

6. The “Friends of the People” in Renfrewshire

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During the second half of 1792, an association of societies known to its supporters, to sympathisers and to disinterested observers as 'The Friends of the People' was formed in Scotland as part of a political campaign in support of the constitutional reform of the British Parliament.

To unravel the various strands which led to the establishment of the reform societies seems, at first sight, to be a daunting task, as it was an association of individuals and groups with different attitudes and priorities, some of whom felt particular grievances more severely than others, and reacted to events with varying degrees of enthusiasm or indifference. It was influenced by local or by Scottish factors, but also took place at a time when decisions taken by the British parliament were having an ever-greater effect on the day-to-day lives of people in Scotland, and was influenced, too, by the momentous events taking place on the international stage, notably in France and in America. To complicate matters still further, support for reform had its roots not only in the world of secular politics, but in controversy over the constitution and proper role of the Church.

In essence, however, the origins of the reform movement in Scotland are fairly straightforward. The movement was established because a number of people interested in the welfare of their communities and of their county were concerned about the way that the country was being governed, and felt that it could, and should, be improved.

In Renfrewshire, the first public notice of the existence of reform societies dates from 2nd November, 1792, when a meeting of Delegates of the United Societies of Paisley associated for parliamentary Reform took place in the Saracen's Head Inn at the Cross, at the foot of the Old Steeple. Presiding at this meeting was a Paisley baker, Archibald Hastie, who deserves to be recognised as one of the heroes of the reform movement in Paisley and Renfrewshire not so much for anything spectacular which he did, but for his firm attachment to the cause of reform for a period of more than twenty years. He was active in the movement when it was forced underground during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and, in 1816, he chaired a famous meeting at the West Relief Church in Paisley, which initiated a further period of reform agitation in Scotland.

It was not surprising that Paisley, as Scotland's fastest growing town, already third in terms of population to Edinburgh and Glasgow, should have played a significant part in the early days of the reform movement. Another reason for Paisley's prominent role in the reform campaign, and for an early reputation for radicalism, was explained by William Taylor, another of Paisley's early reformers:-

“I believe that there is not a town in Great Britain of its population where there is more newspapers read, more enquiry after the news of the day.....It is through this channel, and book societies, that the 'Paisley Weavers' improve in politics and can converse with propriety on many subjects.”

The meeting of Paisley reformers on 2nd November 1792 was not the first occasion during this period, when popular grievances had resulted in collective political action. In 1790, Paisley had played a significant part in the vigorous protests made against a new Corn Bill contemplated and ultimately passed by parliament, which encouraged the exportation of grain and imposed duties to restrict importation. It was, in consequence, considered a body-blow against the manufacturing districts of the west of Scotland, where importation of grain for the growing manufacturing population was essential and, to make matters worse, the operation of the proposed Bill was held to discriminate against Scotland generally. It was against this background that a meeting of thirty-two delegates from the Incorporated Trades and Friendly Societies of Paisley passed a resolution that the new regulations adversely affected “the peace and welfare of the labouring poor who are the radical instruments of British opulence and prosperity”.

It seems clear that the delegates who met at the Saracen's Head Inn on 2nd November, 1792, were representatives from some, at least, of the Incorporated Trades and Friendly Societies of the town, which continued to provide the bedrock of the movement during its early, optimistic days, the period of Government-initiated repression which followed, and on into the post-war period after 1815. William Taylor attributed the success of the Paisley weavers as practitioners of their trade to the meetings of their 'clubs', but it is difficult to believe that they were not also the basis for the political associations in the town:-

“The Paisley Operatives have, for a long course of years, associated in a friendly manner in societies' denominated clubs. These in general consist of from thirty to fifty members.....They meet once in the week; a few on Thursday, but mostly on the Saturday evening. They are to be found in every decent public house.....when met, the first hour is devoted to promiscuous conversation. At eight, the newspapers of that day are produced. They are read aloud by one of the company.....At nine o'clock the Chairman calls silence; then the report on trade is heard. After the labour of the week, here are three hours devoted to friendly society and useful information.....”

At their meeting on 2nd November, the Paisley reformers resolved to act in conjunction with the Society of the Friends of the People in London, and with all other societies in Britain, to obtain equal representation in Parliament, and a 'shorter duration of parliamentary delegation'. As in most political associations, differing opinions gave rise to vigorous debate and, on occasion, to division, but the parliamentary reformers remained united by these two objectives, and in the beneficial consequences which they confidently expected to result when they were granted by the British Parliament.

Extending the right to vote beyond the small number then entitled to do so would, it was felt, fatally undermine the corrupt influence of the small minority who controlled elections, by making it impossible for them to buy or otherwise influence enough voters to guarantee success for their chosen candidates. More frequent elections were expected to discourage MPs from supporting unpopular Governmental measures on pain of dismissal at the next election, and were in consequence expected to make governments more accountable to the will of the people.

Towards the end of 1792, the parliamentary reform movement began to achieve a degree of popularity sufficient to alarm the Government. This was due, in no small measure, to the efforts of Thomas Muir of Huntershill, one of the leading figures in the early days of the movement, who was ultimately tried and transported for his role in promoting the cause of reform. There was no more vigorous nor committed campaigner for parliamentary reform than Muir, but his consistently expressed objective was to secure reform in order to prevent, rather than to promote, the excesses associated with the Revolution occurring in France at that time. When Muir visited Paisley in the autumn of 1792, it seems clear that his intention was to urge upon the supporters of reform there the necessity of accepting, in the short term at least, objectives which would guarantee the widest possible measure of support for the movement, and to avoid those which might generate opposition. In practice, this meant a rather vague commitment to equal representation and to a shorter, but undefined, period between elections, rather than to votes for all (men!) and annual parliaments.

However willing the Paisley reformers were to compromise in the short term, it is clear that significant support existed from an early stage, for more far-reaching reforms. An eloquently-written "Declaration of Rights and An Address to the People, Approved of by a Number of the Friends of Reform in Paisley", was in circulation in and beyond the town in the early days of the movement, and its possession and alleged distribution was one of the charges against Muir at his trial, for which he was transported to Botany Bay. Not only did the Declaration and Address assert universal male franchise as rights properly belonging to the people, and summarise the abuses and corruption on which the case for parliamentary reform was based, it also set out practical proposals for a scheme of reform, including measures designed to regulate the conduct of elections and to produce roughly equal electoral districts, as well as suggesting a secret ballot as a means of guarding against the undue influence of wealth or authority. The Address also revealed an underlying concern with the need to ensure continued prosperity and to defend local manufacturers from excessive Government taxation, a concern with trade and manufacturers which, understandably enough, characterised the movement in Paisley and the neighbouring villages throughout the reform period.

The culmination of the first phase of the reform movement was a successful Convention of delegates from all the Societies of the Friends of the People in

Scotland, held in Edinburgh in December, 1792, which included delegates not only from Paisley, but from Kilbarchan and Lochwinnoch. The Convention, again the brainchild of Thomas Muir, bolstered morale, established clear objectives, and decided upon the proper method of achieving them, that is, by petitioning the House of Commons in favour of reform.

Important as the cause of parliamentary reform was in itself, it had already begun to take on a wider significance, in consequence of a political reaction to the success of the movement, inspired and abetted by the Government, and, principally, by Henry Dundas. The cause of parliamentary reform became a struggle for the right to engage in collective political action, and to assemble for political purposes; to preserve and promote free expression of opinion, and to preserve the freedom of the press; a challenge to the growing influence of the executive branch of government, and to its right to involve the country in war; and part of a campaign against an arbitrary, inconsistent and politically-motivated judiciary.

Many different aspects of the campaign for parliamentary reform in Scotland have interested its historians. The revolutionary potential of the movement; the class origins of its supporters and the extent to which they can legitimately be seen as pioneers in a working-class movement; and whether or not the reformers were Scottish Nationalists have all attracted their attention. To the reformers themselves, this would have seemed odd.

For much of the reform campaign, it was Parliament and events within it which provided the movement not only with its unifying objectives, but with a timetable and method for achieving them. Events associated with the reform movement - forming societies, holding meetings and publishing declarations - did not happen at random, but in response to, or in anticipation of, events in Parliament. After the first Scottish Convention of the 'Friends of the People' in December, 1792, the presentation of petitions to Parliament to coincide with a proposed motion in favour of reform to be debated in April, 1793, was firmly established as the focus of reform activities.

In response to a campaign of misrepresentation and intimidation instigated by the Government, a number of public meetings took place in December and January, whose principal objective was to clear the name of the reform movement against allegations of hidden designs, and seditious intentions. Delegates of the United Societies of Paisley met again at the Saracen's Head Inn, on 26th December; a meeting of the Paisley New Town Society took place at the Britannia Tavern; and meetings of two societies in Johnstone and the society at Neilston, took place early in 1793, again with the intention of declaring the constitutional nature of their proceedings.

By late January 1793, as the reformers began to prepare for the presentation of petitions to Parliament, rumours of a likely war with France, and concern at the potentially catastrophic consequences for an area heavily and increasingly dependent upon trade and manufacturers, added further fuel to the campaign for reform. The reform movement became, in addition, the expression of a

determined opposition to war, and the Paisley, Johnstone and Neilston reform societies were joined by the Sneddon, Old Paisley, Paisley Mossrow, Sandholes, Newton and Reform Friendly Societies in expressing their utter abhorrence of cruel and unnecessary wars, and their fears as to the likely effects on trade and employment.

Recent accounts of the reform campaign have suggested that it was already in decline by the early months of 1793, with membership of societies falling, subscriptions remaining unpaid, some societies deciding to discontinue meetings, and a generally pessimistic and embattled feeling pervading the movement.

If this was true to an extent of Edinburgh, the reverse was the case in Paisley, Renfrewshire and the manufacturing areas of the west country in general, where new societies were being formed, numerous resolutions urging the necessity of reform were appearing in the newspapers, and support for the cause was reported to be increasing rapidly. The movement was also extending far beyond the principal towns to which it had largely been confined in the early days, and reports were received of public meetings attended by numbers, the like of which were unknown in living memory.

The petitioning campaign - the culmination of this phase of the reform movement - resulted in twenty petitions being sent from Scotland in support of the motion for parliamentary reform debated in the House of Commons in April, and is usually regarded as a failure. It certainly failed to impress Parliament, where the motion in favour of reform was crushingly defeated, and lacked the almost universal support which the Scottish petitioning campaign in favour of the abolition of slavery had recently achieved.

In reality, the success of the reform campaign is difficult to assess, since accurate numbers of those subscribing to the reform petitions are not known. Its popularity and importance in some areas such as Paisley, Renfrewshire and the west, however, are less open to doubt. Reports that petitions circulating in Paisley had received twelve thousand signatures in the short space of four days, with another six thousand added from the villages of Renfrewshire, were doubtless exaggerated, but a petition from Glasgow, fifty feet long and closely written, was reputedly the largest in terms of number of signatures ever received by Parliament.

It took nearly forty years for the first significant measure of reform to be achieved, and it is impossible here to relate the tribulations and future development of the movement, but the associations formed in Paisley and Renfrewshire before and during the early 1790s and the activities of the Friends of the People did form the bedrock upon which subsequent radicalism was built, and carried the movement on through the period of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars to the stirring days of 1819 and 1820.