

Shortly after the conclusion of the war with the American States, the country began to direct attention to political grievances, and the cry for Reform became the order of the day. By the most unprincipled stretch of power, the kingdom of Poland had been dismembered and divided between the three leading despotisms of Europe. A strong feeling of commiseration for the sufferings of that brave but unfortunate people prevailed in this country, which was expressed in resolutions passed at numerous public meetings. In this neighbourhood, John Richardson,

Esq. took a prominent part. Suma were also collected for their aid; but these efforts were unavailing before the overwhelming tide of oppression, or were only useful in assuring the unfortunate Poles that there were some portions of their fellow men who sympathised with them in their sufferings. In these demonstrations Perth was distinguished. Among the numerous eloquent speakers which the occasion called forth, a young man of the name of George Mellis was remarkable for his vigorous and impassioned eloquence.

After the excitement regarding Poland had subsided, the subject of *Burgh Reform* was taken up, and numerous meetings were held on the subject. A considerable portion of the Guildry were warm advocates in the cause. Mr David McLeish, dyer, headed this party; he was a man of unbending principle, true to whatever he took in hand; and although not distinguished as an orator, he was endowed with an ample fund of common sense, and advocated the cause against all the sophistry which was brought against him. He continued, through good and bad report, all the days of his long life, a staunch friend of Reform. Mr Mellis also exerted himself in this cause; and when petitions were sent up to the House of Commons, he was called upon to give evidence. He was small in stature, and of youthful appearance, and displayed such powers of oratory, that he was termed "the Scots Boy." Mr David Johnston, manufacturer, and Mr James Wylie, merchant, also exerted themselves on this subject. Year after year they brought it forward in the Guildry, but the *Beautiful Order* prevailed, and effectually resisted every attempt at improvement.

Finding their efforts in this quarter unavailing, the public began to direct attention to Reform on a broader scale, and to agitate for *Reform in Parliament*. Public meetings were held, speeches delivered, and resolutions passed, but all with little prospect of success. A fair representation in Parliament, upon pretty rational principles, was the basis they set out upon: but the more this was resisted, the more was public opinion driven upon extreme measures, till at length a large party in the country began to think of Revolution instead of Reform; and Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage became the demand of the day.—About this time the French Revolution engrossed attention; revolutionary doctrines began to be publicly lectured on; Paine's *Rights of Man* and *Common Sense* were read with avidity, and Political Societies were formed in every town and village in the kingdom.

At a meeting of the Perth Society for Parliamentary Reform, Messrs James Craigdallie and John Burgess appeared as a deputation from the weavers; with a proposition to unite their Societies, and thus form one

on a broader scale. The proffered union was rejected; and the deputies, taking this amiss, adjourned to a public house, and drew up a set of resolutions for the formation of a new Society, to be styled the "Friends of the People." This Society became so popular, that, like Pharaoh's lean kine, it swallowed up the other. Similar Societies were established all over the kingdom, and corresponding deputies appointed. So complete were their ramifications, that the smallest matter of importance was speedily known throughout the kingdom. These Societies soon became very bold in their proceedings, and appeared to imagine they could set all law at defiance. Strong resolutions and handbills were continually issuing. At a meeting in the Guild Hall, a delegation from the Friends presented a set of resolutions which threw the assembly in an uproar. One of them was to the effect, "That as Providence had given every man his calling, he had a right to exercise it to the best advantage, independent of exclusive privileges." No sooner had this portentous sentence been enounced, than Deacon Martin, cordwainer, and quondam Methodist preacher, who was said to have been deposed from the latter office, owing to his habit when at prayer of directing his rolling eyes towards the plate, the moment he heard the clink of a copper — this man, who was always somewhat furious in word and gesture, started up in wrath, and swinging one arm round him, and thumping the table with the other, bellowed out in a voice of thunder, that "having hitherto maintained their exclusive privileges, they would defend them still with the last drop of their blood!" So much for reformation when it comes to a man's own door.

The wild doctrines which agitated France began to spread here, and these societies rapidly increased for a time; but when the rational and moderate part of the members, who started with them for the purpose of obtaining Parliamentary Reform, saw the extreme lengths to which the deluded votaries of anarchy were disposed to go, they withdrew, and left them to become the dupes of the violent men who took the lead, and used every art to inflame the people against the Government. In this attempt a portion of the press lent its aid. Newspapers in London and in Edinburgh were printed, full of inflammatory speeches delivered at public meetings. Pamphlets, in which Monarchy and the Aristocracy were denounced, and the majesty of the People exalted, were circulated with incredible rapidity; and the community became divided into two parties, the Aristocrats and the Democrats. A large hall, which stood in the High-street, on the ground now occupied by the head of St John-street, was fitted up as a coffee room by the democratic party in Perth. Peter Watson (notorious for Republican principles) was appointed keeper.

In this room, the party newspapers and pamphlets were read with extraordinary avidity. Several young merchants attended so closely to read to the mobility, to the neglect of their business, that their affairs went to ruin.

A new Society was now formed, called the *United Scotsmen*. The members were bound by secret oaths; and its ramifications extended into the army, as well as among civilians. This society was started in Perth by a stranger from Glasgow, who was introduced to Robert Sands, the Secretary to the Friends of the People. Their ostensible object was Universal Suffrage, and Annual Parliaments; but their ulterior aim was purely Republican. This man administered the oath to Sands, who in his turn was very successful in his exertions to increase the number of partizans. Vast numbers were sworn in, among whom was James Thomson, one of the town officers. By one of the clauses of his oath, he was bound to pay particular attention to what was going on amongst the constituted authorities; and on the least symptom of any thing occurring likely to affect the members of the Society, he was to give the earliest notice. Another part of the oath bound the members to stand true to the cause, and to one another; and in the event of any of their number being apprehended, none were to give information or evidence on trial. This Society soon assumed a formidable attitude. They became exceedingly bold in their declarations, which were daily issued; and their speeches at public meetings were of the most inflammatory nature. The Society, which spread over the whole of Scotland, was divided into sections, and each section appointed delegates to meet with others, and to visit the different parts of the kingdom. When the general meeting of delegates was held in Edinburgh, two weavers were appointed from Perth. At their election, Dr Bisset, who took a lead in these transactions, said, he had no doubt that the two citizens whom they had now elected, would form an influential portion of the first National Convention! At this meeting, which was held in the Relief church, the King was denounced; and Pitt and Dundas, and several others, were declared to be wicked men and traitors to the People, and ought therefore to be immediately brought to the block.

Liberty and equality became such cant words, that ignorant and deluded people were encouraged in the belief that equality of property was their grand aim, and that a speedy division was to take place;—that the banks were to be plundered, and the spoil divided;—that the taxes were to be abolished, and that the exciseman would cease from troubling;—that all invidious titles of distinction were to be annulled, and the only terms by which men were henceforth to be known, was that of citizen.

Extravagant as were these political nostrums, they were innocent compared with the flood of immorality, profligacy, blasphemy, and infidelity, which rapidly spread to the most deplorable extent. Heads of families renounced the Christian religion, and adopted Paine's infidel notions as the standard of their creed. The Bible was declared to be a silly fable; and some of the deluded wretches actually burnt the sacred scriptures at their profane meetings. The Sabbath was their chief day for holding committee meetings, when numerous parties wandered the fields, reading political pamphlets, and singing songs of shocking profanity, of which they had abundance. To such a length did Infidelity advance, that a party one Sabbath held a mock sacrament on the Town's Muir, applying the bounties of Providence to the derision of the ordinances of religion. Nature they looked upon as their only God—death as an eternal sleep—and heaven and hell as mere bugbears to frighten children. To such dreadful length did these infatuated men carry their views, that it appeared as if society was about to be overwhelmed in anarchy.

Many of these misguided men persevered in these courses till they had reduced their families to misery and want. Their work was neglected, and much of their time occupied during the day with political pamphlets and discussion, and in the evenings their earnings were squandered at club meetings. The weavers and shoemakers, the trades which chiefly distinguished themselves in these matters, had good wages at the time, and were enabled to sport away for a time, particularly the weavers, who, in addition to high prices for their labour, had their time in a great measure at their command. But these habits soon involved them in debt, to an extent which constrained many to leave the town, and to abandon their families to the utmost distress; thus demonstrating, that no species of tyranny is so pernicious as the want of self government.

It is but justice to state that these doctrines were not those of the Reformers, nearly the whole of whom withdrew themselves when they observed a set of individuals struggling for political supremacy, who would be satisfied with no measure of rational reform, and who appeared bent upon throwing the country into confusion.

From this violence of political opinion, it became evident that the peace of the country would soon be endangered, if vigorous measures were not speedily adopted to prevent such a catastrophe. Public meetings had become general throughout the country, and the resolutions adopted were truly alarming; but extreme as were the opinions of many, few were prepared to follow the suggestions of Robert Watt, the spy. This heartless wretch (who was afterwards executed in Edinburgh, having fallen in the snare himself to which he had endeavoured to decoy

ethers) came over to Perth to persuade the democrats to join in the manufacture of *pikes*; but no argument could prevail upon them to take any hand in the matter. This man was the natural son of a Highland gentleman, who had been pretty liberal in giving him education in Perth. He was well known here; and during a residence of some years after the completion of his education, was much esteemed, and considered a young man of amiable disposition, and remarkable for religious habits. Perhaps it was on this account that he was selected as the most fit person to be sent on such a mission.

As has been already observed, the public meetings became frequent, and the language employed on these occasions so bold, that the existing Government became alarmed for their consequences; and the motions of the party were therefore narrowly watched.

At a meeting in the Relief Church, several of the Dissenting clergy took a prominent part. In the course of the business, an individual happening incidentally to use the word Reform, the *cap-out* minister exclaimed—“Reform! Reform, indeed; public opinion was a hundred miles before Reform! That was like pursuing a hare when it was behind. A revolution, and nothing but a revolution, would now satisfy the country, and they were determined to bring it about!” Some of these clerical gentry declaimed strongly against the Government from the pulpit. One of them, of whom better things might have been expected, had constant recurrence to the subject, holding up the career of the French as an example of public virtue and patriotism. Hostilities having commenced between France and Austria, it was a constant note in his prayer for the success of the former, and that they might drink the blood of their enemies—a metaphor at least sufficiently horrible. A precognition having been taken before the Sheriff, as to the ministerial exhibitions of some of these worthies, a damper was put upon their zeal. They still, however, continued warm in the cause in private.

The Perth Hunt, then newly instituted, having assembled at the races, the Friends of the People took the opportunity of displaying their sentiments in a way which could not be mistaken. The assemblies were then held in the Glover’s Hall, and the ordinaries in the George Inn. At the time appointed for the meeting of the assembly, a numerous body of the Friends ranged themselves in two compact lines, forming a lane betwixt the inn and the hall, along which the gentry had to pass, exposed to that searching species of criticism which consists in finding faults. Every individual who was supposed to be a friend to the rotten constitution, had a severe ordeal to undergo; even the best of them had to walk, hat in hand, and make obeisance to the *Majesty of the*

*People.* When the Duke of Athole appeared, a terrible clamour was produced. The cry arose, "There comes citizen Murray, Black Jock who sold the Highlanders. To the guillotine with him, that he may receive his deserts." Mr Dundas also received especial notice. Many of the nobility came in chairs, but this did not save them; the occupant was examined: and even ladies were compelled to endure the insults of the rabble.

A significant display of their power and sentiments, in the burning of Mr Dundas in effigy, was on one of these evenings resolved upon. The necessary habiliments having been procured and stuffed, the figure was taken to a barber's shop to get his wig dressed. During the performance of this operation, the two worthies who had it in charge entered into a political discussion, and in the ardour of debate so far lost sight of their immediate duty, that they let poor Harry fall on the floor, when the intrepid shaver gave him a kick on the part which has been described as the lower end of the back, exclaiming, "Ye'll fall soon enough, ye b——r; ye might have sat till I had done with you!"—When all was nearly ready, the Friends down the town, who had been apprised of what was about to take place, shut up their shops with all convenient speed, to the astonishment of their more ignorant neighbours. These were not, however, kept long in suspense. In a short time, the street was in an uproar, and the effigy made its appearance, mounted on a long pole, while the air rung with the shouts of delighted thousands. After parading the town, the crowd halted in front of the George Inn, that the nobility present might have an opportunity of witnessing the exhibition. An inflammatory harangue having been delivered by one of the leaders, fire was set to the effigy; the belly of which being filled with combustibles, and the head with gunpowder, poor Harry, in the face of his enemies, ended his career in a luminous manner, and with a good report.

The Friends became so numerous, and the excitement so great, that it was determined to hold a public meeting on the North Inch; and immense numbers turned out to witness the proceedings. Walter Miller had just commenced an harangue from the top of the White Dyke, when Sheriff Chalmers, with a number of assistants, came up in order to disperse the meeting. Miller was ordered down, and obeyed; but intimated that another meeting would be held in a few minutes, at a different part of the Inch, to which the whole mass immediately repaired, hurraing as they went. The orations had scarcely been recommenced, when the Sheriff dispersed this meeting also; but after following the multitude from one part of the Inch to another, as fast as his short legs and obesity would permit, he at length gave up the attempt as being hopeless, without the

assistance of a stronger force than he could muster. The agitators being thus left masters of the field, the affair was looked upon in the light of a victory, and strong resolutions were passed, to the effect that they would not submit to be crushed by the hand of power. The manifestations of the party in short, became so bold, that the well disposed portion of the community trembled for the consequences. Numerous plots were hatched against the peace of the State; and so swift and secret was their intercourse, that the general rising of the Friends in Dublin, which was only discovered by the authorities there twenty-four hours prior to the appointed rising, was known in all its details among the Friends in Perth, six weeks previously.

When hostilities commenced between the French and Austrians, the former gained some advantages in the field. The news was hailed with the greatest joy by the Friends, who ordered a general illumination; and the houses of their party were soon lighted up. No sooner had they obtained the power than they manifested the will to become despotic, and in the first moment of exultation, with the aspirations of freedom on their tongues, they began to enact the part of tyrants, by breaking the windows, and destroying the property of those who had not their houses lighted up. The steeple was forcibly taken possession of, and the bells were rung during the whole night. In emulation of the French, a fir tree was brought from the wood and planted at the cross, every branch of which was stuck full of lighted candles; so that the tree of liberty, though somewhat out of its element, shone very bright for one night. At a short distance from this fiery emblem of liberty, a large bonfire was kindled; and tar barrels, and every species of combustible property that could be got hold of, was sacrificed as a burnt offering at the altar of freedom; while surrounding multitudes rent the air with shouts for Liberty and Equality, and for the downfall of the King and Aristocracy.

Old Provost Caw was then in office, and although a very amiable man, had not sufficient nerve to take the lead under such trying circumstances. When the alarm was given, the Magistrates appeared to have been terror-struck, and no measures were taken to check these proceedings. The Magistrates, indeed, had little in their power, for there was no military in the town at the time, to support them, and there were but few constables to call out. It was, therefore, resolved not to disturb the rabble, so long as they kept within the bounds of moderation. Fortunately, the night passed over with little injury; but to prevent further mischief, from the bold attitude they had assumed, a couple of troops of the 4th Dragoons was immediately procured from Kilmarnock.



By this time the civil power began to use vigorous measures for suppressing the Republican spirit which was everywhere spreading. Several of the citizens were apprehended: Watt and Downie, the leaders and instigators of these perilous doctrines, were tried and condemned at Edinburgh. Watt was hanged and beheaded. Downie, having become insane in prison, was not brought to execution.

Mr Fysche Palmer, the Unitarian clergyman in Dundee, was tried before the Circuit Court at Perth for sedition. But owing probably to an apprehension for the effects which might be produced by his able defence, more than to any crime with which he could be directly implicated, he was sentenced to banishment for life. He lay nearly a twelvemonth in Perth jail after his trial, where one of the Burgher rooms was fitted up for his accommodation, and where his acquaintance were allowed to visit him. Mr Palmer had begun to entertain the hope that his sentence would be commuted to a period of imprisonment; when a chaise one day drew up to the jail, and he was ordered instantly to get into it, being scarcely allowed time to pack up his clothes. Mr Muir, advocate, was tried in Edinburgh about the same time, and received a similar sentence.

Among the Friends of the People, or the *extreme left*, as it is now called, Messrs James Craighdaillie, John Burgess, and Robert Sands, had been principal movers. The former was the individual first sought after. He narrowly escaped, and owed his safety to the fidelity of one of the party, who had discovered that a warrant was being made out for his apprehension. Craighdaillie lost no time in destroying any documents which might tend to inculcate himself or others, and had only proceeded a few yards from his father's house, when he met the Sheriff and a party of military on their way to apprehend them. It being dark, he fortunately escaped unobserved among the crowd which the military had attracted. For several months he was incessantly hunted through the country; although conveyed from place to place, and sedulously concealed, by the Friends. He afterwards went up to Manchester, under the assumed name of John Brown, where he was received with open arms by his party. Not feeling safe even here, and fearing that he might be the means of bringing others into trouble on his account, he at length embraced the only means of escape from pursuit which presented itself—that of entering the army. He accordingly enlisted into the Clan Alpine Fencibles, and was thus constrained to swallow the bitter pill of swearing allegiance to that King and Government which he had used his most strenuous endeavour to overthrow.

The indictment made out against Mr Craighdaillie (which had been left at his father's house,) charged him with the crime of sedition; with

being a member of the United Scotsmen; and conspiring to bring about a revolution, annual Parliaments, and universal suffrage. A few years ago, on the National Jubilee, held in commemoration of the passing of the Reform Bill, when every one was striving with his neighbour in the ardent expression of their feelings, Mr Craigdailie carried in the procession a copy of the Scotch Reform Bill, stitched to his indictment: the Reform Bill forming, in his opinion, a strong commentary on its injustice.

Of the other leaders, sixteen were apprehended. John Burgess, their clerk, was taken up at Kirkaldy, where he was confined some time previous to being brought to Perth. Every effort was made whilst he lay in Perth jail to draw information from him; but neither threats nor promises could induce him to compromise his friends. He was at length liberated, without being brought to trial. He never afterwards settled to his trade, but wandered about the country singing ballads. Robert Sands, the secretary, was not so honourable. Although he was the first man that took the oath in this quarter, and was very instrumental in inveigling others, when he was apprehended he gave information against Mr Mealmaker, which sent him to Botany Bay. Sands got clear off without a trial, and afterwards enlisted into the 70th regiment, where he acted many years as schoolmaster.

Walter Miller, hardware merchant in the High-street, and principal orator and leader of the revolutionary party, was also taken into custody. One morning before breakfast, a chaise, accompanied by a party of dragoons, drew up to his door, where an officer had been in waiting to seize him at the moment the chaise came in sight. Miller being instantly thrust into it, was on his way to London before even his family became aware of what had taken place. He was confined in the Tower for many months, but was afterwards liberated without being brought to trial. Notice having reached Perth that Miller would return on a certain day, his friends determined on giving him a public welcome. For this purpose they assembled at the Cloven Craigs in great numbers, and when the coach arrived, they took out the horses, and drew him in triumph into town. Whether it was only the more inflexible Reformers who were tried and banished,—or whether Mr Miller had acquired *solid* reasons for altering his opinions, certain it is, that shortly after his return, he published a large volume in defence of the King and Government, which produced no small astonishment among the public, who had hitherto looked upon him as a staunch Republican. He also experienced a sudden conversion in his religious creed; and from being a notorious infidel, assumed the walk and conversation of religious restraint.

These proceedings greatly quashed the Republican spirit which had got abroad. The party, however, still continued to meet and to carry on correspondence, but not so openly. Emissaries were sent into the army to subvert the allegiance of the soldiers; but such was the vigilance of government, that every attempt was detected. There was plenty of money among them, but there were always some of their needy members ready to take it, and betray their secrets.

When the Irish State prisoners passed through Perth, it was currently reported, that an attempt would be made by the friends here in their favour. A great multitude turned out on the day of their arrival; but the military were in such force, that even if such an intention had existed, it would have been madness to attempt it. The prisoners arrived in six carriages, guarded by four troops of dragoons. Instead of being placed in the jail, they were lodged for the night in the large room of the George inn, where beds were placed on the floor for them. A number of sentinels were posted in the room, as well as without; and the rest of the military were in readiness at a moment's warning.

Many individuals who had taken an active part in these commotions, afterwards came to see their folly, and acknowledged that they had attempted to drive matters too far; whilst others who persisted in their courses, and had thrown off all moral restraints, gave themselves up to idleness and dissipation, and reduced their families to a state of utter misery. Of those who had made a scoff of religion, many died in the most awful and deplorable condition.

It has been stated that immediately after the planting of the Tree of Liberty, a couple of troops of the fourth dragoons were brought to Perth. In a short time the whole regiment arrived, and continued here. On hostilities commencing with France, this regiment was augmented from six troops of 50 men, to ten troops, each 100 strong. The stables in Cromwell's mound accommodated 200 horses, and the remainder were billeted throughout the town. Fresh horses and recruits arriving daily, an excellent market was created for corn and hay. The riding-house on the South Inch having been down many years, a new one was erected in Canal-street for training the young troops. This building was latterly converted into a coach-work. It having occurred to Government that the billeting of the soldiers throughout the town, when so many of the inhabitants were supposed to be disaffected, was exposing them to the influence of disloyal opinions,—a barrack, calculated to accommodate six troop of dragoons, was erected on the grounds known by the name of Drumhar Gardens. As no estimates were taken for this erection, it proved an excellent job for the tradesmen employed on it.