

Video transcript

Scotland's Forgotten Heroes | *One Week in April: The Scottish Radical Rising of 1820*
2020

[15:12]

Maggie Craig:

Hi. I'm Maggie Craig and I write Scottish historical fiction and non-fiction. My latest non-fiction book is *One Week in April: The Scottish Radical Rising of 1820*. Although several researchers and writers have re-told the story of this event in this bicentenary year, the Radical Rising has for too long been a largely forgotten chapter of Scotland's story.

Yet during one intense week at the beginning of April 1820, weavers and other workers in towns and villages in Central Scotland and Ayrshire went on strike, demonstrated and drilled. Hundreds fashioned metal pikes, a rudimentary but potentially lethal weapon and the easiest and cheapest one for working men to make. There was a clash of arms at Bonnymuir near Falkirk and a massacre of eight people in Greenock, when the citizens of the Clydeside port succeeded in freeing Radical prisoners from the gaol there.

In the weeks and months following the Scottish Radical Rising, trials were held in Stirling, Glasgow, Dumbarton, Paisley and Ayr. These were conducted under English law, which made it easier to try people for the ancient crime of high treason. Ninety-eight men were accused of this crime. Some went to ground. Forty-two others did not manage to escape and were put on trial.

As we might imagine, the use of English law did not go down at all well in Scotland. Scottish juries were however savvy, many jurors reluctant to convict their fellow-countrymen of such a serious crime. Although many of the Radical prisoners got off with a short spell in prison, others were not so lucky. Three men were hanged and then beheaded, all of this done in public. Viscount Castlereagh, prime minister at the time, had called for 'a lesson from the scaffold.' Nineteen men were transported as shackled convicts to Australia.

The Scottish Radical Rising did not happen in isolation. It was part of growing unrest throughout Britain in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, made worse when tens of thousands of demobbed soldiers came home looking for work, swamping the labour market.

The demand was for reform of the corrupt and very undemocratic Westminster parliament, universal male suffrage and the repeal of the hated Corn Laws. These kept the price of a loaf of bread artificially high, protecting the interests of landowners and grain merchants at the expense of the poor. Those who wanted this radical reform hoped an improvement in often brutal living and working conditions would follow.

There was an English poet called Ebenezer Elliott, who was also known as the Corn-Law Rhymer. One of his poems sums up the situation at the time.

I saw a nation sunk in grief—

I heard a nation's wail;
And their deep-toned misery was caught
By every passing gale.

Want guarded every peasant's door,
Swept each mechanic's board,
Yet the earth had teamed – *but only teamed*
To swell the rich man's hoard.

I saw the nobles of that land
In pride and pomp roll by;
And I read contempt for the poor man's lot
In every haughty eye.

These calls for change did not come only from the working classes. There were middle class reformers too. One such was James Turner, a Glasgow businessman who had a shop in the High Street and a small country estate in what were then green fields to the north of Glasgow cathedral. Thrushgrove subsequently disappeared under industrial development and housing but you can still see the lie of the land today in the district of Royston, known to older residents as the Garngad.

In 1816, James Turner offered the fields around his house as the venue for a public meeting. Forty thousand people turned up. At the time it was the biggest political meeting ever held in the British Isles. Speaker after speaker called for reform, emphasising how difficult life was for the poor and their children. Too many families could barely afford food, clothes and rent.

It was a cold day in October and the speeches were long. Yet the huge crowd stood and waited patiently, cheering what was being said. One roar of approval was heard from a mile away. There was a huge longing for political reform and a better life for all.

Unrest was growing throughout Britain. Three years after the Thrushgrove meeting, in August 1819 in Manchester, a huge but peaceful crowd of people gathered at St Peter's Fields, again calling for reform. The city's magistrates panicked and sent in the local yeomanry, who'd been standing by. They charged into the crowd, slashing with their sabres. At least 15 people were killed and 600 wounded. In Scotland and elsewhere demonstrations took place to protest against the military being deployed against unarmed civilians.

The situation remained tense over the autumn and winter of 1819 and into the Spring of 1820. In Glasgow and the surrounding towns and villages, people woke up on the morning of 2nd April 1820 to find thousands of posters stuck up in public places. This was the *Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain & Ireland*. It was an electrifying document calling not only for a general strike but for people to be ready to fight for their rights. The *Address* stated that it had been issued by order of the committee of organization for forming a provisional government. It included these stirring words:

'Liberty or Death is our motto and we have sworn to return home in triumph or return home no more!'

There are those who claim, then and now, that the *Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain & Ireland* was the work of government *agents provocateurs*. Some of these shadowy figures had indeed infiltrated Radical circles. One was Alexander, known as Sandy, Richmond of Glasgow. A weaver himself, the chance to exchange poverty for a considerable amount of money seems to have induced him to turn his coat and work against his former comrades. When he was found out, the sense of betrayal among other Radicals was huge. One warning was chalked up on a wall in Glasgow. 'Beware of Richmond the Spy.'

Be that as it may, many people had clearly had enough. The time had come for action. Both sides agreed that a massive 60,000 weavers, cotton spinners, colliers and other workers struck work, as it was called in those days. People went on strike in Glasgow, Paisley, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire and elsewhere.

Other government agents were certainly active. The establishment was scared, both of homegrown Radicals and the possibility they might receive military help from France. The French revolution and its original ideals of liberty and equality had had a profound impact in Britain in general and Scotland in particular.

One group of Radicals was certainly provoked into taking direct action, although they were ready and willing to do so, not suspecting any plot until it was too late. Under the command of weavers Andrew Hardie of Townhead in Glasgow and John Baird of Condorrat at Cumbernauld – both men also army veterans – a small army marched out through a very rainy night, heading for the Carron Iron Works near Falkirk, with the aim of seizing cannons.

They were intercepted by a party of dragoons from the regular army and the local Stirlingshire militia, who clearly knew where to find them. In a short, intense skirmish around a drystone dyke on farmland at Bonnymuir near Falkirk, the little Radical army fought bravely but was over-powered, most of them captured and taken to imprisonment at Stirling Castle.

When they got there, John Baird stepped forward, ready to take full responsibility for what had happened. Addressing Major Peddie, who was the governor of Stirling Castle, he said: "Sir, if there is to be any severity exercised towards us, let it be on me. I am their leader, and have caused them being here. I hope that I alone may suffer." Then he added, on a more practical level: "They have not had much to eat since they left Glasgow. I beg you will be kind enough to order food for them."

The very next day, another group of weavers marched out of their hometown of Strathaven in Lanarkshire, carrying a flag which bore the legend, *Scotland Free, or Scotland a Desert*. *Desart* was an accepted alternative spelling of the word at the time. One resident of Strathaven described them as going out to fight for the rights of Old Scotland.

The Strathaven Pioneers, as they dubbed themselves, thought they were going to rendezvous with a French army encamped on the Cathkin Braes south of Glasgow ready to mount an attack on the city but they too had been duped. This was a false report, designed to flush out the Radicals so they could then be identified and dealt a series of hammer blows.

On the Saturday of this first week of April 1820, five Radical prisoners were being transferred from the overcrowded jail, or bridewell as it was known, in Paisley to the bridewell in Greenock, farther down the Clyde. They were escorted there by the government Port Glasgow militia. They found a

hostile crowd waiting for them. Tempers flared and stones were thrown. The militia retaliated by opening fire on the crowd. Eight people were shot dead, many more injured.

Incensed, and crying 'Remember Manchester!', the crowd stormed the jail and freed the Radical prisoners. They made good their escape. Other Radicals were not so fortunate.

Throughout the summer of 1820, in the trials held in Stirling, Glasgow, Dumbarton, Paisley and Ayr. 98 men were indicted on charges of high treason. 42 appeared in court, 24 were found guilty, two found not guilty and the rest acquitted. These were effectively show trials. The Radical Rising had terrified the establishment and punishments were harsh and brutal.

The first man to be publicly hanged was James Wilson of the Strathaven Pioneers. A well-respected man just short of his 60th birthday, he was nicknamed Purlie Wilson, as he had worked out a method of using the purl stitch to more efficiently weave the ubiquitous knee-high stockings of the time. He had in fact turned back from the march to the Cathkin Braes, suspecting something wasn't right. Ready to flee, he was arrested in his own house in Strathaven. He had been a peaceful reformer all his adult life. It's hard to resist the idea that the authorities were making an example of him.

Purlie Wilson died in front of a crowd estimated at 20,000 on Glasgow Green, just across the road from Glasgow's High Court, where he had been tried. Andrew Hardie and John Baird, who had led the little Radical army at the Battle of Bonnymuir, died in Stirling's Broad Street. They were aged 28 and 38 respectively. Nineteen of the men and boys who had fought with them at Bonnymuir were transported to Australia.

Andrew Hardie and John Baird wrote several letters to friends and family. They were smuggled out of Stirling Castle by a woman we know only as Granny Duncan, who earned a few shillings taking porridge and coffee into the prisoners and their guards. On the night before his execution, Andrew Hardie wrote to his girlfriend Margaret MacKeigh.

He hoped she would not 'take it as a dishonour that your unfortunate lover died for his distressed, wronged, suffering and insulted country; no, my dear Margaret, I know you are possessed of nobler ideas than that...' She had always known how strongly he felt about reform.

Shortly before he was hanged in Broad Street, Andrew Hardie made a declaration to the crowd. "I die a martyr in the cause of truth and justice." John Baird had declared the same, saying he did not fear death because he knew Jesus would forgive his sins.

Only 12 years after Hardie, Baird and Wilson were so brutally put to death, in 1832, the Great Reform Act became law, paving the way for further reform and, eventually, almost one hundred years later, universal adult suffrage.

Almost thirty years after Baird and Hardie were buried in paupers' graves at Stirling's Church of the Holy Rude, they were exhumed and re-interred in Sighthill Cemetery in Glasgow. The handsome monument above their final resting place on this hill overlooking the city also remembers James Purlie Wilson. An obelisk in his memory had been unveiled the year before on the site of his home in Strathaven. A painting of him by an unknown artist is held by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh.

In 1847 Baird and Hardie's earthly remains were brought from Stirling to Glasgow in a horse-drawn hearse, what was then called a mourning coach. In all the villages along the route, people brought flowers, asking for them to be laid over the joint grave at Sighthill, which they were. The Radical Martyrs had not been forgotten.

Lauded as heroes back then, the story of the Scots who fought and died for democracy and a better life for all has too often been obscured by other chapters in Scotland's long history. The night before he died, Purlie Wilson said these words to his grandson John: "I hope that my countrymen will at least do my memory justice."

Hopefully now we're doing justice to his memory and to the memories of John Baird and Andrew Hardie, Scotland's forgotten heroes.

When I was researching this book I was able to see some relics of the Radical Rising, the pikes picked up from the field at Bonnymuir, taken to Stirling Castle and now in the care of Historic Environment Scotland. It was very moving to sit in a rather bland – begging its pardon – warehouse and see them emerging from the bubble wrap and to imagine the men who had marched out with them.

They are indeed vicious weapons but what you tend to think about is the high hopes those men must have had. So I'll finish up by reading a wee bit from my book.

Kept safely away from the light, some relics of the Radical Rising remain. The pikes are a tangible and evocative connection to John Baird, Andrew Hardie and the men and boys who marched with them to Bonnymuir. They recall those heady days when men and women called for democracy, social change and fairness. They recall the men who fought and died for the rights of old Scotland and democracy for all.

Thank you for watching.

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