. In a characteristically frank reply, Robert Bell said, "We have the gowns of two aldermen vacant at present. I wish, Mr. Nichols, you could point out any person who could fill them."[13] One of the vacancies was temporarily filled by a member of one of the powerful family groups whose tradition had included—but was to some extent ceasing to include—service on the Council. Isaac Cookson did not want to serve, but to oblige his friends, and to avoid paying the fine for refusal of office, he took the gown for a year, and then resigned. He did not take his turn as mayor.[14] There was nothing for it but to admit new men, and the two selected were both to play important parts in the coming struggles: William Wright and Robert Bell. Both appointments were acceptable to the burgesses. A Radical journalist remarked, "A man might easily foretell from such a beginning the downfall of Toryism in Newcastle."[15] The next vacancy occurred in 1829, with the resignation of Robert Clayton, and this was filled by a neutral man, Thomas Shadforth, who had a good record of service on the river jury. John Brandling, younger brother of Charles John Brandling, formerly Tory M.P. for Newcastle, succeeded Robert Bell in 1831. After the crisis of 1831-2, which will be described below, two more aldermen, both from the extreme right wing, retired, Thomas Smith and Isaac Cookson the younger. They were replaced by two moderate men, Henry Bell and J. L. Hood—the last named was to be the last mayor of the old corporation and an elected member of the new.[16] The significance of the appearance of these three new aldermen, Brandling, Bell and Hood, at precisely this point, is important to be understood. In 1823-4, the existence of aldermanic vacancies caused the appointment and subsequent mayoralty of two new aldermen who were willing to conduct debates in guild. By 1829, however, the relations between Common

[13] TM, 15 April 1823.
[14] NCA, CCB 1817-24, p. 444.
[15] TM, 26 August 1823.
[16] NCA, CCB 1831-5, pp. 79, 244, 274.

Council and guild were so different that these aldermen could not be allowed to act again as mayor. This meant that annually the aldermen were riven asunder by arguments about the succession; and if there had again been no candidate suitable to the ruling clique, the whole balance of the constitution would have been upset in 1832 or 1833.

To explain this we must turn to constitutional analysis. In 1820, when the Common Council was still largely packed by family groups, it was thought that the charter, with its extremely complicated procedures for municipal elections, gave a virtual co-optive power to the ruling body. As Clayton said to the commissioners of inquiry in 1833, "The effect is obvious—it is to give a preponderance of power to the governing body."[17] Or, as a Radical journalist despondently remarked in 1821,

> "In this case the election is in the Corporation themselves, and the best part of the joke is, that the freemen are themselves made accessary to giving up their power out of their own hands. . . . Some may say that the mysteries *might* send 12 independent men, and the 15 trades *might* send 15 independent men, who *might* elect 12 independent men; but there is such a mighty odds that any of these mights ever come to be fulfilled, that we must regard it as even less likely to happen than that the House of Commons should be independent. . . . This will be more completely seen when it is remembered . . . that out of the 24 mystery men and burgesses that come before them, the aldermen need not care a straw for 18 independent persons, if there are only six that will serve their ends! "[18]

In fact, however, all parties realized, after 1821, that this co-optive power was not quite so impregnable as had been imagined, and of course if once a sympathetic mayor could be had, the concurrent jurisdiction of mayor and burgesses in guild could be established as a nearly democratic assembly. In October 1821 the Council was so worried by these thoughts that it took the trouble to rig the elections by proceeding to the Spital, unannounced, at 10 in the morning, thus leaving the guild meeting leaderless and frustrated. At

[17] MCI, p. 9.
[18] TM, 16 October 1821.

the Spital, some electors were missing, and had to be searched for in the local inns. The delayed election so caused gave rise to a rumour that there was opposition, "a thing," as W. A. Mitchell put it, "that we all know to be extremely unlikely to happen. . . . When any such business as an opposition Mayor comes to be proposed, all that I have to say is, with Johnny Gilpin, 'May I be there to see!'"[19] In 1822 there followed Mitchell's denunciation of corporation employees serving as stewards: "The Corporation, or the body corporate, can have a majority when they please amongst the stewards, or the body incorporate. . . ." He added an exhortation to the auditors to cut off the Common Council's "secret service money", which revealed that since 1819 the Common Council had had a sufficient following among the 24 auditors to prevent any hostile resolutions being passed by them, and indeed to prevent full publication of the accounts: and this in spite of the resounding defeat that ten years before the auditors had inflicted on the Council.[20] In April 1823 the Common Council was able, backed by the Recorder, to admit a young man called Usher to his freedom as a hostman by service, although it was admitted that he had not actually served the trade. The *Tyne Mercury* commented, "If alleged serving freemen are allowed to have their freedom when they have not served for it, in ten years Newcastle will be a rotten borough."[21] There was some warrant for saying this. In other places, where the charter allowed the ruling body to make freemen at will, or with easy qualifications, it was often the policy to sell places, or to create them corruptly, for electoral purposes. In Newcastle the interest of the burgesses combined with the interest of Whig politicians to resist to the utmost any encroachments by the Common Council on the independence of the freemen; and their defeat in Usher's case was only after more than a year of angry manœuvring on both sides. The

[19] TM, 23 October 1821.
[20] TM, 8 October, 5 November, 19 November 1822.
[21] TM, 22 April 1823.

Council's victory was too dearly bought to be of use electorally, and no further attempt was made to create freemen by fictional service. There was, on the other hand, some suggestion that the number of freemen, at least in some companies, was increasing in 1833.[22] There was, too, a movement to revive certain companies that had lapsed into insignificance or complete death. The Scriveners' Company was revived and given a new Ordinary in 1828, and this was particularly important as it contained a number of the most active attornies, among whom the name of Clayton was conspicuous.[23]

The executive body of the freemen was the committee of stewards. There were 68 stewards, elected by 28 companies, and representation of the companies was most unequal. For example, the "nine trades" sent 21 of the stewards, and of these six were provided by the merchants. The Common Council took care to encourage the election of placemen as stewards. Throughout our period two of the Council's employees, John Scott (keeper of the "Kitty", as the House of Correction was irreverently called) and John Pitt Scott (clerk to the Revenue Committee) sat as stewards, as did several of the serjeants at mace and chamberlains, and in August 1823 they were joined by Captain Carr, the notorious captain of the watch.[24] Fit men were not always available, even apart from this kind of influence, and though this meant that the sheriff could always pack juries (and in a sense had to)[25] and that the auditors could usually be counted on to be quiescent (in 1828 the Tailors' Company appointed a blind man as auditor),[26] it sometimes told against the Common Council too.

On the death of the old and rather timid Whig Recorder, R. H. Williamson, in 1829, the family groups made a last trial of their strength, and secured the election of Christopher

[22] MCI, p. 36.
[23] NCA, CCB 1824-31, pp. 331-3, 352.
[24] TM, 5 November 1822, 17 June 1823, 26 August 1823.
[25] TM, 30 April 1822, 26 August 1823; MCI, Appendix, p. 138.
[26] NJB, January 1830, p. 162.

Cookson.[27] He held office—the first Tory Recorder since at least 1794—until after the crisis of 1832, when the Whigs once again obtained the Recordership. This success was the more valuable to the Council party for Cookson's availability to discuss the legality of the election procedure in 1831.

What all these manœuvres implied was that the Tories were having to take special measures to protect themselves, while the burgesses were beginning to glimpse their opportunity. "The freemen, we understand, have made some progress in their efforts for liberty, but like the corporation jobs, it gets but slowly on."[28]

As Larry Hewison remarked in a scurrilous publication in 1829, "The gentleman who expected and anxiously sought for the office [of mayor] this year, has been superseded by the election of Mr. Shadforth; it is of course a great disappointment to him, and his friends (if he has got any) will sympathise with him."[29] By this token we must date the attack by the burgesses on the mayoralty by means of a compliant alderman, to the autumn of 1829. The issue was fought out during the next three years.

A season of riotous guild meetings began. Before the meeting in May 1830, William Garret led a deputation to the mayor with a list of complaints, and during the debate the Town Clerk was attacked for alleged personal disloyalty.[30] The meeting came to an end in near-riot. Small wonder that the Tories were determined to avoid the election of a mayor of the burgesses' party. In October 1830, according to the *Northern John Bull*, the mayoralty was offered to the now elderly Thomas Clennell, who in his day had had the burgesses' confidence. In these years he neglected his duties as an alderman, and refused to take office. Archibald Reed, a prominent Whig, who served as mayor six times since 1800, then agreed to take office, and was attacked by alderman Robert Bell, "for many years this honour has been

[27] Cf. TM, 13 August 1822.
[28] NJB, October 1830, p. 81.
[29] *The Corporation Mirror*, No. II (Newcastle, 1829).
[30] NJB, May 1830, p. 252.

bandied too much among a select few; instead of following the old rule, to be succeeded by turns among a few of the aldermen," and he proposed Isaac Cookson the younger.[31] This year, as had been customary, the real contest took place behind closed doors, between the aldermen. It was not long before these divisions became more public. Next Christmas guild, the burgesses tried Reed out, and demanded that he should put a motion—actually one condemning the Common Council's collaboration with Richard Grainger—to the guild. He refused, and it was put and carried over the mayor's head by John Stevenson, chairman of the stewards. Alderman Thomas Smith, one of the older Tories, and implicated in the jobbery of ballast conveying, injudiciously appeared on the bench and was shouted off it; pandemonium reigned until at last the Recorder's opinion was read, in favour of the mayor's right not to put motions to the meeting. "The Patriot of the crowd" on this occasion was Larry Hewison, author of the scurrilous *Corporation Mirror* and one of the Radical booksellers.[32] Next time, April 1831, Reed betrayed the guild by attending unexpectedly in the morning, instead of the afternoon, and Punshon and Calbreath only just got into the hall in time to read over their list of grievances, without debate.[33]

The next civic election, in October 1831, in some ways was the most interesting of all. The freemen felt strong enough this time actually to dispute the mayoralty in open election. They did this fairly quietly, and as a matter of fact not much notice of the historic event was made in the press. The first step was to fill up the 24 electors with "independent" men; and for the first time on record, the companies refused to provide the Town Clerk with an advance list of their electors.[34] The corporation had to go into the election in ignorance of the identity of the men they had to deal with. The final list contained only seven alder-

[31] NJB, October 1830, p. 81.
[32] NJB, February 1831, p. 188.
[33] NJB, May 1931, p. 247.
[34] MCI, p. 38.

men, as opposed to nine the year before; and these included William Wright, and Aubone Surtees, but not Thomas Clennell. The other electors included Thomas Loggan and Alfred Hall (both Common Councilmen, but not trusted by the Tories), John Stevenson, William Garret, T. W. Keenlyside, Henry Ingledew and William Angus (leaders of the committee of stewards). This made a total of nine opposition votes, out of the 24. The other electors, of course, contained some determined members of the anti-burgess party: Isaac and Thomas Cookson, William Clayton, George Bulman, Joseph Crawhall, and the list was headed by Reed as mayor; but still, it was not obviously dominated, as elections of ten years before had been, by family groups.[35] William Wright was therefore defeated by 15 votes to 9, but this was an encouragement, and both sides took note that the real battle would come next year. An additional weakness to the Council was that Archibald Reed, who by now was only too experienced at controlling civil riot, had to take office for a second year running, and thereby deprived the aldermanic party of even the apparent support of the rule of rotation.[36] The electors, however, took care to consolidate their position by making changes in the Common Council, the first for some years. Five new Councilmen were elected, and the most prominent of them was Emerson Charnley, a Radical bookseller. Perhaps more important still, among the old Councilmen not re-elected were Isaac Cookson (one of the three Cooksons on the Council), Robert Clayton and Job James Bulman—names that remind us that the landed interests of the county were always strong in the borough, on both sides of the political pale.[37]

That this comparatively quiet election had been carefully planned by the stewards is suggested by statements before and after the event. On 27 September 1831 the *Tyne Mercury* said, " The Stewards of the incorporated companies,

[35] NCA, CA 1831-2; *Newcastle Courant*, 7 October 1831.
[36] MCI, pp. 10-13.
[37] NCA, CCB 1831-5, p. 68.

it appears, have resolved, 'as far as the governing charters will permit', that the Mayor and Common Council shall be elected by the Burgesses." On 7 October, the *Newcastle Courant* added, "The opposition did not appear to have been founded on any personal disrespect towards Mr. Reed; but rather to try the merits of the charter of the town."

Between October and January, the corporation's position looked almost desperate. They had succeeded in securing Reed's re-election for a second term, but if in 1832 they proposed him for a third, the moral bankruptcy of their party would be plain, and there would be a further loss of serious men. No other candidate seemed to be forthcoming. Wright and Bell had been waiting their chance since 1829. At the same time the burgesses shifted their attack to the court of King's Bench, where they sued for a writ to compel the mayor to put motions in guild. They were ultimately unsuccessful in this action, but immediately after the Common Council had taken measures to defend the mayor at Westminster, the situation was changed by the resignation of alderman Robert Bell.[38] Why he resigned we do not know. He must have been under considerable pressure, as we know William Wright was next year;[39] but the aldermanic vacancy coming at this time was probably the decisive point in the game, and the thought of this failure no doubt strengthened Wright's resolve not to cause another.

In October 1832, both sides made careful preparations. This is how Garret described the preliminaries to the commissioners of inquiry the year after:

> "In 1820 a resolution was brought forward to make the court of guild a court of record, when Mr. Alderman Reed was understood to be favourable to the views of the burgesses. During his mayoralty in 1830, a deputation from the stewards waited upon Mr. Reed, and put the question to him whether he did not think that the burgesses at large had a right to elect the corporate officers and the common council as well? He replied, 'Certainly they had a right to elect their own corporate body.' It was told,

[38] NCA, CCB 1831-5, pp. 77-8.
[39] MCI, pp. 11, 16.

publicly, that he had made that declaration, and he became very popular. Soon after, however, he thought proper to change his mind and joined the opposite party. Then he fell into disrepute. Mr. Alderman Wright next undertook to become the champion of the burgesses, and of course, they sought to have him elected mayor."[40]

Clayton added the gloss, "The governing body refused to support Mr. Alderman Wright, because his object was to throw the entire town into confusion." The ruling party's preparations took the form of placarding the Spital, and posting constables to keep the election chamber empty until the installation of the official party, and perhaps also to ensure that only the right people got in. They also, it seems, warned the electors of last year to be in readiness, and if this is so, we may assume that they foresaw that the regular election would prove impossible.[41] It is difficult to go further and say that they wished to engineer the blockage of the regular election, as after all the electors of last year contained at least nine opposition votes, and the electors of the present year were—because of the new tactics of the companies—as yet unknown. Like all public authorities in that year, however, they were frightened of the new power of public opinion.

At the guild meeting, William Wright once again accepted the popular nomination. The new alderman whose turn it now was, under the old rule, to serve as mayor, was John Brandling. He had entered the Common Council as sheriff in 1828, and had been waiting for the first vacancy as alderman.

Two rival processions formed to march to the Spital, one led by the mayor and official party, the other by Wright, carried along by a delighted mob. At the Spital, in the confusion, William Garret was refused admission to the election chamber, and this pretext was seized upon by the opposition party to secede and withdraw to a neighbouring

[40] MCI, p. 12; the account of the proceedings in *Newcastle Journal*, 6 October 1832, is hardly more graphic than that in MCI, pp. 11-14. See also TM, 9 October 1832.

[41] MCI, p. 14.

room, where for the rest of the evening they held a noisy rival court, while messengers with notes bearing offers and demands passed between the two sessions. The sitting was prolonged until midnight, the official party being strangely reluctant to abandon the election outright, the opposition party being strangely reluctant to frustrate it unequivocally. Probably it was obvious as soon as the barrier of constables was observed, that the burgesses would not be able to establish a favourable atmosphere in the electoral colleges. Next day, with some difficulty, the Town Clerk succeeded in assembling some of the former year's electors, as provided by the charter, and in getting a decisive vote—Garret and Wright were removed by a trick.[42]

The burgesses had failed to achieve the mayoralty. They did, however, succeed in obtaining the election of James Losh, the veteran reformer, as Recorder, and in fact the Recordership reverted to Whig hands for the remainder of the period. Nor did the freemen cease contesting elections, for in 1833 John Fife himself stood for the shrievalty, and several less important offices were contested.[43]

The corporation immediately took reprisals for the attack upon its authority at the elections by setting up a committee for the management of elections,[44] and by instituting a legal action for disfranchising three of the recalcitrant electors, Angus, Walker and Brumell. The action dragged on inconclusively until it became pointless in 1835, and the expenses of the three defendants were paid by subscriptions from the companies. The auditors too made trouble over passing the corporation's expenses on this account.[45] In short, the corporation party, having with the aid of those who feared for property and the status quo, saved itself from falling under the jurisdiction of the guild, found itself, in lesser matters, in continual conflict with the freemen

[42] MCI, pp. 11-12.
[43] *Newcastle Journal*, 21 September 1833; *Newcastle Courant*, 4 October 1833; TM, 7 October 1834.
[44] NCA, CCB 1831-5, p. 199.
[45] *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 199; CA 1833-4; *Newcastle Courant*, 26 January 1833.

and obliged to take every method in its power to retain control of offices and stewardships. The burgesses seem to have abandoned their attempt on the mayoralty. William Wright left town and did not reappear until 1836, and some freemen left local politics. Alderman Clennell also stayed away on his estates, and the Council was thereafter frequently embarrassed in trying to maintain a quorum of aldermen.[46]

In 1831 the Common Council lost control of the auditors, and for the next four years had to face a sustained attack from this quarter.[47] The auditors demanded reductions in ecclesiastical salaries, control of finance by the eight chamberlains—who were the chartered officers, burgesses, who had long ceased to have any practical responsibility—close control of leases of corporate property, and of the office of collector of port dues. In 1832 they resolved

> "That the body of stewards be requested to enquire, by their chairman or secretary, of the mayor, at every guild during the year ensuing, whether any thing, and what, has been done by the common council, in pursuance of the suggestions and recommendations of the auditors, as contained in their report to the mayor and burgesses."

In 1833 they demanded that the Revenue Committee should contain an equal number of burgesses and common councilmen; this was rejected, but next year the Common Council was forced for the first time to reply to them by submitting a long report and apologia, which in turn was rejected by the auditors. In 1830 also the auditors secured the publication in full of the corporation accounts, together with a detained rental of their property: this was a substantial victory in a battle that had lasted since 1809, and as it turned out was the most solid achievement of the burgesses. The strongest attack from the auditors came in 1834, when they actually disallowed a small payment. Probably the assault would have been resumed next year had it not been for the passing of the Municipal Reform Act. *Esto Perpetua,* they declared, in a final burst of goodwill towards the elected Council.

[46] MCI, pp. 10-11.
[47] NCA, CA 1830-5.

The resident freemen numbered perhaps 1,500 or 1,700 at this period, and the total male population was about 16,000, including children. After the reform act there were 365 freemen who were £10 householders, and 2,811 non-free.[48] These figures, if they seem to prove that the burgesses had only an eighth of the total active male population of the town, are misleading. As it happened, a large proportion of the most influential political figures of the locality were freemen. Among the vested interests one thinks of the great family groups, the Brandlings, Claytons, Cooksons, Reeds and Smiths; or of the prominent individuals, Job James Bulman, James Archbold, Joseph Crawhall and Brough Pow. Among the reformers, there were John Fife, Thomas Headlam, Armorer Donkin, Addison Potter; and a remarkable group comprising most of the influential printers and booksellers of the town, Emerson Charnley, the Mitchells of the *Tyne Mercury*, William Fordyce, Eneas Mackenzie (these last two notable historians of Newcastle), John Marshall, Larry Hewison and William Boag. Many of these names are familiar to historians of our own Society, of the Literary and Philosophical Society, or of the Mechanics' Institute. There was a third class, who were active in the administration of the freemen's affairs, but who were not nominally attached to political parties outside: William Garret (another bookseller), James Calbreath, William and George Angus, Joseph Clark, George Brumell, John Stevenson, Henry Ingledew, T. W. Keenlyside. Many of these men went on serving the burgesses long after the battles of the 30's were over, and when indeed it had become plain that the burgesses as such had no future in the government of the town. Their main interest was centred in the companies and the administration of the freemen's rights. If they opposed the Common Council, it was to repel the encroachments of that body, or

[48] In MCI, p. 20, John Clayton estimated that there might be some 1,500 resident and 2,000 non-resident burgesses. His opponents the non-freemen claimed that there were 1,700 (*Ibid.*, p. 138). Thomas Oliver, in his *New Picture of Newcastle* (Newcastle, 1831), though generally well-informed, gives the figure of 6,000, which, even including non-residents, seems much inflated.

to achieve the ideal constitution they thought was envisaged by the charter, or perhaps because centuries of controversy arising from the dual ownership of the Town Moor had created such a tradition among the steward class.[49]

One effect of the printers' interest in burgess politics was the increasing amount of public comment on their affairs. W. A. Mitchell wrote in his *Tyne Mercury* from 1821 to 1824 a regular series of letters under the name of Tim Tunbelly, devoted to reporting on and criticising both the Common Council and the guilds. Even the head-meetings of individual companies were sometimes reported on. Thus, when the joiners refused to elect Robert Nichols (an outspoken opponent of the Council) as steward in 1822, he declared, "If the time servers who form the Joiners' company neglect him, he ought certainly to be chosen the steward of some independent company—his continuing a private man is a public loss."[50] This kind of publicity, and the analysis of the state of life of the companies, was almost revolutionary. Though he was a freeman himself, Mitchell must have drawn on a large circle of friends and reporters. The secrecy of Common Council meetings was only occasionally broken—we do know a little about the aldermanic squabbles—but the guild meetings were a different matter. They began with a proclamation requiring all non-freemen to depart, but this was not enforced in any effective way, and was sometimes not even made in legal form. At the Easter Guild of 1823 Forsyth, then one of the town serjeants, not yet Town Marshall and police superintendent—forgot the words as he stood up to make the proclamation. Muttering that he would fetch his written copy, he disappeared and did not return. After a while the Town Clerk stood up and told another of the serjeants to repeat the words after him; but as Clayton himself could not remember the traditional phrases, only a paraphrase was proclaimed that year.[51] Tunbelly was followed by William Fordyce in the *Northern*

[49] e.g. TM, 15 and 22 July 1823.
[50] TM, 8 October 1822.
[51] TM, 15 April 1823.

John Bull, and few guild meetings took place without public comment thereafter.

One of the difficulties that both Common Council and burgesses had to contend with was a popular contempt for the legal forms that seemed to mean so little. The prosecution of the three electors in 1832 was indeed the Common Council's revenge for the conduct of the freemen at the disputed election. From another point of view the electoral trouble was only the worst case of a difficulty which had been growing more serious for some years. Throughout this period, and certainly since 1821, there had every year been cases of business held up through the non-attendance and carelessness of those concerned. At Christmas 1821 all apprentices' guilds were stopped because the shipwrights would not bother to attend. Next Easter, the guild had to wait till 6 o'clock before the Common Council could be gathered, and by then the stewards had gone home. Next October, three electors were late, one of them being—as in 1832—George Angus (it was said he "would not attend on account of the magistrates refusing to make him a chamberlain").[52] The Common Council was a small body, containing only 34 in all, besides the mayor and sheriff, yet several Councilmen hardly ever attended. In 1833 aldermen Clennell and Wright wholly neglected their duties, the former living in retirement on his estates, the latter having left the town in dudgeon; and it was sometimes difficult to get a quorum for necessary business. This kind of thing was trivial, certainly, but was not taken lightly by contemporaries. They knew that the continuance of the borough constitution depended on the loyalty of a sufficient number of active public men, and also indeed upon the willingness of a number of men to go through formalities that seemed to them empty or pernicious.[53]

There is no doubt that in 1832 there was a majority of burgesses in favour of upsetting the controlling power of the

[52] TM, 5 February, 30 April, 8 October 1822.
[53] MCI, pp. 32-9, and Appendix, p. 138.

Common Council. Even Clayton admitted this in 1833, though he tried to show that the social class of the burgesses affected their opinions.[54] No doubt it did, but there were many "respectable and well-known persons" who made it their business, first to contest the Common Council's power within the terms of the charter, and then to take some steps towards obtaining a reform of it.

The intensity of party conflict, in this small war, was diluted by the lack of party ties and by the responsible feeling of many on both sides. There were several on the corporation side, like alderman Thomas Clennell, or Benjamin Sorsbie,[55] who would go as far with the freemen as they felt justice demanded, but not at the price of disorder. On the other side, there were many whose main interests lay in other spheres, in national politics or in local industrial initiative: such were John Fife and James Losh. Others had no real ambition except to serve as stewards or simple freemen. The whole episode was given power and significance by the reforming booksellers, and by the circumstance that involved so many of them in guild politics. The freemen in guild certainly achieved some measure of control over the corporation, the power to debate all the Council's activities in full guild, and, indirectly, the power to publish the corporation's doings and details of its finance. But even at its most vigorous, between 1829 and 1833, the freemen's party had no constructive view and no policy except economy and representation; they opposed all liberal and "unnecessary expenditure". At a time when the Common Council was on its own initiative proceeding with central area redevelopment (as we should call it now), the Barras Bridge scheme for example, and maintaining the ecclesiastical establishment of the town by voluntary grants; when it was at least considering the appointment of a full-time Inspector of Nuisances, did actually set up a Peelite police force,[56] and began the task of macadamizing the streets; all the freemen did was to vote

[54] MCI, pp. 34-5.
[55] TM, 26 August 1823.
[56] NCA, CCB 1824-31, pp. 287, 317, 246-8.

down the clerical stipends and police, and demand the reform of Sir Thomas White's charity. Both sides, though not Mitchell, were agreed that there should be no serious alteration of the status quo on the river, and there was in the event no full-scale attack on the ballast conveying interests.[57] Probably the most serious result of the quarrel between the two corporate bodies was the rejection by the freemen of Grainger's corn market scheme. The Common Council's committee in 1831 was completely won over by Grainger to this plan.[58] The Christmas guild of 1831 declaimed against the "interests of a private speculator" and more than hinted that Clayton had a corrupt interest in the affair. This was sufficient to deter the Common Council from proceeding, and, in time, to divide the reformed Council so much that the corn market dispute dragged on inconclusively for another ten years, and perhaps endangered Grainger's support from the corporation in his bigger plans. It may certainly be argued that it ultimately caused the building of the present regrettable Town Hall in Cloth Market.

This piece of Newcastle history has long been buried. Collingwood Bruce, who lived as a child through these events, even said

> "You can easily conceive that before the passing of the Reform Bill a town destitute of religious and benevolent societies would have but few occasions for meeting together in large numbers. The men of the town were not practised in oratory and hence for the most part, as I remember, they hammered and stammered considerably upon the platform."[59]

In contrast to Bruce's unconscious nostalgia, his appeal, like Dante's, to the memory of the untroubled past ("*Florenza dentro la circa antica, si stava in pace, sobria e pudica*"), many historians have revived the memory of the more striking political movements in the borough. The names of the leaders of the Northern Political Union are tolerably well

[57] Some concession was made on this by the Common Council itself: see NCA, CCB 1824-31, pp. 578-81, 587-8.

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 584-7.

[59] J. Collingwood Bruce, *Lectures on Old Newcastle* (1904), p. 96.

known. The purpose of this paper has been to indicate that the existence of the borough constitution and of a party of burgesses in opposition to the Council, created a cross-current which disturbed tangibly the course of reforming opinion in Newcastle. If the burgesses had succeeded in subjecting the Common Council to the guild they would perhaps have established a democratic assembly of a kind—after all, there were not so many more electors after 1832 than there were enfranchised burgesses before. Even without this victory, the existence of the guild meetings as they were provided a forum in which interested men could discuss corporation business in a formal assembly and before the mayor and aldermen. This perhaps is what attracted so many respectable and honest men to take up stewardships. Against this, it is true that even at the height of the burgesses' attack on the constitution they were losing the interest and allegiance of the more politically-minded. T. E. Headlam, for example, played no special part in guild activities, though John Fife did.[60] The reason for this probably lies in the uneven composition of the companies: they were not in fact a satisfactory electorate. The Common Council itself recognized this when in 1831 it petitioned in favour of a reform of the franchise, provided that resident burgesses did not lose by it.[61] The difficulties of recruitment experienced by the aldermen and to a less degree by the stewards, are a reflection of the same fact. The causes of this unevenness lie in the histories and functions of the individual companies, and these have not yet, I believe, received serious attention from a historian. In the absence of such a study of the companies, only one conclusion can be ventured on, that the difficulties of, and determining influences acting on the Common Council in the years before its reform came principally from within the borough constitution, and that its political complexion—which was by no means unenlightened—was very seriously influenced by its relations with the guild.

[60] And see TM, 9 October 1833; NJB, April 1831, p. 228; MCI, p. 138.
[61] NCA, CCB 1831-5, p. 3.