Murray, Spence and Bewick

Newcastle was a very different place in 1750 from the city we see today. This was a time when the Town Moor was outside the city, a time before railways and a time before the vast majority of people had the vote. It seemed like a few families would continue to rule over the North-east just as they had done for so long, families who owned large tracts of land, which were now helping to make some of them wealthy coal owners. Over the next few decades, however, three men would challenge this situation, with a process of questioning and challenging the way power was concentrated in such a small number of hands. It was also a time when the old ways of working with individual craftsmen formed loosely into guilds, was being replaced by larger workforces in mines and factories.

Imagine you could go back to the second half of the 18th century. You would find a North-east of England where the political power was in the hands of a few powerful families, the Brandlings, Liddells, Russells, Ridleys, Wortleys, Bells, and Strathmores, families who were the great coalowners of the time. These families were part of the ‘Grand Alliance’ formed in 1726, who carved up much of the land and power in North-east England between them.

One of their early triumphs was the building of Causey Arch, the world’s first ‘railway’ bridge in 1725-6, which allowed coal to be taken by horse-drawn wagons over the Derwent Valley. Very few men and no women in the region, had the vote and so it was very difficult to change any of the laws, and this helped to keep the power and wealth in such a small number of families. In the country as a whole, only 435 000 men could vote and they were always those with property. They were also the people who received a decent education and consequently saw themselves as the only ones who understood enough about the country and how it was run. Others were not happy about this, and on numerous occasions they protested, including the 1740 Corn Riots in Newcastle, when people were aggrieved at the high price of corn and the riots were only put down by the raising of the local militia and an official promise that the price of corn would be reduced. However it was hard to really change things as the political system was established to try and make sure that all the wealth and power was kept by those who owned a lot of land or other property. It might have seemed like this situation would go on forever, but in the second half of the 18th century, a whiff of change was in the air.

Our story starts with the Rev. James Murray: He was born in Fans in Roxburghshire, just over the border in Scotland. Murray became a Presbyterian preacher, part of a Christian tradition whose members were generally anti-authoritarian. Murray’s first position was in Alnwick, before he moved south to the Newcastle Meeting House in Silver Street, Newcastle in 1765.

Murray held Sunday services and weekday lectures, where he put forward his opinions on what he saw in society around him and he was very much on the side of the poor against the powerful. He saw a lot of poverty and a lot of suffering in North-east England, whilst a few rich families lived in big houses on large estates in the lap of luxury. He was not alone in wanting change. This was the time of the Enlightenment, when across Western Europe and North America the old ideas about how society should be run were being questioned. There was a tide of new thinking which led to the French Revolution and the American War of Independence and this wave of new ideas about greater freedom and equality, upon the shores of Newcastle and influenced Murray and others. Even the usually conservative-minded City Burgesses joined in, when in November 1769, a petition was drafted by a Committee from the Burgesses’ Party in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The Burgesses’ Party could be said to represent the rank and file of the City Burgesses, who roughly played the same role as councillors do now and the aim of the petition was the dissolution of Parliament.

It was the time when coffee houses were beginning to spring up all over the country and Newcastle was no exception in this. These were not merely cafes; they often became informal debating clubs where the new ideas spread by the Enlightenment could be discussed. New clubs which developed included Swarley’s Club in Newcastle’s Groat Market, which was known as ‘Newcastle’s House of Lords’ and in a time before political parties as we would recognise them today, there were other political debating clubs, such as the Independent Club and the Constitutional Club, where men argued about how to reform society.

The city was also a welcoming place to radicals such as Swiss-born physician and political theorist Jean-Paul Marat who chose Newcastle as the site for the launching of his revolutionary tract, The Chains of Slavery, in 1774, in which Marat wrote out about the way he felt the ruling-classes held ordinary people in bondage. Marat was to go back to France and become a vociferous defender of the sans-culottes, the working-class revolutionaries of the French Revolution. It was the murderous excesses of the Terror in the French Revolution which helped to galvanise the aristocracy in Britain into wanting to hang on to power, so that they would not share the fate of their aristocratic cousins across the English Channel.

The time when The Chains of Slavery was released was a period when the publishing industry in general was greatly expanding and Newcastle was at the forefront of this as well. More grammar books were published in Newcastle in the 18th century than in any other English-speaking city outside of London and along with the coffee houses, Sands' circulating library in the Bigg Market and bookshops such as Charnley’s and Barker’s also became popular meeting places. In 1793 the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society was opened and this provided another outlet for progressive-minded people in Newcastle to discuss how society could be improved. All this encouraged an atmosphere of debate.

As a preacher, Murray used Bible stories to question how things were. Murray used stories as metaphors for what he perceived to be the corruption in a political system where there was no real democratic accountability at all and the wealthy, who believed that they knew best, could make laws just to suit themselves. By preaching from the Bible and using his position as a minister in this way, Murray could preach about people resisting the ruling classes, whilst not getting into trouble himself.

The people in his congregation understood very well what he was saying and loved his down to earth language and the way he poked fun at the ruling classes, whilst making serious points. It was this kind of straight-forward language that Murray used when he protested against the conservative-minded Common Council of Newcastle taking what he saw was an inordinate amount of time, to replace the old Tyne Bridge, which had been washed away in a huge flood in 1771.

Murray was also a writer, his most famous book being Sermons to the Asses. The front cover tells us a lot about the views he expressed in this book. It depicted an ass weighed down by two panniers, one with the word politics written on it and the other with the word religion on it. This was not because Murray was against either religion or politics; rather he was speaking out against the leaders of these professions. He had no time for the two main political parties of the time, the Whigs and Tories.

Both parties were made up of people with a range of political positions, but generally speaking, the Whigs represented the interests of trade, mercantilism, parliament, modernism and in religion, non-conformity, those who might be described as the ‘noveau riche’ and limited reform while the Tories were for the monarchy, landowners, the established church and the status quo, with absolutely nothing by way of reform. In Murray’s eyes they were both only interested in relatively small sections of society and not the kind of people who packed out his services and lectures at the Meeting House.

One member of Murray’s congregation was Jeremiah Spence, a fellow Scotsman, from Aberdeen. Spence brought his children up to read the Bible and then asked them what different passages meant. In this way Jeremiah was able to instil questioning habits in his children and especially his son Thomas.

Thomas Spence was born on 21st June 1750 and grew up in Newcastle by the banks of the River Tyne. His questioning nature led him to challenge the way that society was run and the way that property and land was concentrated in the hands of such a small number of people. This was especially pertinent during what became known as the Enclosures, a time when the rich and powerful were enclosing more and more of what used to be common land, taking over what had been land shared between ordinary people, where they could graze their cattle, forcing them into poverty. Newcastle Corporation, run by and for the powerful and wealthy in the city soon had their eyes on a large area of open space they would like to enclose.

In the 1771 Newcastle Corporation attempted to enclose the Town Moor on the outskirts of the city, but campaigners successfully stopped it. Inspired by this, Spence developed his plan, which he introduced at a lecture in November 1775. In the plan there would be an end to aristocracy, a guaranteed income for those unable to work and everyone, men and women, would get the vote. After the victory against the enclosure of the Town Moor, the plan also stated that the inhabitants of each parish should establish an organisation to lease out or otherwise exploit the land, mines, forests, waters and the revenue from these natural resources should be used for their common needs with any surplus being shared equally amongst all. Here was a direct challenge to the ruling, landed classes, who expected to make a personal profit from their land, coming from a son of Newcastle.

Spence was also a prolific pamphleteer and his plan was written about in a pamphlet entitled Property in Land Everyone’s Right. This was another direct challenge to the propertied classes and they were not happy about it. In 1787 Spence left Newcastle for London and in 1794 he was sentenced to seven months in Newgate Gaol on a charge of high treason. Spence then spent 12 months in prison in 1801 for seditious libel. It was the time of the Napoleonic Wars against France and the ruling classes in Britain were very worried that the contagion of revolutionary ideas would come north across the English Channel.

So harsh were the anti-sedition laws, that in a letter dated 21st November 1795, the Duke of Northumberland commented that, “if the people agreed to this surrender of their Rights and Liberties, I can only say they deserve the chains which Ministers have been inclined to forge for them”.

Spence however was not cowed by this treatment. In 1807 he wrote Constitution, putting forward a new constitution which moved on from the idea of an improved English constitution, which could be seen to date from either the 1689 Bill of Rights, or to be based on a much earlier Saxon system of government. Like Murray, Spence didn’t like either the Whigs or Tories. He thought that the Whigs merely indulged in piecemeal reforms, to give the impression that they were going to change society, while not really changing anything, whilst many Tories tried to resist any change at all.

Nor was Spence interested in the usual slogans of those on the reformist wing of English politics, such as no taxation without representation, the right of petition and the rule of Habeas Corpus. It was not enough to merely tinker with the system as it was. Instead he saw the experience in France and the new French Constitution as a precedent to start again from the ground up. In Spence’s constitution, the triple hierarchy of King, Lords and Commons would be abolished and new laws would need the approval of nine-tenths of the parishes in more than half the counties of England. Added to this, most public offices were to be elected for short terms, magistrates would be elected annually and criminal judges appointed for short terms. For those members of the British establishment who looked across the English Channel at the Terror, this must have sent serious shivers down their spines. The Constitution was never going to be seriously

considered by those in power at the time, but it did act as a signpost to the future for later reformers.

Spence’s notoriety meant that he was not only put in prison; he was also mentioned disparagingly in parliament in 1817, three years after his death. George Canning M.P., a future Tory Prime Minister, rose in the House of Commons on 29th January 1817 and firmly criticised parliamentary reformers, talking metaphorically of storms and whirlwinds and of twilight assassins, using as his evidence for all this mayhem, Spence’s plan. Spence, who had died in poverty in 1814, was never to see his plan come to fruition in his lifetime, but he did help to set a precedent, that the North-east was a radical and egalitarian minded region.

New ideas were beginning to develop as North-east England was moving towards being a progressive and egalitarian region whilst at the same time there was the growth of a large working-class, many coming from outside the region, attracted by the extension of the coal industry and its connected industries. Much of the North-east was still countryside, however and it was from this background that our third great Radical emerged.

This was the artist Thomas Bewick, who was born in Cherryburn near Prudhoe. He is most famous for books of drawings of the natural world, inspired by the countryside he grew up amongst, along the Tyne Valley, printed using innovative wooden printing machinery. Although he is best known for this, Bewick was not just interested in the natural world. Interspersed between the lapwings and the plovers, the local cattle and the barn owls were drawings of the poor, struggling through life and living very frugally, slipped in quietly but determinedly, the pain of their difficult lives literally etched in their faces. As it was only the rich who could afford these books, so it was a way of ensuring that they could see the suffering of the poor.

Bewick came to live in Newcastle and spent time at the new debating clubs, becoming a friend of Thomas Spence. Spence’s views were particularly radical for his time, more radical indeed than Bewick’s and this was to lead to a fight between the pair. Having developed his views, Spence sought to propose the topic, ‘property in land being everyone’s right’, for a debate at a debating club, both Spence and Bewick frequented. Spence assumed that Bewick would support him in the debate, but this was not to be, as Bewick was from the old school of radical thought, which valued ‘liberty and property’ over the work of public officials and which valued traditions and saw ownership of land as part of a well-functioning society. Spence lost the debate and consequently turned on his old friend, Bewick, who being a strong six-footer, compared to the considerably smaller and bow-legged Spence, proceeded to give Spence a good beating. Spence and Bewick did patch up their relationship and at the end of the day they were both on the same side.

Spence has been seen by some as an early Socialist, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that both he and Bewick were really looking back not forwards, to some idyllic Anglo-Saxon past before the Norman Invasion of 1066, although Spence’s Constitution did attempt to say something new. This rosy Anglo-Saxon past had never really happened, but it gave both Spence and Bewick an ideal to work towards. Preserving ancient freedoms, for themselves, would also have been uppermost in the minds of those who wished to keep the status quo.

Murray, Spence and Bewick were three men who projected a new kind of politics for the North-east, one based on empathy and concern for the poor, the powerless, the marginalised. They challenged the view of the aristocracy in the region and in Spence’s case the nation, who thought that only they were educated enough and so equipped, to rule.

The decades to come would see the desire for fairness develop in North-east England amongst a growing working class, who would find themselves working in a regional economy which became highly inter-linked. They were to a large extent an immigrant population, incomers from Scotland or Ireland, Cornwall or other parts of the North of England. It was also a region where people began to think about a better life for people who lived thousands of miles away, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Timeline

1726 ‘Grand Alliance’ of landowners and coalowners formed.

1732 Birth of Rev James Murray

1740 Corn Riots in Newcastle

1750 Thomas Spence born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne

1765 Rev James Murray begins preaching in Newcastle-upon-Tyne at the Silver

Street Meeting House

1769 Petition of Newcastle Burgesses calls for dissolution of parliament

1771 Newcastle Corporation attempt to enclose Town Moor preventing ordinary

people using it

1772 Tyne Bridge at Newcastle washed away in flood – Murray protests at

inordinate time spent in building replacement

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1774 Jean-Paul Marat’s Chains of Slavery published in Newcastle

1775 Thomas Spence launches his Plan

1787 Spence leaves Newcastle for London

1791 Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man published – read by many in North-east –

once claimed that every pitman had a copy in his back pocket

1794 Spence imprisoned for seven months for High Treason

1801 Spence imprisoned for twelve months for seditious libel

1807 Spence publishes his Constitution

1814 Spence dies

1817 Spence denounced in parliament by George Canning M.P.