Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Poet and Revolutionary

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Prologue

It is 21 May 2015. A film opens in cinemas across the UK. It is a documentary by Amir Amirani about the origins and consequences of the international protest on 15 February 2003 against the Iraq war. On every continent – even Antarctica – people demonstrated in the largest protest the world had ever seen. Dismissed by some with a 'Well, we didn't stop them, did we?', the protest actually had a continuing profound influence on events across the world, particularly in Egypt. The title of the film is *We Are Many*, and it opens with the final stanza of *The Mask of Anarchy* by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

> Rise like lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number.
> Shake your chains to earth like dew,
> Which in sleep had fallen on you;
> Ye are many, they are few.

Shelley's revolutionary ideas did not escape his contemporary reviewers, and he was famously attacked in the right-wing journal *The Quarterly Review*. On the other hand, his poem *Queen Mab* was circulated so enthusiastically among radicals and the emerging working class that it was known as 'The Chartists' Bible'. Afraid of the influence of his ideas, critics seized on Shelley's atheism to condemn him as a wicked man. His desertion of his first wife, Harriet, and his desire to set up a second family with Mary Godwin, was considered abundant confirmation of this, even though many men kept mistresses and visited prostitutes without challenge. Even today, when he is less likely to be attacked for his atheism, his love-life and financial difficulties are used to undermine him and his revolutionary ideas. His bicentenary brought diatribes as well as varying degrees of praise.

Despite the international fame he gave to 'We are many, they are few', Shelley is still seen by some left-wing commentators as being politically and poetically negligible. They wonder whether

his poetry is too obscure to communicate to a mass audience, and whether poetry even should 'make sense' in the way prose does, or just communicate imagery and emotion like painting and music. Some writers (including those who are divorced) have accused him of sexism because he deserted his first wife. Others, like the left-wing journalist Paul Foot, have suggested that he would have been a greater political poet if he had remained in England. It is true that he might have been more successful in getting his political poetry published if he had not had to rely on others to act for him, but without his union with Mary Godwin, or his life in Italy, Shelley might never have written his greatest poems, nor Mary her famous novel, *Frankenstein*.

It is often suggested that Shelley did not sincerely wish to overthrow the system, as he was born an aristocrat. He could not easily rid himself of an aristocratic manner which embarrassed Leigh Hunt and caused Byron to describe him as 'perfect a Gentleman as ever crossed a drawing room'.[1] Although Shelley 'loved the people', he did not want to be a worker. He needed time for writing and political activity and, as he explained to Godwin, workers did not have the time or the education.[2] He tried to find a middle way, rejecting his full inheritance, sharing what money he had, and mixing with journalists, doctors and other professionals rather than aristocrats. Whilst he employed servants, he seems to have accorded them more respect than was common then – or now. For example, he took Elise Duvillard, one of the children's nursemaids, to the opera and praised the other nursemaid, Milly Shields, for her prowess in astronomy.[3]

In the 1980s three books were published about Shelley's politics: P.M.S. Dawson's *The Unacknowledged Legislator*, Paul Foot's *Red Shelley* and Michael Scrivener's *Radical Shelley*. They were all valuable and illuminating studies, but much more material has come to light since then. Dawson saw Shelley as a Foxite Whig and Godwinian whose revolution was far in the future. Scrivener and Foot connected Shelley more firmly to Thomas Paine, William Cobbett and the radicals. In fact, Shelley was also indebted to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French revolutionary writers, to the British empiricist philosophers, and even to John Gale Jones's British Forum and the Society of Friends (Quakers). He was very open-minded and considered political ideas from all sources, and the links between all these figures and their

followers were greater, after all, as the population was so much smaller than now.

With the repressive measures of the 1790s, the United Irishmen and the London Corresponding Society members were silenced and their ideas derided by the ruling class, but within 20 years the slave trade had been abolished and the reform movement was reviving. Shelley supported these campaigns and supported people who attempted to spread education, better living conditions and technological advances. He rejected the dominance of 'the few' and insisted on the need for equality, but he also opposed violence, inspiring Gandhi, and leading many to believe that he was a pacifist. These days fewer people than ever own more of the world's wealth than ever before, and Shelley's arguments about violence are still important. He reasoned that it was to be avoided if possible because its use by 'the many' might have a corrupting adverse effect because it is the weapon of 'the few' in defence of their power and inequality.

That violence has forced more and more people to desperately flee war and persecution, with Muslims in particular being attacked and their religion misrepresented in order to feed divisions. It is worth remembering that Shelley hoped that 'the Mahometan, the Jew, the Christian, the Deist, and the Atheist will live together in one community [. . .] united in the bonds of charity and brotherly love'. He would have been proud to have his poetry associated with the expression of unity in opposition to war and violence which was the demonstration of 15 February 2003. Shelley has been dead for nearly 200 years, but he was with us on that day.

1

Shelley's Family Background and Education: 1792–1811

It may seem strange for a political biography of Shelley to begin like a Victorian novel by asserting that its hero was a gentleman from an old, distinguished family, but this fact clearly makes a difference to Shelley's enemies. They state that he was not, and therefore when he rebelled against the aristocratic, landowning class it hardly mattered, since he was *nouveau riche* and so never really of that class.[1] The Shelley family, however, dated back to the eleventh century, included a Knight of Malta and Catholic martyrs, and was connected by marriage to most of the prominent families in Sussex. Shelley's great-grandfather was a third son who had emigrated to America, but he sent Bysshe, his second son named after his grandmother, Hellen Bysshe, back to England to be brought up by his grandparents. Bysshe Shelley inherited property from them and when his uncles and his own elder brother died he inherited their estates too. He increased his property by marrying wealthy heiresses. Bysshe had four children by his first marriage and seven by his second, but most of the estate was to go to his eldest son, Timothy, and was intended to be eventually inherited by Timothy's eldest son, our hero, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Within twelve days of the birth of this heir on 4 August, 1792, Bysshe had had his fourth child by his 'dear friend', Eleanor Nicholls. He remarked, 'Ran Tim Damned hard Age Considered'. He was 61, and regarded a very handsome man.[2]

His grandson said of him, 'He has acted very ill to three wives. He is a bad man.'[3] Percy Bysshe Shelley made no distinction between the women his grandfather married legally and Eleanor Nicholls, whom he did not marry. His own father, Timothy, had an illegitimate son not much older than his legitimate son and heir, Percy Bysshe

Shelley. Percy Bysshe would inevitably have seen the hypocrisy when Timothy told him that 'he would provide for as many natural children as he chose to get, but that he would never forgive his making a *mésalliance*'.[4] It was not an unusual attitude in the upper classes of the eighteenth century: marriages were usually made not for love but to unite estates. No woman had much control over important aspects of her life, including marriage; it was important for well-off families to be able to control women's marriages so that properties could be thus united. An upper-class woman, if she did not marry, with few exceptions, remained at home with no career or independent social life and certainly no sex life. Women rarely had much education and if they had any the only work they were likely to find would be as a governess. A woman from a rich family was often left in poverty after her male relative died, and women had no right to keep either inheritance or earnings if they married. Divorce was extremely rare and required an Act of Parliament: desertion was not grounds. A man could divorce his wife for adultery but a woman could not divorce her husband without evidence of exceptional brutality. If she left, she lost all rights to her children. Most people had a vicious attitude towards those women who lived independent lives or who broke the conventions of marriage, although men got away with it. Although there was no organised movement, women were increasingly demanding the right to be educated, to choose their husband and to work as they wished. Some women, such as Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote the influential *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, had successful lives as writers.

Field Place, an old manor house, was developed in the eighteenth century into a spacious residence with large grounds, woods and fields. Horsham, near Gatwick Airport and the M25, now has numerous large offices smothering what was in Shelley's time a pretty market town, close to the ports and a prosperous centre for 'agriculture and its associated industries, like tanning and brewing'. It had good roads to London, at least one theatre, bookshops, banks and legal offices, even a model gaol. Shelley's family patronised the local theatre and events such as May Day, celebrated with children's dancing, garlands of flowers and 'Jack in the Green', or fairs with

roundabouts, shooting galleries and a Fat Lady or Living Skeleton. Similar families in the area included an Indian lady, Mrs Beauclerk, a stepsister of the United Irishman Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and French émigrés who had fled the Revolution.[5]

The French Revolution

The French Revolution was a defining event and shaped the world in which Shelley grew up. It had succeeded initially because the bourgeois class had allied against the aristocracy with the working people and were supported by the peasants, who destroyed chateaux across the country. On 14 July 1789 insurgents stormed the Bastille.[6] But the bourgeoisie wanted to stabilise the country whereas working people wanted to continue the revolution until they gained political rights, higher wages or cheaper food. When Louis XVI attempted to leave the country to obtain military help from Austria to restore his powers, the French Assembly sentenced him to the guillotine as a traitor. After his trial and execution, the Girondins, who had held power, were purged from the Assembly by the Jacobins, who more overtly courted working people. Their 1793 Constitution provided universal male suffrage and some control over representatives, but France was at war and instead of the Constitution, people got the Committee of Public Safety. The Jacobins succeeded militarily against the invading English and Austrian forces and put down a royalist rebellion, but they introduced a huge wage cut, attacked popular working men's clubs and silenced their presses. In 1795, popular insurrections calling for the Constitution of 1793 were brutally put down, one by General Napoleon Bonaparte, one of the new officers who had replaced aristocrats in the army. 'Gracchus' Babeuf, editor of the popular *Tribune of the People*, launched a 'Conspiracy of Equals' based on a plan for common ownership. There had been so many defeats that people failed to respond and the leaders were captured and executed in 1797, but in the wake of this the Jacobins revived and so did the royalists. In danger from both, the Directory turned to Bonaparte for support. He took over and continued as dictator with a war of conquest.[7]

In Britain

The French Revolution was initially welcomed by the British ruling class. Charles James Fox, the prominent Whig, said, 'How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world, and how much the best' and even as late as 1792 William Pitt, the Tory Prime Minister, believed that the new France would mean there would be 15 years of peace. Both parties in Parliament, Whig and Tory, represented the rich landowners who at the time did indeed rule, even though not much more than a third of the population was employed in agriculture. Factories were still small, the workforce yet unorganised, unaware of its own strength, and factory owners had not yet established their political status.[8]

For working men, the Revolution was an inspiration. In 1792, Thomas Hardy founded the London Corresponding Society, so-called because they corresponded with groups in France as well as Manchester, Sheffield, Norwich and other English cities. It was open to any working man with a weekly penny subscription. Hardy believed that common people could make their wishes felt if, and only if, they would unite. He asked, 'Have we, who are tradesmen, shopkeepers and mechanics any right to seek to obtain a parliamentary reform?' The answer was 'Yes'.[9]

When Dr Richard Price, a Unitarian minister, expressed his view that it was right for people to resist power when it was abused and to form a government of their own choosing, Edmund Burke reacted by writing *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) which was firmly against any change. The French queen, Marie Antoinette, a 'delightful vision', would be revealed as 'but a woman'. Mary Wollstonecraft, in the first reply to Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), thoroughly agreed: a queen is but a woman. Burke believed that 'learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude', a phrase that was to become famous and mocked among the multitude so maligned. Two radical journals were entitled *Hog's Wash* and *Pig's Meat*.[10]

The more famous reply to Burke was Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* which sold 50,000 copies by May 1791. Paine believed that government's authority came from inherited power through conquest

by 'a banditti of ruffians' and that 'the Aristocracy are not the farmers who work the land but are the mere consumers of the rent'. Paine proposed to tax the rich, remove sinecures and secure disarmament, and to provide public funds for education, maternity benefit, old age pensions – many of the reforms which were introduced in twentieth-century England and which are now being dismantled.[11]

The second part to *Rights of Man* sold 200,000 copies and was reprinted continually, circulated widely and pirated, its sales swelled by the fact that there was a warrant for Paine's arrest for publishing it. He fled to France.[12] Burke's *Reflections* and Paine's *Rights of Man* clarified the class lines which were drawn. The French Revolution was destroying the privileges of the aristocracy and monarchy and that class in England was very afraid.

The government set up a system of spies, anti-Jacobin societies and newspapers to publicise guillotining and the plight of émigrés. Effigies of Paine were burnt and 'Church and King mobs' were encouraged by the government to attack 'Jacobins'. In 1791, a Birmingham mob attacked the home of the Dissenter scientist, Joseph Priestley, wrecking his library and laboratory and forcing him into exile. People were sentenced to between 18 months and four years' imprisonment for selling *Rights of* Man, or for saying 'I am for equality and no king'.[13] At this time, prisons were privately run and Cold Bath Fields prison was notorious for the inhuman way in which the inmates were treated. The young Sir Francis Burdett visited this prison on several occasions and exposed the conditions. Prisoners were kept without food, warmth, light or cleanliness and refused visitors and writing materials. Their possessions were stolen, they were beaten up and women were prostituted. Relatives of the prisoners organised protests outside, and later became Burdett's election campaign supporters with the slogan 'No Bastille!' An enquiry was set up. Burdett also vehemently opposed the slave trade and supported Catholic Emancipation and his resulting great popularity led to his being elected MP for Middlesex in 1802.[14]

Timothy Shelley's Political Career

Timothy Shelley became an MP in 1790. He was a close associate of the Duke of Norfolk, a radical Whig close to Fox and Richard Brinsley

Sheridan. To 'win over to his party the Shelley interest', Norfolk arranged for Bysshe Shelley to become a baronet, although this did not happen until 1806, and for Timothy to have one of the two Horsham seats, a privilege for which Timothy had to pay £4,000.[15] Norfolk would have been unlikely to have accepted less from Timothy since, later, he was not willing to reduce it to less than £3,000 for Sheridan.[16] The 'Foxite' Whigs supported the campaign against the slave trade, the campaign for Parliamentary reform, Catholic Emancipation and the campaign against the Test Acts which disqualified members of religious groups outside the Church of England from taking public office. They also opposed the war with France in 1793. These were popular movements outside Parliament and they overlapped. Quakers were prominent in the movement against the slave trade and were in favour of other reforms, the General Synod of Ulster condemned the slave trade and opposed the war with France and Olaudah Equiano, the 'fluent writer and speaker' against slavery, was close to Thomas Hardy, leader of the London Corresponding Society (LCS). Both the LCS and John Cartwright, the campaigner for Reform of Parliament, wholeheartedly supported the 1798 Irish Rising.[17]

Britain's slave merchants had become very rich and powerful on the profits of the 2.5 million Africans they bought and sold between 1630 and 1807 while 'it was taken for granted than one transported African in three, at least, would die of dysentery or commit suicide' within the three years.[18] Although some of the 20,000 black people in eighteenth-century England became distinguished figures, many were still slaves. They themselves began the movement for abolition because they repeatedly ran away. Working people sympathised with them – as the magistrate, John Fielding, said, 'they have the mob on their side'. Black people were in court to see the legal victory of James Somerset, when it was ruled that a slave could not be forced to leave England against his will. It was celebrated with a ball in a Westminster pub.[19] The Quakers set up a committee to campaign against the slave trade and their 1783 petitioning of Parliament was the first large-scale use of petitions. They published Thomas Clarkson's prize-winning *Essay on Slavery* and encouraged Josiah Wedgwood to produce the logo of the movement 'Am I not a Man and a Brother'. They introduced a

boycott of sugar which involved many women. The Quaker printer James Phillips published the horrifying print of the section of the slave ship showing how slaves were packed in. Parliament was full of people with West Indian properties who did not want to see the slave trade abandoned, but the Prime Minister, William Pitt, did. He encouraged William Wilberforce to be its Parliamentary spokesman and to introduce an anti-slave trade bill in 1792.[20]

In Horsham there was a strong, active Quaker group and great anger against the slave trade, but Horsham was a 'rotten borough' controlled by a Lady Irwin. At that time, large towns such as Manchester and Birmingham had no Parliamentary representative while a tiny village could return two members. 'Rotten boroughs' were owned by one person and in some cases, many in Cornwall, they were owned by the Crown. Others regularly went on the market, and the MP represented no one at all in some, such as Old Sarum where the town was 'a thornbush'.[21] One of Irwin's candidates was a retired West Indian merchant and slave owner, James Baillie, so Norfolk used this corrupt system to get candidates elected to Parliament who would vote for Wilberforce's bill. Thomas Charles Medwin, the Duke of Norfolk's steward, and his colleagues bought up enough property to get control from Irwin. She successfully petitioned against the result when Norfolk's candidates were elected. Medwin was charged with 'making a false return' and Timothy lost his seat on 8 March 1792. Baillie became MP and when, on 2 April, the abolition bill was debated, he spoke against it. Even with the huge backing of public opinion, the bill was defeated. By 1792, it 'smelt of revolutionary democracy'.[22]

Norfolk dined with the Shelleys on 15 April, and the connection continued. Timothy was to become MP for New Shoreham, another seat belonging to Norfolk, in 1802 and remained so until 1817. He worked for the Sussex interest in promoting a bill to re-open the road which is now the A29, but he voted consistently against Catholic Emancipation perhaps at the wish of his electorate. He still claimed to be a reformer in 1835 when, at the age of 82, he opposed the reform candidate and former political associate, Robert Henry Hurst. In 1810 Norfolk regained the Horsham seats.[23]