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'You must fire on them': Protest and repression in Pulteneytown, Caithness, in 1847

James Hunter

University of the Highlands and Islands

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**“YOU MUST FIRE ON THEM”: PROTEST AND
REPRESSION IN PULTENEY TOWN, CAITHNESS,
FEBRUARY 1847**

James Hunter

When Scotland’s 1846 potato crop was wiped out by blight, the country was plunged into crisis. In the Hebrides and the West Highlands, a huge relief effort came too late to prevent starvation and death. Further east, towns and villages all around the Moray Firth, from Aberdeen to Wick, rose up in protest at the cost of the oatmeal that replaced potatoes as a basic foodstuff. As a bitter winter gripped and families feared a repeat of the calamitous famine then ravaging Ireland, people mobilised to stop outward shipments of grain, which were blamed for both shortages and price rises. During January and February 1847, grain carts were seized, ships boarded, harbours blockaded and the military confronted.¹

In 1847, no part of the substantial and fast-growing settlement of Pulteneytown was much more than thirty years old. The town, a place of numerous business premises and hundreds of stone-built homes, had been laid out to the west and south of the harbour that had given rise to it. From this harbour, there were various ways of getting to the bridge connecting Pulteneytown with the much longer established burgh of Wick. Of these, one of the most direct consisted, as it still does, of Bank Row, which after a few hundred yards becomes Union Street. Along Bank Row and into Union Street at about nine o’clock in the evening of Wednesday, 24 February, 1847, there marched some thirty men of the British army’s 76th Regiment. For the previous three or four hours those men, together with 70 or so of their comrades, had battled at Pulteneytown’s harbourside with 1,500 or more people intent on preventing what the army was there to facilitate: Caithness-produced grain being taken aboard a waiting cargo vessel.

¹ This symposium contribution has been adapted for *SSL* by Professor Hunter from his book *Insurrection: Scotland’s Famine Winter* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019). We are grateful to the author and publisher for agreeing to republication here; third-party enquiries as to reuse should be directed, not to *SSL*, but to the original publishers. Eds.

While trying in vain to clear Pulteneytown of protestors, bayonet-wielding troops had drawn blood from at least fifty individuals. Increasingly enraged crowds, for their part, had begun by “shouting, yelling [and] spitting” at the soldiers before going on to assault them with “sticks,” “staves,” “stones and filth.” Understandably, then, the troops making their way into Union Street were not in the best of tempers. Their mission was to convey to jail in Wick two Pulteneytown men, John Shearer and James Nicolson, whom they had earlier helped arrest; and when, from doorways facing on to Bank Row, a handful of residents had tried to impede the soldiers’ progress, those folk—men, women, youngsters—were instantly and roughly brushed aside.

Bank Row was and is flanked on both sides by houses. But on reaching Union Street, the military found that, though still protected by homes and other buildings to their right, they were open to attack from the left. On that side, Union Street was bordered only by the steep embankment separating it from Sinclair Terrace, a parallel but higher roadway which, that Wednesday night, was occupied by hundreds of people—some from elsewhere in Pulteneytown, others from Wick—whose purpose was to inflict as much damage as possible on the troops below.

Today the slope between Sinclair Terrace and Union Street is fenced and wooded. In 1847, however, there were neither trees nor fences to obstruct the missiles that now descended on the soldiers of the 76th. On getting into Union Street, their commander reported, he and his men were at once exposed to “tremendous volleys of large stones.” So heavy were some of those stones that one of them shattered the wooden stock of a soldier’s musket; others, “thrown with great violence” and curving down from high above, inflicted injury after injury on men whose progress was thus brought to a halt. “I was struck with stones several times,” said Corporal Cormick Dowd who “had his head cut through his cap.” “My arm was black [from a] severe blow,” said Private John Carr. A stone “knocked the firelock” from his grasp, said Private Richard Broome. “The stones were rattling on our bayonets,” said Private Daniel Connery.

I was hit between the shoulders with a large stone which knocked me flat to the ground.... When I got the blow I said I would stand this no longer, and it was as good to kill another as for oneself to be killed.²

Daniel Connery’s wish to retaliate was doubtless shared by lots of men around him. But in circumstances such as those facing the 76th Regiment in Pulteneytown, the army was not empowered to do as Connery wanted. The

² NRS AD56/308/2: Evans-Gordon to Adjutant General, 24 February, 1847; *Inverness Courier*, 20 April. 1847; NRS AD14/47/533: Statements of Cormick Dowd, John Carr, Richard Broome and Daniel Connery, 4 March, 1847.

military was in Pulteneytown “to aid,” in the legal jargon of that time, “the civil power”; and it was for a senior representative of this civil power, not Captain Charles Evans-Gordon, the officer heading the now stalled advance up Union Street, to decide on the best means of extricating Connery, Broome, Carr, Dowd and other soldiers from their hopelessly unprotected position.

How the chain-of-command operated in situations of this sort had been explained by a veteran soldier, Sergeant Thomas Morris, in a best-selling account of his time with one of the regiments the Duke of Wellington led to victory over Napoleon at Waterloo. When, a year or so after that war-winning battle, Morris’s unit was sent to quell disorders in Birmingham, where workers had gathered to denounce wage cuts that followed the peace, the sergeant, whose sympathies were with the protestors, was much impressed by a local law officer who made it his business to countermand the orders of a military man hell-bent, Morris felt, on “killing a few people”.³

On some brickbats and stones being thrown at us, our brave captain gave orders [to us] to load [our muskets], and he then gave directions that we should fire among the mob.

At this point, however, a Birmingham magistrate standing beside the captain “interposed,” as Morris put it, and said “there was no necessity for that”: ““ Then,” said our officer, “if I am not allowed to fire, I shall take my men back.”

Sir [said the magistrate], you are called on to aid and assist the civil power, and if you fire on the people without my permission, and death ensues, you will be guilty of murder; and if you go away, without my leave, it will be at your peril (ibid., 209).

That Birmingham exchange was not replicated in Pulteneytown’s Union Street. There the impetus for drastic action on the military’s part did not come from Captain Evans-Gordon of the 76th but from Robert Thomson, Sheriff of Caithness, a man whose conduct could scarcely have been more at odds with the pacifying role adopted by the Midlands magistrate Thomas Morris so admired. For this, in the days that followed, Thomson would be condemned widely.

Among the sheriff’s numerous critics was the *Times* which, in an excoriating analysis of what the paper’s leader-writer called “a most deplorable incident,” found nothing to suggest that Thomson “was justified in the course he adopted.” “Military power should at all times be most sparingly used in dealing with an excited populace,” the *Times* contended. But in Pulteneytown Sheriff Thomson, instead of treating the army’s guns

³ Thomas Morris, *Recollections of Military Service, in 1813, 1814, 1815*, new ed. (London: for the Author, 1845), 210.

as a resource to be deployed only in “the very last extremity,” had reached for this resource so speedily that he could not have given proper thought to what might follow.⁴

Thomson, who had earlier presided over a series of mostly unsuccessful attempts to clear streets and alleys in the lower part of Pulteneytown, had felt it his duty to ensure that his prisoners, Nicolson and Shearer, were got safely into jail. That was why the sheriff was accompanying Evans-Gordon and his men. Walking alongside Thomson, and acting as the sheriff’s personal bodyguard, was Constable Donald Sinclair, the Wick area’s single policeman. Sinclair was a big man and, on stones starting to fly “like hail,” he said, “I told [the sheriff] to keep in my shelter as much as he could.” But those protective efforts notwithstanding, Thomson was soon hit by a stone that drew blood. “The sheriff,” according to Sinclair, “then called to Captain [Evans-Gordon] and said we cannot stand this longer, you must fire on them.”⁵

That, the *Times* reckoned, was the moment when Robert Thomson’s emotions got the better of the considered judgement he should have exercised:

Becoming alarmed apparently for his personal safety or irritated at the blow he had received, [the sheriff] immediately and, as we think, most hastily and improperly, ordered the soldiers to fire.⁶

The inquiry the *Times* demanded into the circumstances surrounding this order was not conceded by Lord John Russell’s Whig administration. Had it been and had it had access to Constable Donald Sinclair’s sworn testimony as to the events of the night of 24 February, its verdict on Sheriff Thomson’s conduct may not have been too far removed from that of the *Times*—all the more so in view of the fact that Charles Evans-Gordon, writing just a couple of hours after the Union Street debacle, was every bit as clear as Sinclair as to the origins of Thomson’s instructions to him. “The sheriff who was with me was struck in the head,” Evans-Gordon informed his superiors, “and he then loudly gave [me] the command to fire.”⁷

It was not for Captain Evans-Gordon, whose military career would culminate in his reaching the rank of major-general, to dispute that command. But he appears to have done everything possible to minimise the risk of its giving rise to fatalities. “I loudly shouted to the people above that I was about to fire,” Evans-Gordon said. This, the captain feared, would be treated as a bluff by folk unlikely to give up just when they were gaining the upper hand. By way of reinforcing his warning, therefore,

⁴ *Times*, 4 March, 1847.

⁵ NRS AD14/47/533: Statement of Donald Sinclair, 1 March, 1847.

⁶ *Times*, 4 March, 1847.

⁷ NRS AD56/308/2: Evans-Gordon to Adjutant General, 24 February, 1847

Evans-Gordon next ensured that his men made as much noise as possible with the ramrods used to drive powder and ball down the barrels of the muzzle-loading muskets that were then British infantrymen's standard-issue firearms. The resulting clatter, the captain hoped, would make it clear to those with ears to hear that previously unloaded weapons were being loaded and that gunfire would shortly follow. "The crowd must have heard him [shout] and [heard] the ramrods working," he said. "Some of them did go away." Most, however, did not.⁸

"The night," the captain said, "was dark." There was no moon and such illumination as was available from the gas-fuelled street lamps installed in Pulteneytown some years before was faint and fitful at best. Muskets were notoriously inaccurate even in optimum conditions. When fired uphill in next-to-zero visibility, they became all the more so. It may be, too, that soldiers like the vengeance-seeking Daniel Connery were in no mood to heed Evans-Gordon's directive to aim, not at the thickly occupied upper slopes of the embankment down which stones were still being heaved, but at its empty lower reaches. That is speculation. What is certain is that, despite Evans-Gordon's best efforts, the smoke and crash of a military musket volley—a thing never before experienced in Caithness—proved a prelude to bloodshed.⁹

As always in calamity's aftermath, there were stories of narrow escapes. "One man had the sole of his shoe torn off by a bullet," Wick's weekly newspaper, the *John o'Groat Journal*, reported. "Another had his boot split." Deaths had somehow been avoided. However, "a girl named MacGregor was wounded in the left arm, the ball passing through the fleshy part ... The girl's wound is a large one." Still more serious was the injury sustained by William Hogston, a foreman cooper with one of Pulteneytown's several manufacturers of barrels destined for the Caithness fish trade. "A ball went through [Hogston's] right hand which was so shockingly mutilated that the fingers had to be cut off," *Journal* readers were informed in the immediate aftermath of the Union Street shootings. Nor was this the end of Hogston's torments. Because amputation was then the standard medical response when wounded limbs began to become infected, William Hogston, days after the loss of his fingers, lost his hand in its entirety.¹⁰

Since a cooper with only one hand was unemployable, Hogston, his wife, and five children, were left destitute. Irrespective of what the now former tradesman had or had not been doing on the night of 24 February,

⁸ NRS AD14/47/533: Statement of Charles Evans-Gordon, 4 March 1847; *Inverness Courier*, 20 April 1847.

⁹ *Inverness Courier*, 20 April 1847.

¹⁰ *John o'Groat Journal*, 26 February, 9 April 1847.

his disability would have attracted sympathy. But there was a further reason for the near universal feeling in Pulteneytown and Wick that David Hogston and his family had suffered a huge injustice. Hogston, by his own account and the account of others, had taken no part in the events preceding the musket volley that left him both mutilated and jobless. “It seems [Hogston] was climbing the brae for the very purpose of avoiding the mob and being safe from the military,” the *John o’Groat Journal* asserted. “He was standing a minute before at the [Union Street] door of an acquaintance, and on being ordered off by one of the [soldiers] he went the way he was directed.” Because many of the complaints made about Sheriff Thomson were rooted in this conviction that David Hogston had been guiltless of any offence, the authorities were bound to have produced any contrary evidence available to them. That did not happen.¹¹

Editorial staff at the *Times* were unsurprised by the apparent innocence of the man most affected by what had happened in Pulteneytown. When, in other places and at other times, the army had fired on rioters, uninvolved bystanders had frequently been killed, and only the merest chance, the paper’s leader-writer felt, had prevented this new recourse to military firepower “from resulting in a [similar and] most lamentable sacrifice of life.” Even so, the *Times* concluded,

the too common consequence on these melancholy occasions ensued; for the individuals most severely wounded were a man who had taken no part whatever in the fray ... and a girl who must have been one of the last persons to deserve the cruel fate she experienced.¹²

Underlying, and accounting for, what took place that February evening in Pulteneytown was a series of interlocking crises. Potato blight and its food supply ramifications were clearly central to one of these. But aggravating blight’s impact in Pulteneytown and other coastal communities was a steep downturn in fishing incomes as, in part because of mass poverty and famine in Ireland, it became virtually impossible to find markets for cured or salted herring, a commodity on which much of the Pulteneytown economy depended. The book from which this account is drawn explores more fully how people responded to these difficulties, and how overstretched authorities reacted in the ways they did to a protest movement that the London press dubbed an “insurrection.”

University of the Highlands and Islands

¹¹ *John o’Groat Journal*, 26 February, 1847; HAW CC/7/10/1/1: Wick Parochial Board Minutes, 2 March, 1847.

¹² *Times*, 4 March, 1847.